

Twilight of an Idyll

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TWILIGHT

of an Idyll

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Iris Seyler, *Sculpture*
 Art Gallery, Mount Saint Vincent University
 Halifax, Nova Scotia
 Dec. 20th - Jan. 21st 1993

Iris Seyler's installation of an untitled sculpture (not to be mistaken for a sculptural installation) opened at Mount Saint Vincent Art Gallery, bringing with it considerations on the authority of work through place and the displacement of authority through work.

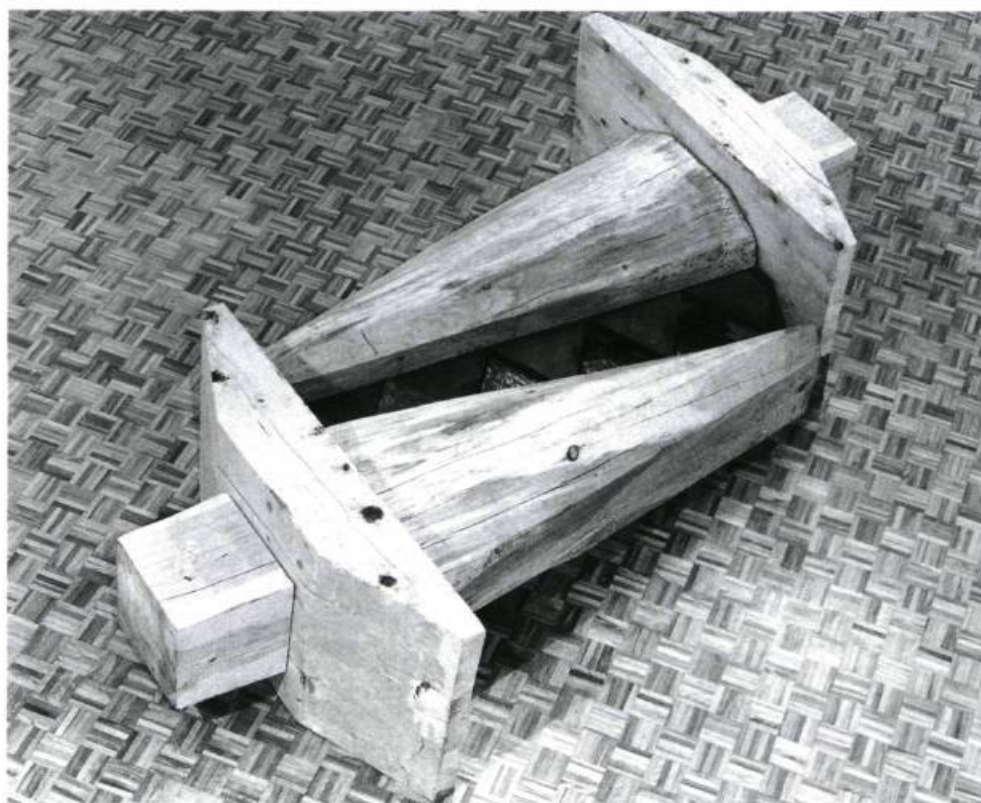
This University Gallery, replete with blond parquet flooring, exceptionally tall white walls, and an open grid concrete ceiling, successfully suggests the ambiance of an abandoned gymnasium and that of desanctified church. Such architectural identity has become the habitat in which much contemporary art is to be found, making it difficult at times to determine what the art is in service to. In such instances, work is relegated to compete primarily for complementary attention, beyond its own terms.

It is Seyler's concern to try and avoid such circuitous referencing and afford the possibility of a more clarified encounter.

In an earlier exhibition, Seyler located a large modular wooden structure in the approximate center of a moderate sized gallery. This structure was comprised of hand hewn 12" square pine timbers, stacked horizontally to form a seven by seven foot "wall".

Further observation disclosed that each level was the result of three individual sections, each carved to allow the other entry. (The applied joinery was that of mortise and tenon).

In this work, and in one of the two works from the Mount Saint Vincent show, Seyler allows the evidence of handling to remain. The chisel and saw marks serve as reminders of a mid-tech approach intended among other things to



Iris Seyler, *Untitled*, 1992. Pine beam, cast iron, (inlaid blades), 0.91 x 2.43 x 0.91 m. Photo: Steve Farmer.

reinforce the condition of the uniformity of the interior. (The sculpture is entirely 'skin deep').

Through Seyler's use of techniques for such visual arrest, the participants are encouraged to locate in themselves the physicality of the sculpture and, in doing so, are carried beyond a representational surface.

This is most apparent in the wood and cast iron work, suggestive of two mammoth daggers lying tip to hilt. These obviously carved and interlocking blade-inlaid objects are so dysfunctional in any literal way that they succeed in belying their own monumental physicality.

They serve as a massive symbolic emblem for a detente that strongly implies the incapability of influence. If you will, they become the carcasses of certain twentieth century art issues sardonically commemorating the end of an era. An era endemic of the flat and passionless exchange of appropriated symbols.

Recall the functional-sculpture of Scott Burton

and its apparent servitude to the taste and fancy of the middle class. It proved to serve as a souvenir that sanctioned the virtuosity of a 19th century value system. (Once again, the flattery of craftsmanship taking precedence over the stoicism of workmanship).

It is her concern for workmanship, a concern for doing things properly but no more, that is Seyler's strongest attribute.

The second work in this exhibition, solely concerned with matters of political state, was less convincing.

A cast iron crown, weighing more than several individuals could lift, sits directly upon the floor, forming a rectangle. Around this object lie four limestone slabs, somewhat reminiscent of sarcophagi.

Craftsmanship here seems to have inappropriately entered. The crown reads more like a failed attempt at floral design, while the figures appear to be entombed. The confidence found in the "Dagger" sculpture is not present here.

"Autocracy" lying in state surrounded by the coffins of an indeterminate "public" conjures up some interesting relationships. Unfortunately the references remain too generalized and the objects too estranged to hold one's attention for very long.

The ceremonial Roman enlaced dagger that Seyler chose to monumentalize in the first of these two sculptures creates a metaphor enhanced by the conceptualism of workmanship.

The 'Lying in State' work,¹ on the other hand, suffers from a preoccupation with technique as exercised

through craftsmanship.

Unfortunately, but consequently, it is difficult to determine what it is attempting to assert. In addition, the graphic quality of this sculpture, (Lying in State) gives it just the kind of palatability that aids in undermining any physical reading of the sculpture. The idea in the work is technically over complete, and the architecture is in no way responsible for this circumstance.

Seyler's strongest works are direct, competent and reliable. They illustrate both a faith in methodology and a working knowledge of the history of sculpture.

Both material presentations in this exhibition are encouraging evidence of Seyler's development as an artist. If one arrangement is less interesting, it is due I believe to nostalgia and not to uncertainty.

Louise Bourgeois once said that "artists who cannot leave their past behind find themselves creating sculpture as a way to exist in the present", thus making it all the more important to avoid the inclination toward sentimentality. ◆

NOTE

1. 'Lying in State' / My Description of the Cast Iron, Limestone Sculpture.

L'auteur commente l'exposition d'Iris Seyler à la Mount Saint Vincent Art Gallery, à Halifax: un lieu d'exposition particulier sur le plan de l'architecture. Les sculptures en bois de Seyler, qui laissent apparentes les interventions de l'artiste, rappellent les oeuvres d'un Scott Burton et leur lien avec des objets de la classe moyenne.

Iris Seyler, *Untitled*, 1992. Pine beam, cast iron, (inlaid blades). 0,91 x 2,43 x 0,91 m. Photo : Steve Farmer.

