

Ghost Ship: The Sculptural Apocalypse of Walter Redinger

2/4/2007

POSTCAFE



I'd surmise that even the most cursory glance at Ghost Ship—at any portion of it—would be enough to announce its status as a masterwork.

The day sculptor Walt Redinger pulled open the door of the dim workshop behind the rambling farmhouse he has lived in all his life in West Lorne, Ontario, to show it to me, I could feel it before I could see it—there was a kind of cool whoosh from inside the place; the object is so vast and unremittingly intense as a structure, you could more or less sense the presence of it—the pressure of it—before you could see it.

The doorway to the workshop seemed to take forever to swing open (it moved through one of those arcs of calculus-moments when units of time seem endlessly subdivided)—and finally to reveal, within the crepuscular light of the shop, what I suppose you could call the “prow” of the “vessel”, as initially intimidating as a gigantic dinosaur skeleton would be—especially if lodged in a southern-western Ontario garage.

Then, finally, the rest of it—the strange, empty, vertical coning-tower structure that follows the odd bent or otherwise uplifted prow, and the structure's strange, hammock-like sag towards some imagined water-line in the middle of the inbuilt narrative that leads you from the front of the ship to the back. Ghost Ship sat in the perpetual twilight of Walt's shop (in the half-light of lazy dust particles, golden in the slatted sun-rays), dark, prodigious, brooding, and somehow inevitable (how is it that some things you've never seen before look inevitable?). It was a great beast, for sure.

Bristling with spikes, flanges and paddles of dark grey fibreglass—fibreglass the colour of smoke, soot, lead and oil—and seemingly marinated in a tincture of time itself, the forty-two foot Ghost Ship, though perhaps the most morphologically unique and otherwise originally

conceived and fabricated construction I'd seen in a long, long time, nevertheless seemed simultaneously ancient to me, appeared to be some hoary, reclaimed thing, not so much built as found—unearthed, revealed, disinterred from some remote and alien site.

Not the least strange thing aspect of it, sculpturally-speaking, was the fact that it didn't appear to be an additive work, brought gradually to its present form by accretion—even though Redinger says he took his time with it, which means he worked on it for a decade. Rather, it appears to have been always fully-formed—not patiently and elaborately put together (though of course it was). It is not, in other words, an epically-scaled bottle-less ship-in-a-bottle.

How ship-like, exactly, is Ghost ship and how much allusion and analogy can it hold?

In some ways the work looks botanical or zoological, rather than nautical. That is to say, Ghost Ship, while steadfastly vehicular, is also persuasively creaturely: at first glance, it might be a huge, armed, oceanic anemone. Or a Man-o-War, the fossil of a Skate, or the skeleton of a Giant Squid. It's lunar. Or Venetian. Or a sentient Martian war-machine. Or it's some special-effected cyber-creature that comes sailing towards you at a terrifying rate through science-fiction space. It has enough vast, plated, Armadillo-esque passages to make it look like a permeable Stegosaurus. It has spikes and barbs that feel primitive, like tearing teeth and slashing antlers—hooks and eyes, rhinoceros horns all over, poking up and out and down and across, self-cancelling, a moiré-pattern of potentially lacerating excrescences, "gnashing", as dear old Jack Kerouac used to say (in Mexico City Blues), "everywhere in consciousness." A bone-pile. A seagoing burial ground.

Or maybe Ghost Ship is a horrifying, gargantuan shard of runaway industrialism—like a tangle of barbed wire, magnified into nightmarish dimensions. Or, more benignly, a Brobdingnagian amusement, the artist's bravado assemblage from the parts in a cosmic Tinker-toy set.

And at first it's difficult to shake off the work's Ship of Fools associations (or at least I found it so)—associations culled from Sebastian Brant's *Das Narrenschiff*, the original Ship of Fools from 1494 (with woodcuts by Durer) and Hieronymous Bosch's painting of the same subject (1490-1500), to the identically titled bestseller by Katherine Anne Porter (1962) and the sci-fi novel by Richard Paul Russo (2001)—all of them narratives of the progress of the variously misguided, their lives integrated and accelerated by their being confined, isolated, bound, by the vessel itself, a vessel headed, like the doomed steamer in B.Traven's great novel, *Death Ship* (1934) for destruction. (1)

But Redinger's monumental vessel is not, after all, a death ship or a ship of fools. It is a ghost ship. A ship of fools carries its heedless passengers and crew, always dangerously devoid of self-knowledge, towards oblivion. Death and destruction lie perpetually ahead of it, at the end of the allegory. A ghost ship, by contrast, has already been there and back. Redinger's Ghost Ship is the bearer of accumulated experience, the sea-going saved remnant come drifting back from the edge of apocalypse, mute with too much knowledge, silenced by enormity. Ghost Ship is redemptive.

Where does The Ghost Ship fit into the Redinger canon? It really doesn't. A great deal of the artist's sculptural work over the past forty years, while it has employed fibreglass, has employed it in the generation of rather mythically-imbued shapes that, while hard, nevertheless looked soft—elements of the works appearing, therefore, to drip, ooze and slither according

to the impress of an entirely fictive mass and gravity. Ghost Ship, while it is also constructed mainly of fibreglass, has the structural honesty and straightforwardness of carbon or bone. All the elements of this operatic vessel are what they are: the ship is spiky, dangerous and derelict. Ghost Ship is Redinger's Marie Celeste, his Nautilus (2), his Demeter (in Bram Stoker's Dracula, 1897), his Flying Dutchman (both Wagner's and the Ampoliros, the "Flying Dutchman of Space" in Frank Herbert's Dune, 1965).

Ghost Ship is an organized hallucination of perpetual will, the lineaments of summary, of finality, fallout from the artist's fierce need for large amusement, the fruits of his having been at play in the fields of maturity. Ghost Ship is an ocean-going question mark, or a frayed, disintegrating exclamation point. Ghost Ship is the artist's sculptural Armageddon. It utters a perpetual goodbye. A chilling and ironic Bon Voyage.

I would have given a lot, by the way, to have seen Ghost Ship come thundering along the 401 from West Lorne towards Toronto, on the back of a flatbed truck.

_Gary Michael Dault

Toronto, January 7, 2007.

1) Novelist Walter Kirn, reviewing Robert Stone's memoir, *Prime Green: Remembering the Sixties* (New York: Ecco/HarperCollins) in the *New York Times Book Review* for January 7 of this year, quotes from the author's recollection of a sea voyage through the Antarctic, a voyage that seems to have had an inexplicably ghostly feel to it; in one scene, the ship's crew follows the distant mass migration of penguins that at first, as Kirn notes, appears, "in its dense totality", to be another big ship. "The vessel the captain thought he saw", writes Stone, "was low in the water and was certainly progressing west. Whatever engine powered it was mysterious to me; it seemed to throb, a distinctly unstable mass."

2) "...It was evidently a hard impenetrable body, and not the soft substance that forms the bodies of the great marine mammalian. But this hard body might be a bony carapace, like that of the antediluvian animals; and I should be free to class this monster among amphibious reptiles, such as tortoises or alligators..." [Jules Verne in Walter James Miller ed., *The Annotated Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* (New York: Thomas Crowell, 1976), p.43].