

STILL LIVES IN BRONZE

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WILDENSTEIN

147 New Bond Street, London W.1.



INTRODUCTION

These bronzes cast such a spell that I can believe that even in a notably civilised gallery, where we have received impressions down the years of the most cultivated art of man, the most finished elegance of the dix-huitième for example... I can believe that even here some of the atmosphere that surrounded them in the great loft on lower Fifth Avenue where they evolved will still hang inseparably about them.

The atmosphere is a bright yet slightly steamy warmth like some fantastically fertile conservatory where exotic growths sprout and proliferate uncontrollably, almost threateningly. So much so that, shedding ones jacket and looking about, one notices that arching leaves as sharp as swords may stab one if one does not watch. One is concerned whether any of the assembled plants are of carnivorous kind, concerned to make sure that though they may prick none of them will snap or capture.

Wandering among them, edging between them in the loft, I found that I was unpredictably enraptured by the marvelous detail of growing things. One is very unused to that in sculpture. We have actually very nearly lost the capacity to marvel at sculpture, apart from the objects of vertu which were the playthings of extinguished dynasties. But there are no bibelots and one would play with them at one's peril. They have the character not of capricious luxury but of the natural necessity of growth.

Like the plants from which they originated they need bright light and in the reverberating light of the loft we notice qualities of form and texture that we have hardly observed in plants themselves. But Rhonda Shearer, the sculptor, has observed them. I have heard remark on *the gesture, the particular nuance of the forms*, which she understands in *the direction, the twist and turn of plant surfaces*. With her aid we notice minute details of ribbing and veining, cockling and pimpling, at the same time as we watch the resilient curling, the arching and buckling. It is because we are seeing plants as form for the first time.

It is a privilege and a true luxury, this one, to discover 'serious sculptural imagery' — I am quoting Shearer again — where we have never recognized it before. Our impressions of plants have always been of something transitory and usually fragile, prone to bruise and wilt, sure to die and decay. But here, as we examine the quite minute detail and notice a quality like craftsmanship in petals and leaves, we become aware that we can possess it and handle it, as we have never dared to. If

we abandon the color, the texture, the grape-bloom of plants, we can have the form, the shape and the dynamism of their design forever. One's impressions of them have been made as lasting as bronze, as durable as the objects in the museums. Shearer writes her own best commentary; she is well aware of 'the potential visual irony of flowers being transposed into bronze.' It is a transmutation to rank with the best ironies of current New York art.

Recognizing a quality like craftsmanship in the complex shapes of natural growth is reading a metaphor, but here we become aware that the parallel is achieved by true craftsmanship of an exceptional order. It is in fact the craftsmanship of a quite brilliant woman of 32 who has contrived a very resourceful development of *cire perdue* which brings the real delicacy of flowers within the compass of bronze as never before. Rhonda Shearer maintains, as any artist is wise to, a certain reserve about her contriving. Reserve, even a little secretive (as one has noticed in good artists before), is more dependable than the blatant ham-fistedness which is more usual in the post-modern styles.

This is none the less a typical figurative style of the 1980's in that it is based not on conception or stylisation so much as transcription or quotation, a transference of the actual, which allows what is real to register its own likeness, indeed a positive identity with its image. I do not think that Rhonda Shearer will tell you how she works the miracle, anymore than the Boyle family (for instance) will tell you but the fact remains she works it and surprises us continually not with style but rather with that in art which is nature itself — that which would have been beyond any imaginable formulation. She communicates with a robust candor (which you find when you know her is peculiarly her own), some essence of the real which but for the beautiful truthfulness of her contriving, would have remained, possibly forever, unrealised.

Wandering through the loft one gets to know species that were quite unfamiliar. Fat leaves excite one to finger an unexplored cabbagey puckering along their springing ribs. The surface is so natural that one can imagine the dark moistness of hollows. Edges and textures remain as clear and sharp as ever. All the rest is form. It is bronze, which is to say it is symbolic image-stuff, no longer alive except in our imaginative apprehension.

One asks oneself, in sober truth what was this life of which we have a metallic translation? The answer is that it was decorative flora transported from the southern gardens that grow it to arrive before dawn at the flower market on 28th Street. Rhonda Shearer must have been there early to pick the vivid anthology of southern life, which will have stood about the loft in the great jars out of fairy stories, while she moved among them with her assistants like unobtrusive extensions of her. The plants, which must sometimes have been quite strange and

always in some profound way mysterious, must have been grouped and evaluated for purposes still unformed, which were inherent in their strangeness.

At this stage Shearer's procedure was quite like the routine of some superlatively luxurious flower-arranger; the fact does not reduce its meaning but rather the reverse. The grandeur of these bunches as flower-arrangements is a social value. Just similarly, the meaning that Mantegna found in spiky classical acanthus derived from the infatuation with antiquity of his society. In every age, at every stage art offers an account of what in nature has or has not been understood and valued. It is perceptive of Shearer to be unafraid of decorative luxury. She is continually revaluing an image which is the common property of her highly social milieu. Just as Mantegna was valuing a taste for the rebarbative Roman world, so Shearer implicitly examines the myths of flamboyantly prosperous America, which thinks to hold nature to ransom, yet finds itself, when it least expects, nature's captive. So in Shearer's sculpture we can, if we look, discover what it is that we call beautiful. Discover in this bronze ferocity the design that we have neglected in nature. The social connotation of the images that come naturally are in our day the themes of the New York art which so obstinately refuses to be set down as superficial. Shearer's art is about nature and above New York, both at once. At one end, the social end, of her loft there hangs a superlative portrait of a favorite, lamented racehorse by the beloved artist lately dead who was her friend. You may doubt if Warhol's picture has anything in common with Shearer's bronzes until you notice that the relationships in each between what is sociable, held in common, and what is personal and original are rather alike.

Shearer entitles even her grandest bouquets still-lives. Actually, like many still-lives they have a multiplicity of meanings, botanical, decorative and social, all resolved together in the triumphant objects, challenging, intriguing and superbly easy on the eye. One of these meanings lies in the likeness to architecture. The arrangement of the bunches has its own demure symmetry, a pattern with a botanical source; it is akin to the balanced alternation of axils. But they are even more like the capitals of impossibly flamboyant columns, supporting an imaginary Temple of Flora, as romantic as the imaginings of Thornton. Is it appropriate that these explorations of a sculptural language in natural structures should have their debut in Britain? The best precedent that I can think of is far from close — the startlingly real-seeming and very English leaves of the capitals at Southwell Minster, which Nikolaus Pevsner wrote about. After them there are the iron capitals of Oxford Museum, wrought under the direction of Ruskin. The more of nature gets into art, the better it takes root in England.

One has wandered through the loft ; one looks back between the plants. The design and the intricate perimeter of each are so endlessly intriguing. Then one notices that among them there is a gentle undulation. The points of sharp leaves, which arch high into the space of the room, are slowly, not gently but with all their tensile power, waving in the air. The movement in the room has disturbed them ; their resiliency continues to flex of its own responsive nature. In another way it seems the leaves are living still. Will you notice that in Bond Street ? Or imagine it and dream of living with it, as I do ?

I do not know when there has been such efflorescence in bronze or such an enlargement of the scope for sculpture.

Lawrence Gowing

LANGUAGE OF NATURAL FORMS

If I was going to create a sculpture of a human figure, in my mind's eye I could flip through the history of sculpture, Ancient Egyptian gods and goddesses, Roman portraits, the beauty of Michelangelos' David, the interpretations of Rodin, and Henry Moore. I can trace the steps and clearly see an evolution — a visual history.

But where was this for me? I would see the beauty and mystery in the structure of a flower. The universal application of a natural language; laws into patterns that the forces within space ruled. Where was the three dimensional history of a flower?

I looked but could only see them in decorative arts; plastic or silk, or even worse papier mâché, porcelain, an occasional gilded lily or wood. Flowers and landscapes were always a subject matter for painters, but for sculptors up until the 20th century, plant forms were never used except as foils for human figures.

But why 2,500 years of only the figure in sculpture, then into 20th century abstraction with never more than minor attempts of exploring plant forms as subject matter?

To look at the heart of the situation is to see the limitations of material and technique. Who wants to create a sculpture of a leaf that is thick and clumsy? To capture the gesture and thinness as a sculptor what material would you use that would exceed a minute and insignificant scale?

Clay? The armature itself would be thicker than a leaf. Wax? Too brittle for large surfaces and how could a mold be poured so thin. Bronze? "Impossible", all the foundries would say, "How can you cast three foot leaf forms only millimeters thicker than nature?"

This was the challenge I faced. All the studies made by painters in their examination of flowers and plants — Georgia O'Keeffe, Arthur Dove, even Mondrian, — I wanted to explore three dimensionally.

Where would I start? I felt I would have been remiss if I didn't begin with formal studies of basic structures; to understand plants as three dimensional forms. I decided to identify and work with the various patterns and shapes that form the vocabulary of nature — the spiral, meander and branching patterns.

I wanted to acquire and intimate knowledge and confidence in use of their rhythms, their sense of harmony, and symmetry, and in the case of the spiral and certain leaves, asymmetry.

How would I begin? Again, with sculpture, it is the formidable technical limitation that had to be conquered — and the initial context of these studies. In 3-dimensional reality, flowers couldn't be suspended in mid air and examined as in a Georgia O'Keefe painting.

I determined the appropriate context of my initial studies would be still lifes, as a metaphor for the first historic examination of flowers by painters — and the opportunity to remove these plant forms out of the context of nature into the isolation of a man-made world of which these forms were artificially included.



Mondrian became frustrated by the randomness and chaos of nature and evolved into abstraction. “But behind it were twenty years of study, of research, of trial and error in the Naturalism which preceded his abstract art: and then he discovered it's solid most fundamental ‘law’ (the right angle in it's vertical position)”, as Michel Seuphor writes in his book on Mondrian.

As a sculptor, I wanted to look into the randomness and chaos of nature, yet to do it in a still life context, I was creating my own order. To

make these forms work as sculptures, I could never duplicate nature exactly. The juxtaposition and over-abundance would not create the clean silhouette of negative space needed to “see” these plants and flowers as form and structure. Perhaps this is the first act, the removal of plant forms from nature, in the road towards abstraction.

With the context of still lifes decided, I still needed to deal with the technical limitations of how to create these sculptures and with what medium?

Bronze was the material I appreciated most, and had always thought was under-explored and had great possibilities for new imagery.

I intuitively felt the innate presence of plant forms and their delicacy would lend itself beautifully to the strong eternal aspects of bronze.

Even more interesting, was the potential visual irony of flowers, which detractors have historically critized as decorative and sentimental, being transposed into bronze — the same material of which our most serious monuments are made.

Much experimentation took place to create the still life studies of the past four years. There was as much unlearning involved in the process as learning.

One area of concentration was patination. In the beginning I assumed that since a traditional brown or black worked for figurative sculpture it would also work well on plant forms.

After seeking out a wide range of chemicals and methodology, and contrary to the guiding principle of patination for human figures which steers away from mottled color because of the distraction from the form — I soon discovered that the dynamic optical rhythm of plant forms necessitates variation of movement and color in patination.

However fascinated I was with all these technical explorations, the reduction of life to a universal language — the interconnectedness of all things that exist in space — meant far more.

Rhonda Roland Shearer



1
GREEN
PEPPERS
1984



2

APPLES
AND PEARS
IN BOWL
1984



3

PINEAPPLE
1984



4
MEDIUM
CACTUS
1984



5

RANDOM
APPLES
1984



6

RANDOM
PEARS
1986



7

SMALL
CACTUS
1984



8
ROCK
CACTUS
1984



9

GEOMETRIC
CACTUS
1985



10
SMALL
TRIPLE CACTUS
1984



11
TRIPLE
CACTUS
1984



12
PRICKLY
CACTUS
1984



13
HYBRID
LILIES I
1985



14
HYBRID
LILIES II
1985



15
BRANCHING
CACTUS
1984



16
ORCHID
PLANT I
1984



17

ORCHID
PLANT II
1985



18

YELLOW ORCHIDS
IN VASE
1985



19
ORCHIDS
IN VASE
1984



20
TIGER
LILIES
1985



21
CALLA
LILIES
1986



22

ANTHERIUMS
GONE TO SEED
1985



23

STILL LIFE
No. 9
1986



24

STILL LIFE

No. 3

1986



25
STILL LIFE
No. 11
1986



26
STILL LIFE
IN BRONZE
1983



27

STILL LIFE

No. 8

1986



28
STILL LIFE
No. 6
1986



29

STILL LIFE

No. 5

1986



30

STILL LIFE

No. 4

1986



31

STILL LIFE

No. 7

1986



32

STILL LIFE
No. 12
1986



33

STILL LIFE
No. 10
1986



34

STILL LIFE
No. 2
1984

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CATALOGUE

- | | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Green Peppers
Bronze, 1984
5" × 9" × 5½" | 12. Prickly Cactus
Copper, Silver
& Bronze, 1984
34" × 14" × 20" | 23. Still Life No. 9
Bronze, 1986
51" × 28" × 44" |
| 2. Apples and Pears
in Bowl
Bronze, 1984
8" × 11" × 11" | 13. Hybrid Lilies I
Bronze, 1985
25" × 27" × 10" | 24. Still Life No. 3
Bronze, 1986
62" × 35" × 57" |
| 3. Pineapple
Bronze, 1984
12½" × 11" × 11" | 14. Hybrid Lilies II
Bronze, 1985
28" × 20" × 26" | 25. Still Life No. 11
Bronze, 1986
47" × 30" × 28" |
| 4. Medium Cactus
Bronze, 1984
10" × 9" × 9" | 15. Branching Cactus
Bronze, 1984
11" × 8½" × 9" | 26. Still Life in Bronze
Bronze, 1983
44" × 17" × 33" |
| 5. Random Apples
Bronze, 1984
6" × 11" × 22" | 16. Orchid Plant I
Bronze, 1984
35½" × 17" × 28" | 27. Still Life No. 8
Bronze, 1986
57" × 26" × 39" |
| 6. Random Pears
Bronze, 1986
9" × 32" × 40" | 17. Orchid Plant II
Bronze, 1985
19" × 5½" × 12" | 28. Still Life No. 6
Bronze, 1986
58" × 32" × 35" |
| 7. Small Cactus
Bronze, 1984
7" × 6" × 6" | 18. Yellow Orchids
in Vase
Bronze, 1985
29" × 20" × 25" | 29. Still Life No. 5
Bronze, 1986
75" × 62" × 64" |
| 8. Rock Cactus
Copper & Bronze, 1984
8" × 9" × 8¼" | 19. Orchids in Vase
Bronze, 1984
33" × 16" × 25" | 30. Still Life No. 4
Bronze, 1986
53" × 37" × 39" |
| 9. Geometric Cactus
White Bronze, 1985
8" × 7" × 7½" | 20. Tiger Lilies
Bronze, 1985
45" × 37" × 42" | 31. Still Life No. 7
Bronze, 1986
56" × 50" × 60" |
| 10. Small Triple Cactus
Copper & Bronze, 1984
13" × 4½" × 4½" | 21. Calla Lilies
Bronze, 1986
36" × 28" × 32" | 32. Still Life No. 12
Bronze, 1986
43" × 35½" × 38½" |
| 11. Triple Cactus
White Bronze, 1984
17½" × 8" × 11" | 22. Antheriums Gone
to Seed
Bronze, 1985
51" × 41" × 43" | 33. Still Life No. 10
Bronze, 1986
48½" × 44" × 64" |
| | | 34. Still Life No. 2
Bronze, 1984
44" × 31" × 40" |

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