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The Handmade Objects of Small Town and Metropolis

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Au delà de la sculpture

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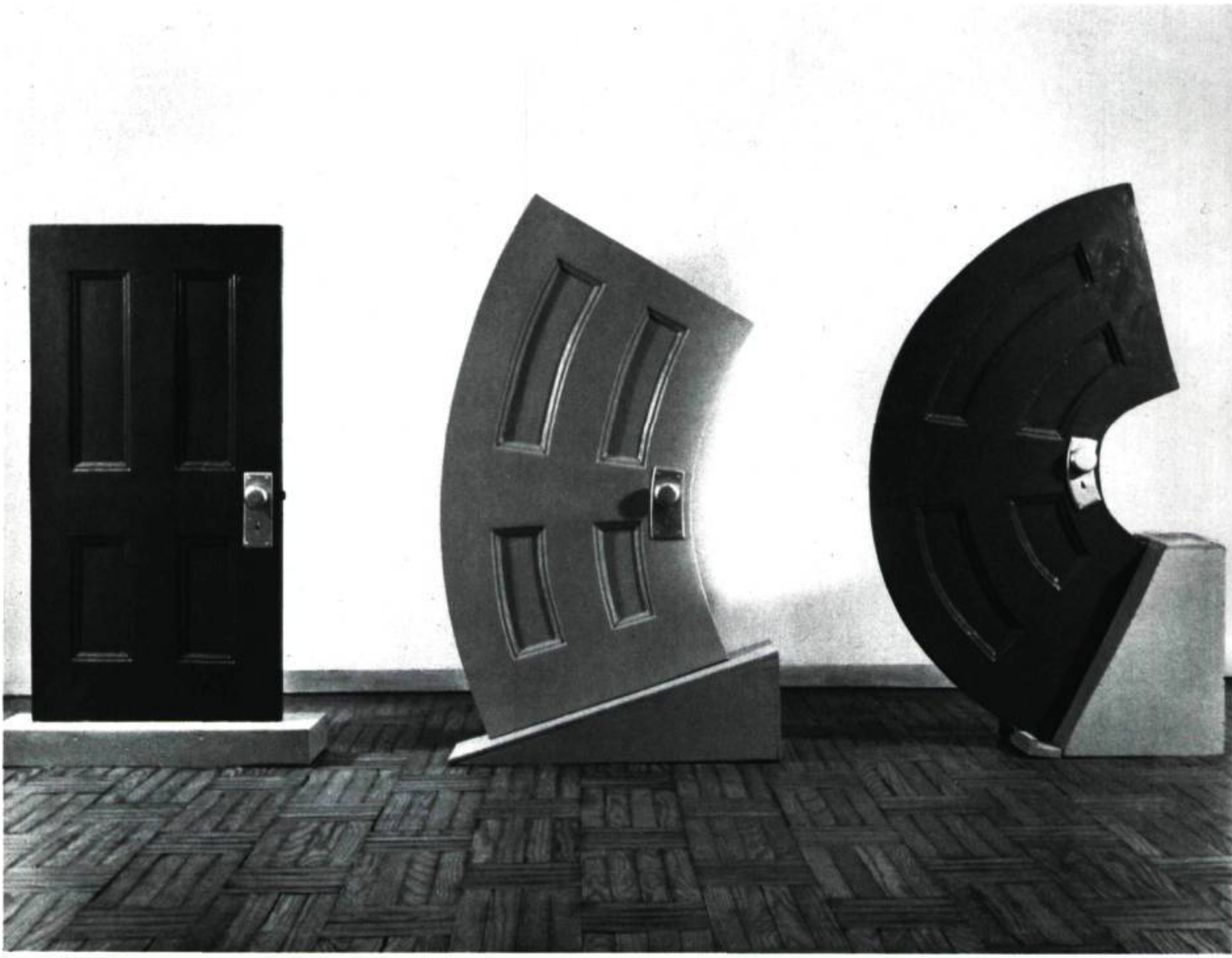


John MACGREGOR. Three Doors, 1968. Sculpture sur bois. 46" x 26"/46" x 26"/43" x 26"
(116,85 x 66,1/116,85 x 66,1/109,25 x 66,1 cm). Isaacs Gallery, Toronto. (photo Gordon C. Greig)

SCULPTURE AU DELÀ

the handmade objects of small town and metropolis

by ARNOLD ROCKMAN

My students at York University are required to take part in an experiment. It lasts a month. During the first two weeks, they sample their leisure hours on a predetermined sampling plan and they keep a detailed journal of what they have done with their time. During the second two weeks, they are forbidden to read newspapers or magazines, listen to the radio, watch tv, or go to the theatre or the movies. The continue keeping the log of leisure-time hours, and then they write a final report on the changes brought about in their lives by this mass media deprivation experiment. And for many of them it is a real deprivation. They had not been aware of it, yet the mass media had been a psychological drug addiction. When suddenly removed from this continuous tickling and teasing of eye and ear, they experience symptoms akin to those accompanying the withdrawal of drugs. Yet they also discover that their eyes and ears have been thorougly cleared and cleaned.

I myself have lived in a world without media for over a year now, primarily because I wished to concentrate on my sociological studies. It has been a strange sort of world, quite cut off from most other people's concerns which I would learn about second- and third-hand. I had not seen any of the sculpture in the galleries, though my friends and acquaintances would talk about it, sometimes with enthusiasm, because I had not allowed myself to visit galleries for more than a year. Though it was not planned that way, such an aethetically monastic regime turned out to be an excellent preparation for the writing of this article. I came back into the galleries with thoroughly cleared and almost innocent eyes.

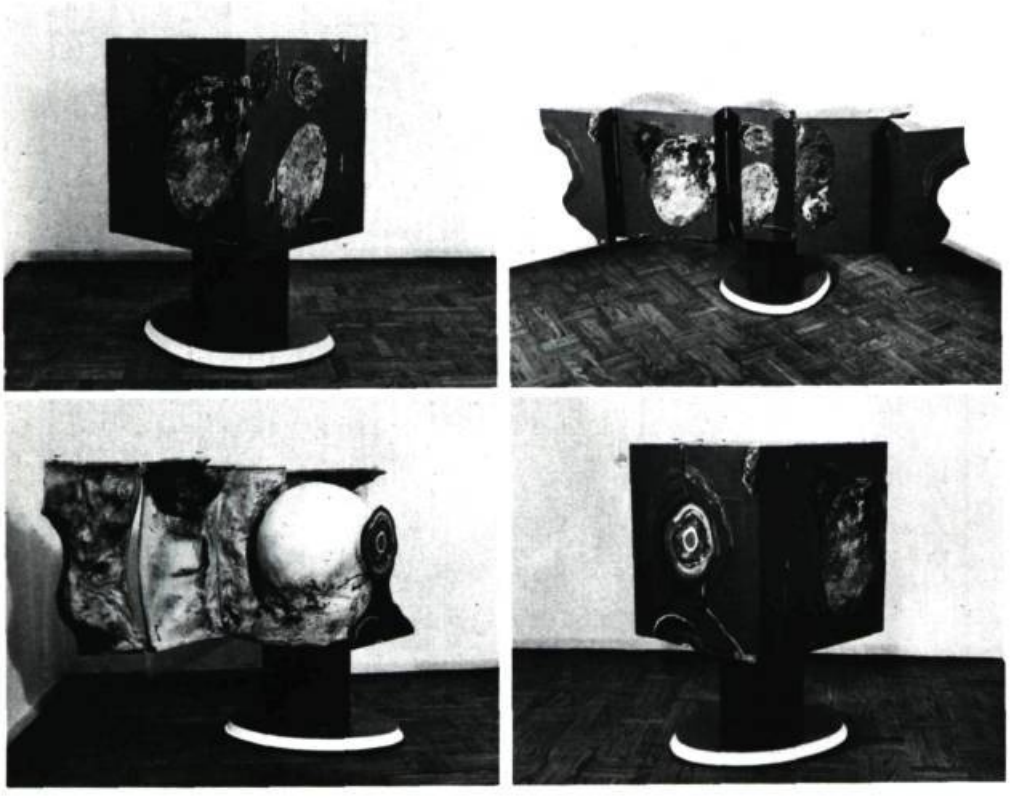
Before catching up on the sculpture I hadn't seen, I wondered whether it would show signs of a fundamentally new direction, the clues to a fashion or even a new way of thinking and feeling about objects in space that could not be glimpsed last year. From this point of view, the recent Ontario sculpture turned out to be something of a disappointment. It represents a consolidation, a half learned lesson, an incomplete digestion of fashiongs being practiced in the main centres — and for Toronto there is only one main centre of which Toronto is still the suburb — New York.

Consider the case of Arthur Handy. This sculptor rapidly became well known a few years ago for his sensuous, sexy handling of ceramic, a material traditionally associated with amateur, artsy-craftsy, handmade craft objects, not quite "fine" art. Yet in Handy's hands, fired clay was an excellent medium for sculpture with all the virtues of cheapness and complete control of the medium. A large bronze might cost $2,000 to make, but a ceramic piece of the same size could be done for less than $100. For some reason, perhaps because ceramic had low-status connotations, Handy decided to switch to plastics. The first results were unveiled at the City Hall sculpture show in the summer of 1967. A huge, dark blue sphere with a vertical lineal hole big enough to put your head in and shout into the murky depths to hear your shout as a strange muffled echo. This was the fashionably cleaned-up, architecturally-scaled version of his previous series of funky ceramic sculptures under the collective title of *Aphrodite Yawns*. Quite rightly the National Gallery decided to buy it. It was one of the strongest pieces in the show. It had presence. It didn't get lost in the huge space of Nathan Phillips Square. Moreover, Handy had managed to translate his sexy metaphor into more fashionable (and therefore more immediately acceptable) materials.

His latest work has now firmly squashed all the qualities that made his previous work so engaging. Handy's gone completely minimal. All the human references have disappeared. No mark of maker's hand, no biomorphic form, no reference to human activity and symbol.

I have nothing against minimal sculpture per se apart from the fact that it is an art for ultra-sophisticated mandarins who can get their aesthetic kicks from minimal stimuli, a kind of conspicuous deprivation. Everybody can get something from the pop objects of Greg Curnoe or John McGregor. But it takes real class, the taste that goes with Knoll furniture and Mies van der Rohe buildings, to dig the minimal. Digging the minimal is one thing; doing it is something else. And it's hard to do because it depends on strong ideas. Handy had them once, but he let them go because he must have felt they didn't belong in the minimal vocabulary I single out Handy because here we have an example of a strong sculptor who didn't hang onto his strength, perhaps because his own strength wasn't fashionable.

Martin Hirshberg at first sight presents us with the opposite phenomenon. He started off with assemblages of kewpie dolls and mirrors, reminding us of Arman gone wrong and vulgarized, and then stripped away everything poppy and literal to come up strong in the minimal-kinetic camp. If Handy went from strength to weakness, Hirshberg seems to have



Ci-dessus: Tony URQUHART. Opening Box-Phoenix, 1968. Acrylique et bois. 41" x 25" x 24" (104,15 x 63,5 x 61 cm). Isaacs Gallery, Toronto. (photo Ayriss, Toronto).

Page ci-contre; de haut en bas: Don JEAN-LOUIS. Amoeba, 1967. Plastique. Isaacs Gallery, Toronto. (photo John Reeves).

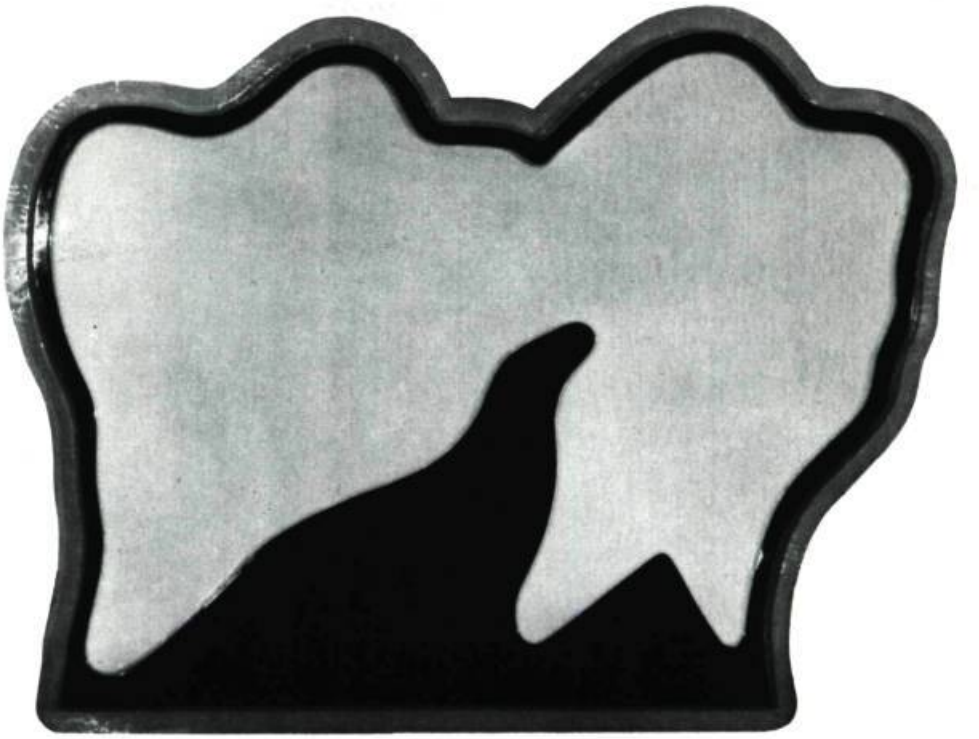
Walter REDINGER. Spermatogenesis # 1, 1968. Fibre de verre. Isaacs Gallery, Toronto. (photo John Reeves).

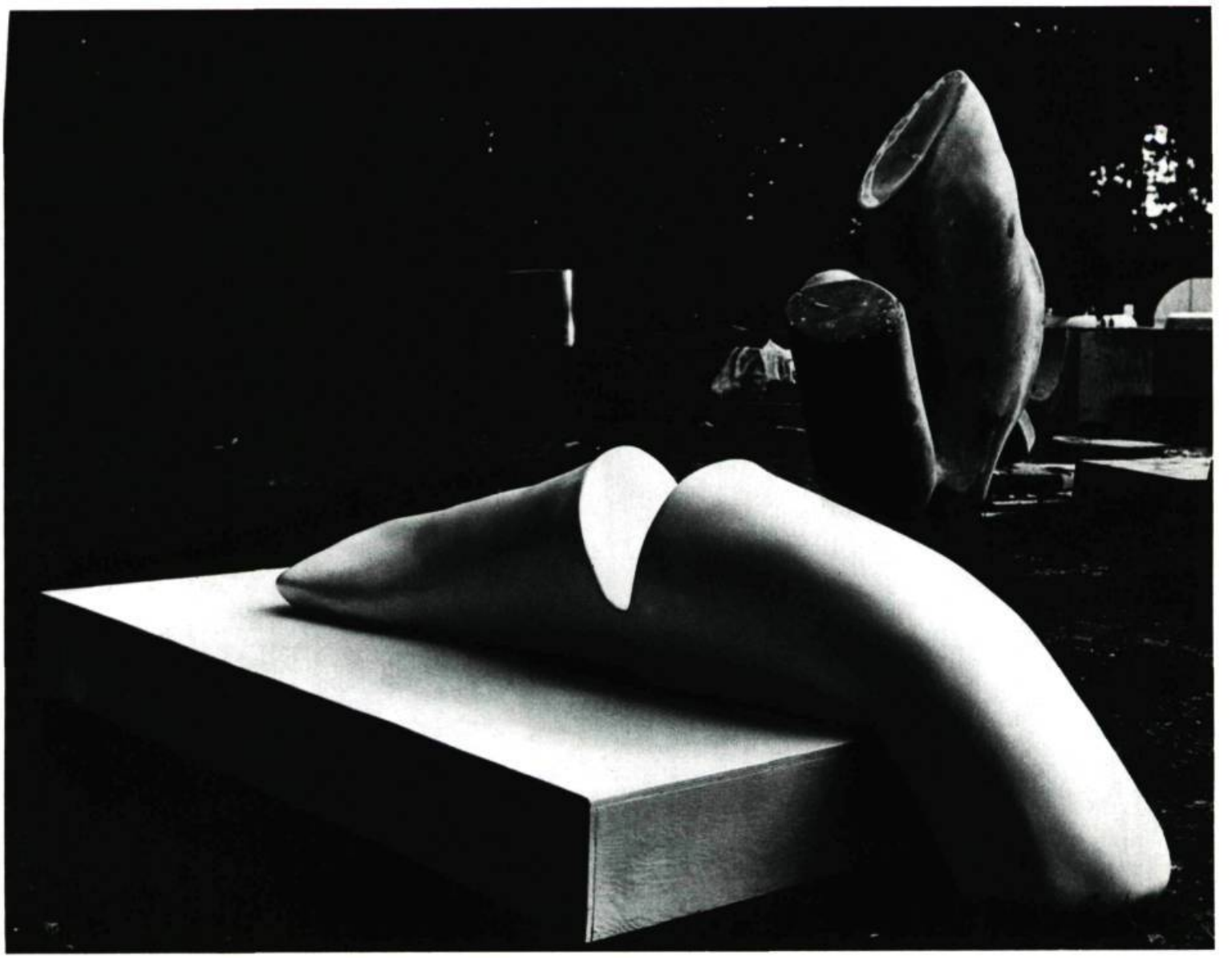
gone from weakness to strength. But th contrast is superficial. Some fashions ar easy. Anybody can play. Others are dif ficult and only very few have what it take to stay in the game. Hirshberg has picke an easy route. He's a good craftsman an he makes elegant objects, but that's a they are. They have elegance, taste, pro fundity — but they don't disturb any c the viewer's pretensions and preconcep tions. Compare Hirshberg with Pol Bur in Belgium or Robert Breer in the Unite States and the difference is immediatel illuminating.

These examples should serve to illus trate this critic's aesthetic presuppositions Good sculpture, like any other art, mus allow us to believe that the artist ha something important and disturbing t say. It may in fact not be true. The artis may have absolutely nothing he wants t tell us or anybody else. Nevertheless, th objects he makes ought to suggest that i he wanted to he could talk eloquently c dreams and nightmares.

One of the few Toronto sculptors wh has that quality is Ted Bieler. He has ad vanced steadily from strength to strengt over the last five years. Perhaps his growin strength is a reflection of his schooling In the fifties he worked under Ossi Zadkine and Jean Lurçat, and the studied architecture at the University o Toronto. Whatever the reason, his recen work, whether free-standing sculpture o integrated into building, appears pro found. His one lapse has been the pre-cas concrete panels designed for the Univer sity of Toronto's new Medical Schoc building which seems to have sprouted linear pimples. His work is usuall biomorphic, suggesting a huge landscap of the flesh in concrete or epoxy. A recen work, *Waves*, in very lightweight plastic spreads all over the floor of a large room It looks like the sea suddenly frozen, and its endless curves succeed in humanizing any space with rectilinear boundaries I suspect that *Waves* works best in such a space and that if it were placed in a room or park with curving edges it might fail In fact Bieler seems nearly always con scious of the contrast between man-made rectilinearity and organic curve. His sculptural reliefs depend on their contex within a square or rectangular frame. His most recent work in Ajax, Ontario for a hospital and a municipal building may seem to belie this remark. Bieler has designed the walls of the buildings them selves. They are decidely non-rectangular but their curves are successful because one is still aware of their deviation from the rectangle

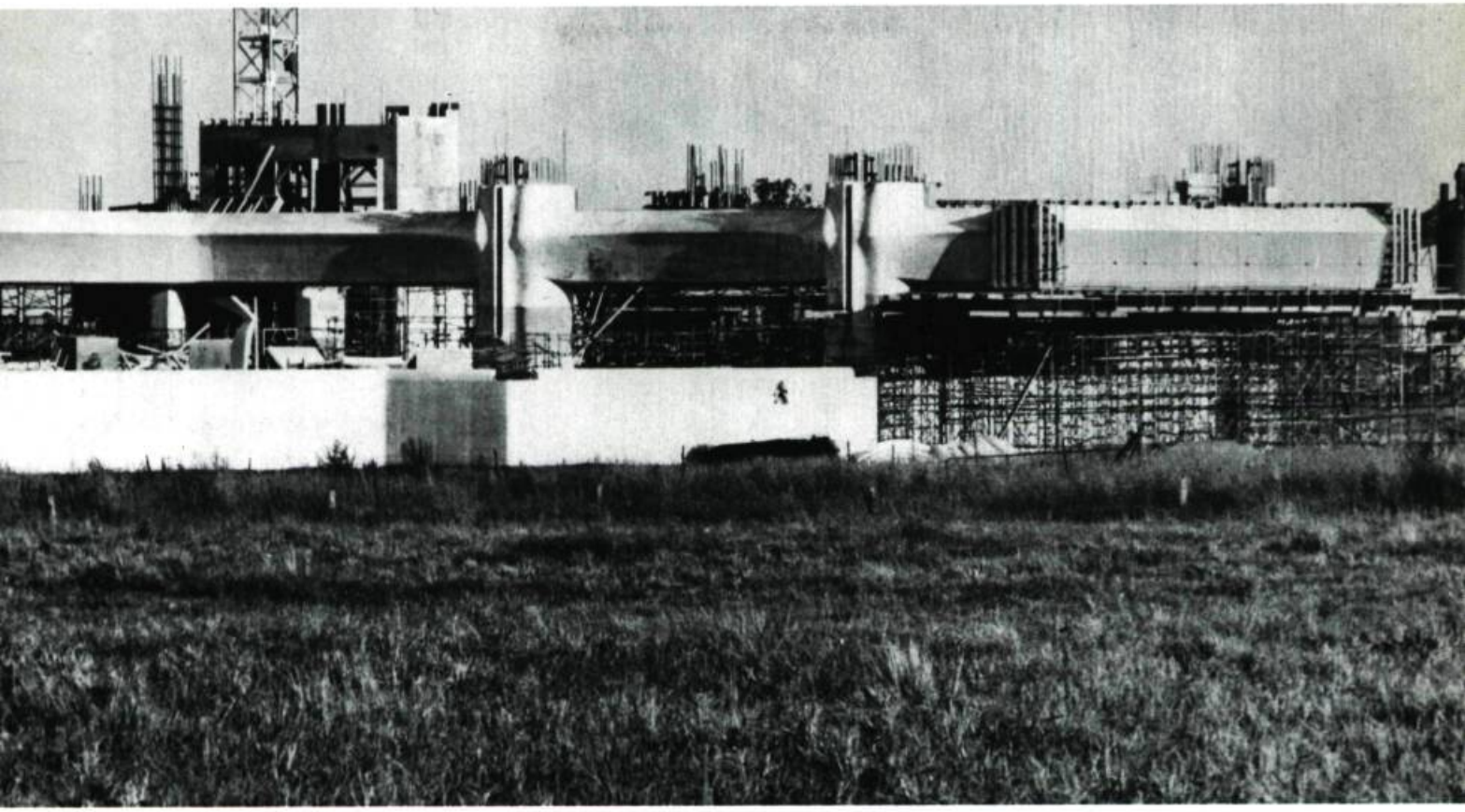
Tony Urquhart's recent exhibition at the Isaacs Gallery was a pleasure to see be cause anyone who has followed Urquhart's work during the last five years will know that he has been struggling to find some way of bridging the gap between the





Page ci-contre : Ted BIELER. Wave, 1967. Plastique armé de fibre de verre. 288" x 192" x 24" (731,6 x 487,7 x 61 cm).

Ci-dessous : Hôpital Whitby, Whitby, Ontario. CRAIG, ZEIDLER & STRONG, architectes ; Ted BIELER, sculpteur. Poutres de béton armé moulées dans des moules de plastique armé de fibre de verre.



painted surface and the free-standing object. At times the struggle has been painful to watch because the viewer could see that Urquhart is an intelligent, sensitive craftsman with all the knowledge of the problems involved, yet not quite able to find his solution. Now, he seems to have broken through. He has made a series of boxes, painted on the outside in a sort of lyrical abstract expressionist mode. The boxes open up along complex, curving breaks to reveal a space filled with painted, bumpy, rocky, sometimes mammary, undulating surfaces which may be arranged and rearranged in many different positions. Sometimes, when the boxes are opened up and folded back on themselves, the painted surfaces all align themselves into new patterns. Urquhart's boxes seem to express a theme reiterated over and over again among Ontario's sculptors : the conflict between the natural world and the manmade, mechanical world. Urquhart's boxes imply that the natural side of man can break out of its confines any time it so desires.

So far I have written of sculptors whose work I knew before I went into voluntary aesthetic monasticism. But the one who really jolted me back into the art world was a man I'd never heard of before, Walter Redinger. I've seen only one piece of his (I forget its title), but it made such a strong impact that I shan't easily forget the way it looked. Redinger is another biomorphic sculptor. He seems to be aware of England and Los Angeles, but he's thoroughly absorbed what he's seen and he's very much his own man. The Redinger piece I saw at the Art Gallery of Ontario was made of white epoxy, beautifully finished, slick surfaced, yet it wasn't a slick object. Out of a massive, sinuously curving wall, a first thrusts itself. The fist and the wall are one continuous shape, yet the fist looks as if it is about to drag some massive body out of the wall which seems to contain it. Redinger's work is sufficiently fashionable in the slick, mechanical tradition, so that the sculpture betrays no mark of hand or implement, yet the mechanical look is not a disguise for pure poverty of idea. On the contrary, Redinger's work looks as if it is quite capable of speaking eloquently about nightmare and ecstacy. In fact, the contrast of slick finish and animal shape may become a major technique for referring in a non-cliché-ridden manner to the universal contemporary nightmare of people trapped in a prison-machine.

Sorel Etrog's recent work also seems to be "about" the contrast and the conflict of the human and the mechanical world. In each bronze cast since 1965, a series of arms resembling double-headed wrenches or telephones interlock with each other and are poised against an Arp-like shape which becomes their extension. My main quarrel with Etrog's work is the material. There is no aesthetic justification for his use of bronze. In fact, Etrog often pits the bronze to make it look like rough-hewn stone, yet it is obvious also that he has no interest in playing tactile games with the viewer. But this is not the only reason why his work seems to lack conviction. The material seems wrong for what he does with it, and so does his chosen genre of free-standing sculpture. In this genre, whatever the material, the object stands in its own space and may be approached from any direction, but Etrog's objects are really free-standing bas-reliefs that look as if they are waiting for a wall. I suspect that he is catering to a high-status museum and collector demand for free-standing bronzes, but his heart isn't really in it. In fact, the plaster originals convey much more conviction, and Etrog's appropriate medium may well be cast white plastic.

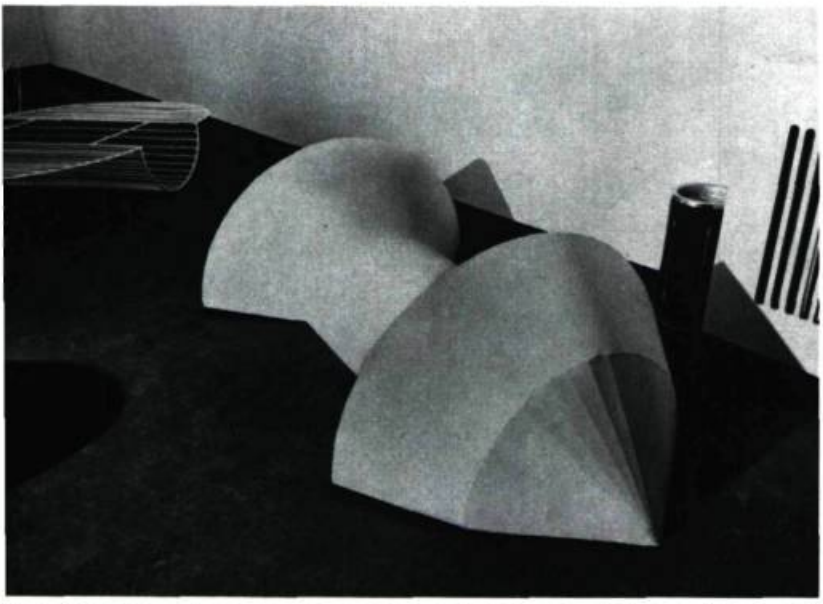
Obviously bronze is hard to use today, precisely because of its Old Master snob connotations. Filipovic gets away with it in his most recent work, just because he doesn't use patina but brings the metal to a fashionably high polish. Like Etrog, he

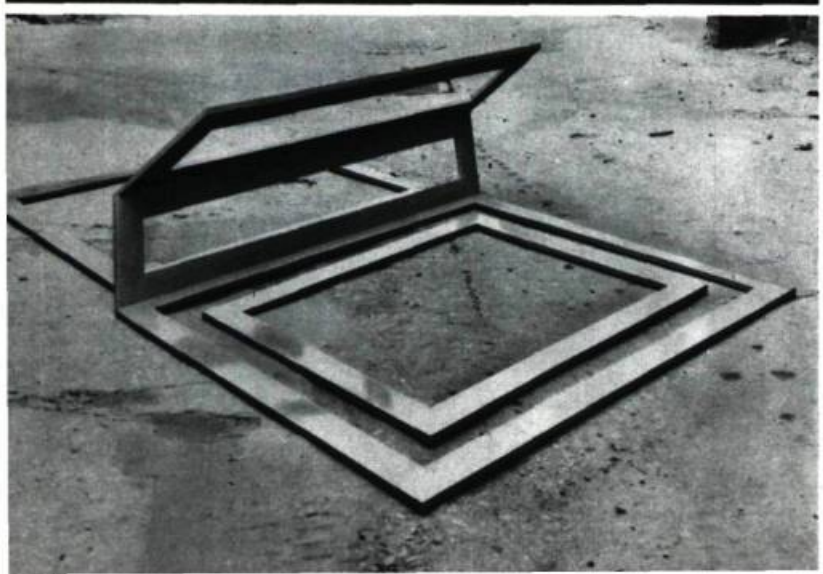
makes free-standing reliefs, sometimes chunky, sometimes sinuous, but unlike Etrog, Filipovic seems to stop with the production of elegant objects whose appeal is directed to a European sensibility.

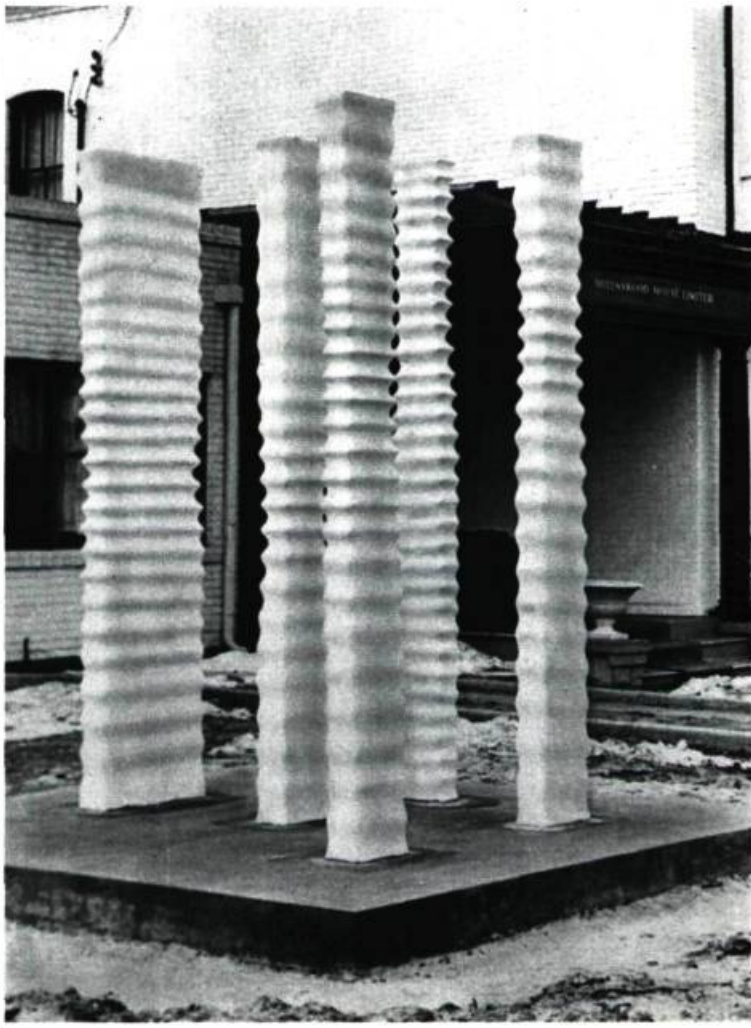
My remarks about Martin Hirshberg (see above) must also be applied to the work of Zbigniew Blazeje and Michael Hayden's Intersystems group. Blazeje sometimes encloses light bulbs in wooden boxes lined with coloured plexiglas and mirrors or he takes strips of 8 mm colour film and lights them from behind. Having done this, he either hooks the lights up to flasher units or to photoelectric cells so as to allow some sort of indeterminate sequence. The results are superficially engaging, but one soon loses interest in them because they are simply toys whose workings can quickly be understood. In one of Blazeje's boxes, two beams of light on opposite sides of the box shine on photoelectric cells. When the light beams are disturbed by viewers, two different sets of lights flash on. Obviously, this box can be the setting for a two-person game. But the game soon palls since the same stimulus always gets the same response. Kinetic light art ain't easy, and it gets even more difficult to bring off if you try to turn it into a game for viewers.

Hayden's boxes filled with fluorescent dyed liquids present the same set of problems. Theoretically, Hayden's boxes may present a variety of combinations within a fixed framework, but the Constructivist form vocabulary within which he works supplies a rigid structure of limited interest, while the different combinations of colour, movement and shape which the handler of these boxes can bring about is again similarly constricted.

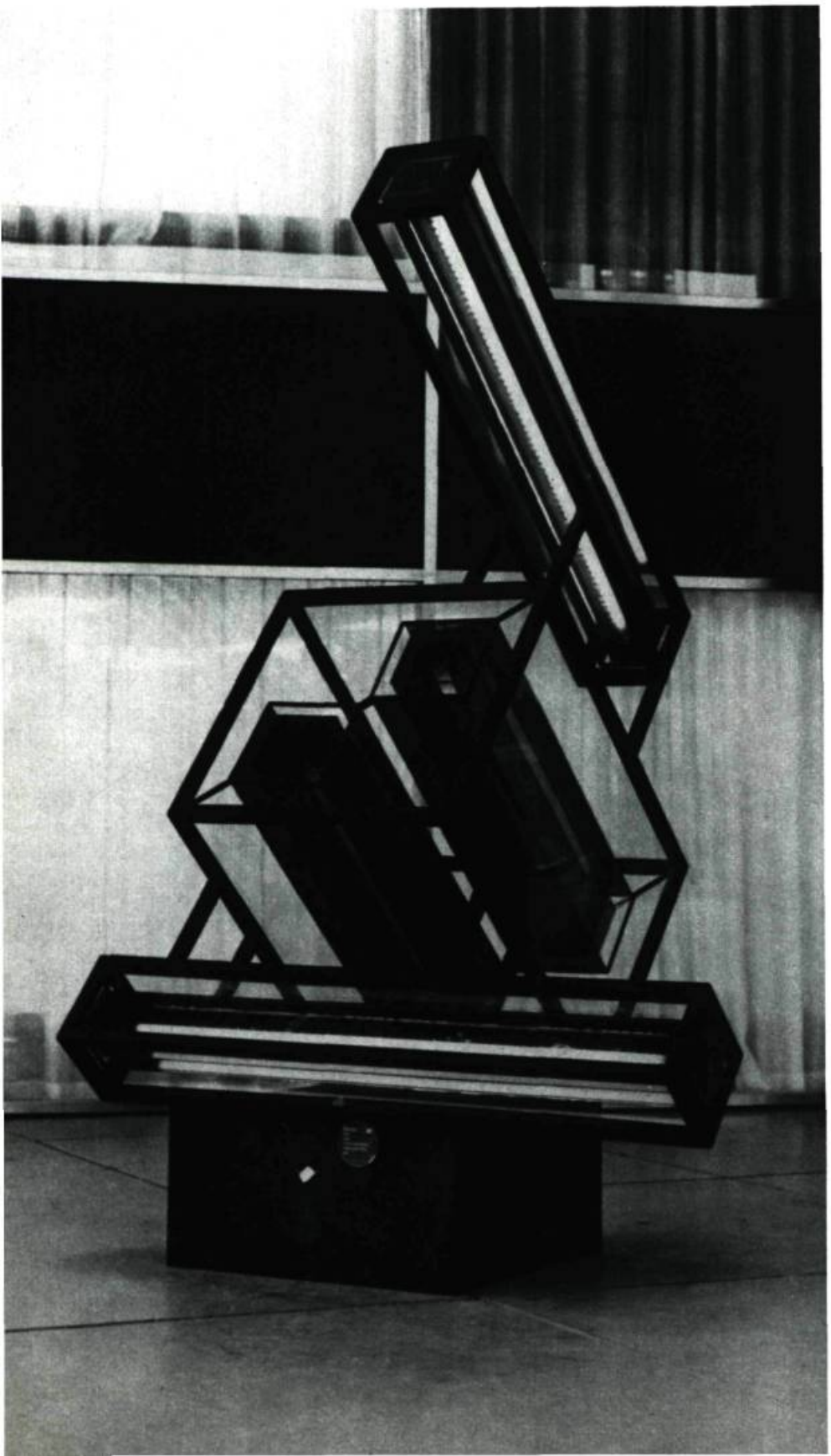
One would think that kinetic light art ought to be the ideal medium for twentieth century sculpture. After all, it strips down and symbolizes in manageable form the major environment and the major medium of the century — the look of the city at night with lights flashing on and off and moving along the highway, and the sensibility of "light through" rather than "light on", the popular sensibility trained by movies and tv. But the artist must compete with the infinite complexity of the modern nighttime city and the fascinating imagery of tv and the movies. If Blazeje, Hirshberg and Hayden may be said to fail, then they are brave failures, since there is hardly anyone working in this deceptively simple yet heartbreakingly difficult area of experimental aesthetics who may be said to succeed. Pol Bury and Robert Breer have been mentioned







Page ci-contre, à gauche de haut en bas: Royden RABINOVITCH. Conic Topography, 1968. Acier peint. 72" x 36" x 24" (182,9 x 91,45 x 61 cm). Carmen Lamanna Gallery. Toronto. Karl BEVERIDGE LS 687, 1968. Aluminium fini émail. 72" x 132" x 24" (182,9 x 335,3 x 61 cm). Carmen Lamanna Gallery. A droite: Robert HEDRICK. Sans titre, 1968. Béton recouvert d'époxyde. H.: 9' (2,75 m). Herrold Morris Gallery, Toronto. (photo Robert Title). Ci-dessous: Zbigniew BLAZEJE. Jewel Multiplex Response, 1967. Acier, acrylique, fluorescent, cellule photoélectrique et système sonore. 114" x 72" x 72" (290 x 182,9 x 182,9 cm). Carmen Lamanna Gallery.



and I could add the names of George Rickey and Len Lye. But none of these artists use light itself as part of the object. To the best of my knowledge, nobody working anywhere, with the possible exception of Gyorgy Kepes, has yet been able to combine light, movement, sculptural form, space and material into one completely satisfying whole. So far, we have been treated to primitive glimpses, that is all. Yet I also believe that *this* direction rather than the directions of minimal sculpture or freestanding immobile objects may turn out to be the most profondly important direction that sculpture or aesthetic environments may take during the next few decades.

The most interesting artists, in Ontario or anywhere else, are busy throwing off ages-old techniques suitable for the craftsman running his own small business who cannot afford machines and therefore must produce by hand. Instead, they are trying to learn industrial and electronic crafts and they must face the indifference if not the outright hostility of the businessman, the collector, the museum, the gallery dealer, the critic all of whom too often believe that sculpture is objects made of expensive material that last forever and stand still where you put them. This I believe is a rapidly-dying aesthetic, and those sculptors such as Bieler or Redinger who practice it and can still pull it off are to be commended. But it is an aesthetic that expresses the values of possessive individualism in a small-town marketplace before the industrial revolution. Many of us, in spirit if not in actuality, are still small-town people who feel more at ease with the rustic, the small-scaled, the handmade, and gaslight. And most art, even the slick, minimal art of Handy, the Rabinowitch brothers or Karl Beveridge, expresses these values, even if in attenuated form. The sculptures may have come down from the pedestal and even sometimes lie around on the floor, may even *be* the floor, but too rarely do they express the frantic, nervous, sometimes exhilarating and rapidly accelerating changes now sweeping through the world, yea, even through stodgy Ontario. For this reason, though their work hardly succeeds, we would do well to give sculptors such as Hayden, Blazeje and Hirshberg all the encouragement we can. Those who work in the more traditional sculptural media need encouragement too, but they need less of it because their task is less difficult.