The Palm at the End of the Parking Lot

Robert Lobe's outdoor studio spreads along the rugged profile of a ridge capped by the Appalachian Trail, a stone's throw from the secluded trailer campgrounds of Harmony Ridge, in Sussex County, New Jersey. There by consent of the Risdon family, owners of the camp, he has become de facto sculptor in residence. The road winds through the well-kept camp and then becomes a path as it approaches the area where he works, and then it ends in the forest that rises to the Trail. In the spring, the abundant spill of rock along the ridge is clearly visible in the budding woods. There are ropes of vines and jack in the pulpit and fiddleheads, nut trees and maples and oaks. In the summer the woods grow dense with an undergrowth of sapling and fern, and the specific rocks and trees that draw Lobe's attention are obscured by the hardy foliage of the season. There is a locked tool chest stocked with pneumatic hammers and sledges, and there are an air compressor and hoses, but no shed, no electricity or running water.

Among the few discernible signs of Lobe's activity are bolts embedded in the surface of an occasional rock, and superficial pitting where quartz crystals pop under pressure from the hammer's blow, a tree composting among the fallen leaves. In one place, the site of current activity, there is a cradle of two by fours supporting a sheet of anodized aluminum inflected with the peening of a sledge where the light metal begins to stretch and cling to the rock surface. The cradle supporting the work in progress is one of Lobe's adaptations of the traditional technique for creating relief known as repoussé, raising metal over a form which in this case happens to be the form of a rock. As a sculptor he has adapted and practiced variations of the technique for 25 years, nearly 20 of them at Harmony Ridge. Applied to endlessly available inventories of rocks and trees, it is Lobe's signature expression.[1]

In the seasonal August river city heat and humidity of the summer of 1995, Lobe temporarily relocated his studio to the foot of a mighty tree on the gently rolling lawns of Laumeier Sculpture Park, in St. Louis. A pleasing, relatively manicured landscape, the

park lacks the abundance of rocks that are part of his personal landscape, and instead is populated by an eclectic, site oriented and permanent collection of outdoor sculpture. The largest of Lobe's projects seem to be appropriately intended for installation in the occupied landscape, in sculpture courts, on lawns, often in relation to buildings and the work of other artists. Invited to propose a site specific work for Laumeier, he visited the park, choosing among many different places informed by his response to them.

He saw where Andrew Goldsworthy did his piece, and David Nash, and in some instances, he personally was not much taken with what to him seemed a general modesty of affect, a predictability. He ran the gamut of ideas, and gravitated to this tree, a majestic black walnut said to be decaying, located somewhat near a parking lot. Within sight of lot and tree, Lobe reckoned on Alexander Liberman's architectonic landmark, *The Way*, an enormous red portal of tumbling columns just beyond, and nearer by the aluminum I-beams of a Robert Morris, and then a grove of trees. There are the open concrete boxes of Donald Judd connecting to another copse of trees in the distance, and closer to hand Vito Acconci's playful little amphitheater of concrete and sod in the form of a face imbedded in the lawn, and at the time there was another large tree, not a walnut, since removed.

Lobe was commissioned to create the object of his proposal, what came to be *The Palm at the End of the Parking Lot*, a massive black walnut sheathed in aluminum repoussé and rising like the hand and forearm of a terrestrial deity from the park lawn. The project was a way for Lobe to examine the interface between a person and the natural surroundings. "It became like a door," he said, "a connecting bridge, to enter into this metaphorical world we call landscape." For the title, Lobe adapted the first line of the Wallace Stevens poem "Of Mere Being."[2]

The palm at the end of the mind,
Beyond the last thought, rises
In the bronze distance...

In the Stevens metaphor, the temporal experience of living in the vast savanna of being that lies beyond thought or feeling becomes barely imaginable in its vastness by the

thought of a tree at the farthest boundary of perception, and in that tree, a singing bird, unattainably remote. For Lobe it represents the making and the function of his sculpture as a kind of dead reckoning, a way of finding something. The thought is as high and gothic as the *Palm* came to be. It is an enduring piece. There is nothing like it anywhere.

Lobe made drawings of the tree with pen and colored ink, and talked of possibilities. His real challenge was the virtual absence of rocks in the landscape, and for a while he considered the feasibility of importing rocks, or going to another place and making them there. But the tree was magnificently there, in a great site, and in a position to allow him to connect his ideas with the site. With Laumeier. With the acreage. With the idea of the sublime articulated in the Stevens poem. And part of the existing landscape could deal with his concerns about nature, very serious concerns for him at the time. Laumeier's invitation provided a grand opportunity to realize a project that he couldn't have conceived of otherwise, and he thought of the possibilities in the least self-effacing terms possible. There is a vista of 200 yards. Totally naked, the *Palm* could jut out of nowhere, in the rudest way possible, and in the light of day the piece would sparkle.

Black walnut is decay-resistant wood, and for the first time Lobe could conjoin aluminum sheets to a living armature that could maintain that union indefinitely. He proposed to selectively truncate the tree, a process common to Lobe's work, and envelope it with heavy, quarter-inch thick, five by thirteen-foot sheets of pounded plate aluminum. Using the heaviest pneumatic hammer made, bought for the occasion, and a diesel air compressor the size of a kitchen, he shaped the aluminum fabric onto the surface of the tree. He used stainless steel carriage bolts to pin the aluminum jacket deep into the walnut, so that eventually when the bark degrades, and the tree shrinks slowly, the integrity of its altered form remains. And he cropped the major limbs at various points in relation to the height and girth of the trunk, until, without his conscious intention, they came to resemble the fingers of a hand extended on a forearm emerging from the earth. At its highest extremity, the *Palm* extends 17 feet, and at its widest, 8. His hands, forearms and body absorbed the shock of the hammer's percussion 7 days a week, 12 hours a day, for 21 days, in humid, hundred-degree weather. After the opening

celebration, the exhausted sculptor packed up his gear and put it in his truck. Alternately plunging his grotesquely swollen hands in buckets of ice, Lobe drove straight through five states to join his wife and family at Lake Placid in New York a thousand miles away.

"I kept the confines of sculpture revolving around what I feel sculpture speaks most about," Lobe observes, "and I've tried to develop that message." The message is evident in the reasoned, hands-on and even empirical progress through the history of his work. When he left his native Ohio for New York, the first sculptures he made were kinetic, inspired by the artists of the arte povera movement, the movable structures of Mark di Suvero and the interactive assemblies of Eva Hesse. He read them as landscapes, participatory, floor-oriented assemblies of rubber mat, twine, wire, bedsprings and electrical conduit that could be articulated, folded and jumped upon.[3]

In time, he raised the pieces off the ground, like the structures of David Smith, and then he turned to wood. Although he came to use redwood and cedar and yellow cypress, the first piece in this body of work was made from the cedar of a water tower Lobe found in a dumpster. He took it to Richard Artschwager's studio in the basement of an early SoHo gallery on Broome Street, and recut the wood, getting rid of half a century of rot. The work that followed expressed ideas about volumetric shapes coming together, as he tried to build a logic into the surface that would demonstrate the volume, and reveal a kinesthetic sense of mass. Looking at Judd and David Smith, the work became increasingly volumetric, and very geometric. He began to seek an organic fit in terms of form and surface, but tried to keep the same logic of the earlier work. He thought of trees and walked around and picked up stones in a vacant lot.

Lobe's wood sculptures referred directly to rocks in the articulation of their volume and in the space they occupied, his answer to minimal art, and from there logically proceeded to structures of organized material. As things transpired, the material and its organization spoke to Lobe from the body of a car. He sold a wood sculpture to the Levi Strauss Collection. With the money he bought a 1958 Aston Martin Mark III, and the world of pounded metal, raised on a form, opened to him. While the Aston Martin had a steel

chassis and was framed out in wood, the aluminum skin of its body was formed, like the Statue of Liberty was made, with free blows of a hammer on metal over wooden molds. To remove the marks for the sleek skin of the car, the parts were run through a rolling machine, a giant c-clamp with rollers. "I never had a thought in my head of working with aluminum until I bought the Aston Martin," Lobe says. "And I realized that I could do something completely different." It turned out to be a seminal point of departure.

Part of it was that the car needed work and the work required techniques that were new to him. He went to a library and looked up repoussé, and found an issue of Popular Mechanics from 1948 that described in lay terms how forms could be hammered out of aluminum. As he worked on the restoration of the Aston Martin, it followed that Lobe would transfer the technique to rock. The very first of such pieces were made on stone tailings from the World Trade Center excavation, rocks that were being blasted out of the ground to provide the footing for the complex, heaped in piles. He thought of them as Rosetta stones, encoded with a decipherable language that would guide him in his work. The first attempts were small, raised directly on the rock. He wrapped the rock with aluminum, pounding the sheet metal to conform to its surface, then carefully cut the aluminum to remove the carapace he'd created, and finally welded up the seam. In the fall of 1976, he showed the rocks and the sculptures that derived from them on the roof of P.S. 1 in Long Island City.[4]

Lobe based his first large-scale aluminum sculpture on one of these rocks. Ambitious at more than 12 feet high, *Manhattan Schist, Portrait of a Rock* (1977) is a variation of the repoussé method, an interpretation of the rock, a portrait. Using his own round and bullet shaped mallets, he stretched and shaped the aluminum by pounding the metal over a leather pillow filled with sand, like a rifleman's pad, rather than directly on the stone, and raised the finished panels on a complex support. The huge sculpture with its flowing surfaces is totally in the round, and despite its size, weighs not much more than 150 pounds, a size Lobe could deal with on his own.[5]

The problem with the piece was its apparent top-heaviness. It was not clear how the mass could rest on the ground. He developed a solution that was an adaptation of the super light frame construction devised by Aston Martin for the model years that followed his own. Beneath the surface of the sculpture, four columns function as vertical elements of a supporting trellis of aluminum conduit. He connected everything on the skin to this vertical frame, and directed all the forces to the columns. Finally, he made a ring bar around the base of the columns to tie it to the ground. Having dealt with this structural problem by further extrapolating from his experience with the Aston Martin, he realized that in making the frame he had returned to the same problems he had faced with his work in wood, a process that was inherently time consuming and obsessive. By the excessive nature of the process, he had separated himself by too many degrees from the immediate experience of creating sculpture that he intended.

But he wasn't done with wood. He had developed the tools and the expertise to make wood sculpture, and he wasn't ready to let it go. He collected branches in the woods that had different curves to them, different Y-shapes and yokes. He put them through a joiner-planer and made flat boards out of the curves, and fashioned an egg-shaped piece, opening up the volume, laying curved branches in different patterns. It was another portrait of a rock, but this time he organized the surface as thought it had been hammered. It was the final transition to the repoussé work that followed.[6] Now he was motivated to get to the point more quickly, and he returned to hammering directly on the rock, as he had at the beginning.

Lobe began a series of sculptures that later reminded him of trophies, the product of an explorer attitude, with trees growing out of rock, as though he had discovered them. He worked for a while in the terminus of the Palisades at Weehawken called King's Bluff, until he was thrown off the land, and he worked along the Appalachian Trail, before he found Harmony Ridge, and was thrown off again by the park rangers. Through a map and title search he located the owner of the King's Bluff acreage, was granted permission to work there, and did for 6 years. He was looking at combinations of rocks and trees, and doing work that in time seemed to him to be too much of the same thing. "Two or three

of one rock and a root or two roots, a branch. And I felt I was farming and I was gathering carrots or cabbages."

In response, his work became more ambitious. He began to invert large reliefs of rock so that the thickest part of their structure seems to press against the sky with architectural potential, and he experimented with the morphing of shapes. Such pieces billow out overhead, like the cornices of 19th century industrial buildings. The idea of inverting the sculpture led him to a much more fluid situation in his work, and he began collaging pieces. If he had a section of rock face, or combination of rocks, or if he had a tree that needed a certain combination of rocks, he'd introduce the two, superimposing one on the other in any orientation that seemed right. They were created chunks of landscape.

Looking back at the history of his work, Lobe realizes how much it is about landscape, and understands that the references to materials and material structures are conveyed in landscape with the miscellaneous and disorganized and random occurrence of things, of wood, rock, water, air. "And that's what is read in my aluminum," he says. "What's transposed in the surface of my aluminum pieces is this reference to materials. It's not really just a rock and a tree, it's wood and stone and organic and inorganic and that's where the interest comes from." He observes that what is interesting about sculpture and art in general is that it continues to develop associations, and one of the most interesting is in the architecture of the work, where the nature is present as an idea, because the materials themselves are essentially architectural materials. "My work comes from the transposition, the transformation of material, and the material I'm using, whether it's wood or stone, is an outgrowth of the early rope-twine pieces reduced to materials that are organic and inorganic, and then transposed to this kind of text, this kind of indexical way of describing my surroundings in an energetic and physical way."

By the '90s, the whole idea of the progress he'd made in the '70s had changed again. He had embraced aluminum as a medium that would allow him to distance himself with nature, and twenty years later, he had entered a period of work where nature was beginning to subsume his work. Without knowing it, just proceeding forward in his work

in a natural progression of impulsive emotional decisions – "not trying to outwit art, or what was happening in art" – he started getting much more involved with trees. He would begin in the field, then return to his Jersey City studio to work on a surface and its organization, bringing a limb or other element along with him, sometimes returning the work in progress to Harmony Ridge for further elaboration of a component rock. Lobe's challenge was to not be metaphorical, to try to approach the work in a rational and analytical way that allows him to understand what he does in subsequent work. Unintentionally, the work became increasingly metaphoric.

His attitude today is more a ritual of looking, gravitating towards a subject, combining art and nature. The intention is to make art, and in order to achieve that end, he has come to respect the entire process. He realizes that much of what he had considered under his control in fact happened because of how he did things and where he was and how he felt, what the accidental circumstances are. He has become immersed in the composition of things, how a branch comes to grow a certain way, or how three trees in proximity to each other can branch a certain way because of their genetic disposition. He sees how the rocks are formed, and how a broken branch that continues to grow, but downward, frames a section of a rock, and how, when put together they make him think of currents of water in a stream.

Lobe considers landscape a good metaphor, because it goes beyond immediate concerns and spreads out in a pantheistic way, and that the impulse to the sublime of Rothko and Newman is a valid one. In order to retain the originality of his work – that aspect that makes it worth doing – he takes a more conscious approach to it, concerned with what difference it makes as he comes full circle to the notion of his work as created landscape, with the collage of rock and tree. His recent wall pieces combining rock and tree are expressed whenever possible in one sheet of aluminum, to simplify the work, and get closer to the idea of created landscape. They are relatively intimate, with the quality of a relief, not large objects hanging off the wall. Simplified, they are synoptic, concise, abbreviated references to landscape.

He considers other possibilities, ideas that may proceed from the installation of his work outdoors, as at Laumeier. *Harmony Ridge #27* (1990) (74 x 113 x 71"), the large-scale work in the courtyard at the Newark Museum, rises naturally out of a bed of English ivy. For two years, the work *Reflected Landscape* (1997) (80 x 60 x 80") rested in a reflecting pond, like a rock and tree floating on the surface of the water. In both instances the physical components of their immediate surroundings, the innumerable leaves and the rippling of the water, responded to the dappling and peening and striations of the sculpture that are, for Lobe, a kind of painting, the making of marks on a metal substrate. Perhaps in much the same way he has employed alloys of green and gold, or projects a future work to be made from galvanized steel, Lobe has figured out a way to grow moss on the surface of a hammered aluminum piece. It remains an idea of interest to him, but as of this writing, not more than an idea. As though to underscore its viability, however, in the spring of 2000, *The Palm at the End of the Parking Lot* began to sprout green shoots from a sliver of an aperture where the metal sheets are joined. It's the ultimate metaphor of an altered myth, like Daphne returning from the laurel.

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[1] This text was informed by interviews and site visits with the sculptor conducted in the spring of 2000, and by a video document and other materials provided by Laumeier Sculpture Park.

[2] Stevens, Wallace and Holly Stevens. *The Palm at the End of the Mind: Selected Poems and a Play.* New York: Vintage Books, 1990.

[3] These sculptures were titled after their component materials. [slide information for caption: *Wood, Rubber, Wire and Rope*, 1969. Height variable, diameter 10 feet. Collection of the artist.]

[4]P.S. 1 was founded in 1976 as a facility of the Institute for Art and Urban Resources, and is now the contemporary arts center of the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

[5] In the spring of 1977, *Manhattan Schist* was included in an outdoor exhibition of Lobe's sculpture at the Hammarskjold Plaza Sculpture Garden of the United Nations, New York City. In 1978, it was installed in front of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum during one of the museum's recurrent "Young American Artists" exhibitions sponsored by Exxon. It was then purchased by the late collector J. Patrick Lannan, founder of the Lannan Museum, Lake Worth, Florida. Following Lannan's death and the dispersal of the museum's collection, *Manhattan Schist* was conveyed to the Center for The Fine Arts Sculpture Court, Jack Orr Memorial Plaza, Metro-Dade Cultural Center, in Collaboration with the Art in Public Places Trust of Metropolitan Dade County.

[6] The oaken *Tree Supporting Boulder* (1977) (83 x 78 x 49") is in the collection of the Brooklyn Museum of Art. The aluminum *Tree Supporting Boulder* (1977) (78 x 83 x 55") that is its mirror image was shown in juxtaposition to it during the 1978 Exxon exhibition, and was purchased by the Guggenheim Museum. The aluminum *Tree Supporting Boulder* is Lobe's first combination of rock and tree, and immediately followed the making of *Manhattan Schist.*