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The Expressive Edge

CHARTA

Chapter VIII

ROBERT LOBE: THE BAROQUE ABSTRACT

Robert Lobe's sculptures astonish, in this déjà-vu art world, with their grandeur and originality of vision. Of his wall pieces and freestanding tree sculptures, Lobe says that he returned to nature in a new way, more conscious of the sublime—a sublime both fearful and beautiful. This attitude towards nature places him as a Northern Romantic; in his treatment of landscape, which magically fuses the scientific and the ecstatic, there are analogies to American Transcendentalism.

Lobe, who has aptly said "edge is the key to mass and volume," showed many years ago a hyperawareness of edge as an expressive force. From no two vantage points does any part of his work appear the same. Lobe's writings about the sculptural edge, mass, and their relation to nature grow out of and express the work:

My inspiration for the edge was not only Bernini but also David Smith. I was impressed by the way the planes abut, leaving a gap, filled by a weld, catching a shadow, becoming an edge. As I wrap sheets of metal around nature's irregular shapes, often the edge falls across a plane. The holes in my work are also edge—another way to identify presence . . . Art has to do with the invention of our desires. Something that says, now we're getting a bit closer . . . To use the forms of nature requires respect of the art and science that govern its laws of growth and change.¹

Lobe's exhibit in California in 2004 showed important developments from his previous work. A contrapuntal relation between realistic nature and abstraction has always been fundamental to his sculptures. But his new works, both the bas-reliefs and the freestanding tree forms, are far more abstract—further from the motif—than any of Lobe's other works from the past thirty years. In both genres, the artist now "rearranges" the nature that he selects to be shaped and hammered into art.²

VINE, 1999 (p. 103) demonstrates this move towards greater abstraction. It is composed in a freer way, with a virtuoso treatment of surface. Lobe says that his use of much thicker aluminum sheets,

which he anodizes, allows him to work the aluminum "like clay." Thus he can create voluptuously articulated surfaces, with whorls of molten metal and labyrinths of lines within a terrain. Truly "abstracted" from the original object or site in nature, this work is more Lobe's conception of particular natural elements than literal recreations of those elements themselves.

The new wall pieces with the extravagant silhouette and surface that is both meticulous and sensuous is emphatically Baroque in its theatricality, plunging diagonals, and complex patterns of movement. The edges, Baroque in character, alternate between sharpness and fluidity, giving the work a dramatic tactility. As in *VINE*, Lobe adapts the technique of radically opposing directional movement: one mass of volume moves left, the other right, creating a mood of energy and majesty.

Lobe's work resembles Noguchi's in its intense drama and tactility, and in contrasting raw nature to the intercessions of art. The silhouettes of Lobe's works often recall the bizarre shapes and edges of Chinese scholars' rocks, as well as the plunging diagonals in Bernini's treatment of drapery. The way Lobe uses aluminum, an extremely responsive material, steepens his work in mystery. Light is an active poetic protagonist, augmenting theatricality as it moves over a terrain of edges at times fierce, at times serene.

The viewer begins with a sense of Lobe's homage to the natural world. Then, close-up, one sees an infinity of mark-making: hammered, chiseled, and pointed details, which add up to a volcanic textured surface, a microcosm of pitted and fissured matter. The work is contradictory: while it has a taut centeredness, it is also spatially voluminous, with an insistence on penetrating the viewer's space. *HARMONY RIDGE*, 1996 (p. 104) has a dark and menacing plasticity and is orchestrated on an immense scale. If cloudlike and beatific, this work also evokes nature's *terribilità*.

The wall sculptures embody the themes of growth and change so common in Baroque sculpture. Of the bas-reliefs, *CIRCLE* (2005) continues the triumphantly Baroque tone, compelling in vertiginous stance and lush, complex rhythms, while others take a decidedly classical stance, serene and balanced. Lobe sees the bas-reliefs such as

PAGE I, VOL. 11, 1999 (p. 79) with its elegantly broken, irregular edges as “pages from a notebook—the notebook of nature.” The analogy to pages or drawings is apt, as Lobe, with his hammering tools, “draws” on the aluminum sheets.³

As concentrated distillations of a whole, these works have immense power. Lobe knows that the fragment has an undiluted energy and plastic unity that the whole may not. In these works, the formal qualities themselves—the volumes, the mass, the lines, the edges, the rhythms—are so precise as to symbolize the whole. Surely these surfaces, where light makes the forms dissolve and merge, create an image of a world in movement. The surfaces reveal a substructure of substance and material. Stark and calligraphic, Lobe’s rhythmic groupings of trees, as in *HARMONY RIDGE* (1996, Reston, Virginia), shows an inward and perceptual relationship to nature. To the artist, these works are “interior landscapes.”

There is a spare and linear elegance to the tree works and a spatial symmetry that suggests an Eastern aesthetic. In the wall pieces, Lobe gives the energies of art and nature equal power; in the tree works, he suggests that art has the greater voice, and the accents—stones on the branches—are like music, creating a spare rhythm.

Lobe’s *CIRCLE* demonstrates what he called an American tendency to hold the “resolution in balance” in his creation of a molten, menacing surface, which appears, like a tidal wave, at its highest point, about to break. This sense of a reenactment of nature’s energies, as well as the turbulence of the surface, recalls those of Rodin. Lobe recently said: “I want to convey the discovery, the unexpectedness of the familiar.” In *CIRCLE* Lobe’s mark making seems freer, more massive. *CIRCLE*’s monumental forms are more volatile in contour and edge. The work has a Dionysian choreography of plunging heavy bronze curves, recalling, in force and repetition, waves of an angry sea.

As Barry Schwabsky pointed out some years ago in *Art in America*, most sculptors who supposedly deal with nature have no spiritual or philosophical relationship to it. The United States may possess vast expanses of extraordinary natural landscape, but we Americans do not believe in it. While we are at home in nature, nature is not our home.⁴

Lobe’s affirmation over twenty-five years ago of the ancient but

forgotten truth of man's interdependence with nature relates to American Transcendentalism. He has certainly achieved his own transcendental sublime. His unique achievement recalls the words of Leonardo da Vinci, who praised artists "capable of disputing and contending with nature." Lobe's sculpture suggests a possible mediation between human existence and the larger natural world. While poetic, his work is about the destructiveness of nature and the destructiveness of man. He is an important sculptor not only for his formal qualities but for the authenticity and relevance of his vision.⁵



Robert Lobe, PAGE I, VOL. 11, 1999



Robert Lobe, VINE, 1999



Robert Lobe, HARMONY RIDGE, 1996