



Inflections of Modernity

RICHARD STOUT

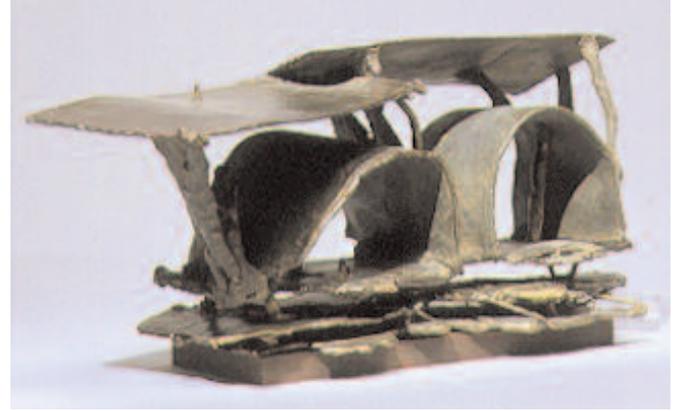


BY ILEANA MARCOULESCO

For a long time, I could not detect the swallow that would herald a sculptural spring in Houston. The best artists always emigrated; some gave excuses—no propitious climate, no inspiring culture, no public understanding. In the last few years, however, this city, and its environs, has taken me by surprise. Richard Stout, for one, broke the spell and canons of Texan art in the direction of abstraction, producing objects unlike anything labeled sculpture in this-here geography. He has not been corrupted by the drifting standards disseminated in postmodernity: with a rare power of concentration and self-confidence, he crossed unscathed the chasm between classic and fashionable and came forward with new ways of art-making.

Born in Beaumont, Texas, in 1934, Stout is best known for his symbiosis with the Gulf Coast, which he has elevated throughout the years to almost mythic status. Not departing from geometric rigor, he blended architectural volumes into a reverberating symphony of colors. Having started to sculpt at an early age (11 or 12), using plaster, rough wood, or any other found materials, in his maturity, Stout produces abstract sculptures, invoking but not depicting real-life events.

Unlike Stout's paintings, which are aerial and light in response to the littoral landscape, though not devoid of mystery, his sculptures are mostly a somber, difficult art, full of ciphers that resist immediate reading; yet they grow on you with each new approach. The sculptures appear to explore a space of intimate events—in spite of their rhetorical titles, compiled from grand mythological narratives. In severe bronze, gray, brown, aged wood, or green hues, they are heavy, complex, versatile three-dimensional shapes. Ascetic in appearance, cryptic in connotation, yet freewheeling, they speak a private language of passions and are hard to penetrate, except intuitively. The horizontal spaces are charted with vectors and pegs so that no matter from which angle you look at them, they seem oriented. This is one way of transposing abstract impression-



Clockwise from opposite, bottom: *To Cythera*, 2002. Bronze with oil paint, 9 x 7.5 x 11.5 in. *Icarus*, 2005. Bronze, 19.5 x 29 x 21 in. *Hero*, 2005. Bronze, 19 x 24 x 15 in. *Encampment*, 1999. Bronze in 2 parts, 11.5 x 26 x 19.5 in. *Library (at Alexandria)*, 1999. Bronze with oil paint, 11 x 17 x 7 in.

ism into sculpture.

Stout's sculpture is miles away from figuration, rarely suggesting realistic frames. The hand follows its sources—memory, imagination, dreams, chance encounters—with the boldness of invention. Not that the eye relinquishes for a moment its severe control over the combinations, the alternation of the full and the hollow, the gauging of proportions and the daring of vectors. Some dynamic pieces seem to float at full speed on water, as in *To Cythera*, *Isle of Love* (1999), or to pierce the air like aggressive wild birds. Some, like *Minotaur* (1999), are centered around the dark geometry of a cave, inhabited by symbolic, frightful victims. *Library (at Alexandria)* (1999), a fiction of genius in mahogany red, presents a burnt piece of furniture with faulty steps and irregularly protruding shelves, barely allowing one to sit on a step of the ladder, open a volume, and replace it *ad libitum*. A ruin of exquisite majesty, in spite of its reduced scale, it inspires a feeling of nostalgic reverence. *Encampment* (1999) suggests a double gypsy caravan with two covers—half-cylinders of unequal radius—anchored to rafts of different widths and compositions; it looks like the abode of nomads, eternally migrating, floating on a sea of uncertainties. In the midst of this free-play abstraction, one can read a gamut of humanoid psychological forces kept in check by the artist's command of classical proportions. Passions, fate's treacheries, abysmal errances, and absurdist events are visible, eliciting a gamut of aesthetic/emotional responses. A multiplicity of perspectives enlivens each object, revealing totally new facets, as if disparate objects were glued together in a fragile continuum; they engage viewers in a variety of experiences, loaded with multiple significations and emotions. Stout's abstract objects are not frozen in unique postures: changing perspectives modifies contours, suggesting different stories and moods. Each profile projects a different physiognomy, irreducible to a single "take." There is an ineffable dialogue between

angular profiles, flat grounds, and winged soarings, generating, like life itself, an array of versatile icons. *Untitled* (2002–03), in oxidized bronze, resembles a giant locust or prehistoric bird, projecting its green wings against the luminous pastels of a villa's elegant terrace, an extraterrestrial amid human artifacts.

The two "giants" of Stout's last show—*Hero* and *Icarus*—both in green-painted bronze (both 2005), grew out of Stout's smaller (and equally cryptic and expressive) sculptures. As the names suggest, they incarnate two opposed stations in life: *Hero* the victor, camped on one graceful, dancing foot and two precariously grounded appendages, wings or tails; and *Icarus* the vanquished, defeated, limp, wings folded downward, emanating pessimism or perhaps resignation. It is curious that the most purely abstract pieces in Stout's body of work lend themselves best to psychological considerations. Such is the paradox of abstraction: by deflecting attention from the pretty or ghastly details, it opens a direct window into pure, essential insights that, in turn, usher in feelings and judgments.

Formally speaking, these two pieces, to a greater degree than the smaller sculptures, present an extraordinarily vivid characteristic of being, according to a bold and appositely focused inspiration—the perspectival approach to the invented object. Do pure invention and perspectivism go together? Or is the perspectival approach to be confined to "realistic" artifacts? I don't know the answer to this question. But in practice, anyone having watched Stout rotating his artifacts around imaginary axes, or circling each piece to achieve a synthesis of facets, angles, holes, twists and turns, must admit that this approach yields a richness of insight, an astounding intensification of meanings. The artifact appears not as one, in spite of its spatial unity, but as the non-

linear product of the sum of its various facets, angles, and elements. Thus a dynamic view of a multi-dimensional object is created that viewers are free to judge, complete in imagination, and interpret in their own terms. It is the triumph not of subjectivism in abstract art, but of the synthetic phenomenology of perception of which Merleau-Ponty spoke so eloquently more than half a century ago.

It is noteworthy that this seemingly abstruse approach to art has found its spontaneous “application,” almost an embodiment, in, of all places, Bayou City, Texas. While some native Texan artists felt that they could not reach fame or originality here, Stout, a quintessentially Texan artist, did not uproot himself. Widely traveled, both physically and optically, he has only sharpened and deepened his sense of the *spiritus loci*, lifting it to the rank and status of the universal.

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