



Welcome to Amigo Motel!

It's an every-so-often blog by John Bentley Mays about the artists and shows and other doings at the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art in Toronto. It's also an ongoing critical account of contemporary Canadian art's engagement with history, self and society. The whole idea is to encourage public discourse on what MOCCA is up to, so please feel free to leave comments. –JBM



Amigo Motel

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Redinger on Redinger

Amigo Motel caught up with Walter Redinger just before last Saturday's opening of the artist's Return to the Void at MOCCA. He was dressed for the occasion in a black bowler hat and a black, buttoned-up frock coat, an outfit that made him look like an amiable Victorian English archdeacon.

Amigo Motel: Tell me about *Ghost Ship*, the history of it.

Walter Redinger: I think many artists like to do a boat once or twice in their career. With all the tangling and weaving of life, the ups and downs and sorrows, it takes beauty and skill to skim over the surface of the water. But I never thought I would want to get heavily into boats. When I started to work [around 1990], I got into three or four ships. The first one [1994] was a singular thing with the Christopher Cutts Gallery. Then I put it aside for about a year or so, and began to work on another project--still a kind of ship, but smaller than that one. And from there I moved ahead, working on the boat or ship idea. Now what happened? I get three or four of them, and I'm having an exhibition at the McIntosh Gallery [in London, Ontario; 1998], and at the same time the Michael Gibson Gallery wanted me to exhibit. Paterson Ewen also said he'd like to do it, but he didn't want all the pressure, so he wanted to show with someone else. I didn't know he was a fan of mine. So the fourth boat went in there [1998], and it looked good, but it didn't look marvellous. I didn't know what I was looking for. Mind you, I was coming off that four or five year stretch when I was in the desert, searching for God knows what, and I was quite picky. I sensed, when I brought the boats home, that I was not yet happy with what was happening. My way of solving it was to get very hostile, and I chopped them up in pieces, and I used those pieces... Everybody thought I was nuts. So I said, I don't tell you how to run your life, let me deal with it. I want to do what I have to do here. And I started to work on this last one, but in my heart I called it my first. I started to

go after this bugger. In the summer times I would work outside, where I could see. Then, when fall came, and for three or four winters, I would haul it inside. I had one heavy winter and about three or four heavy summers. So counting the boats I first started, *Ghost Ship* took close to ten years.

So I'm having more fun, more control. I believed I had to get this bastard right. I wanted that complexity, and I didn't have it yet. I was very fortunate that I had a friend who apparently didn't have any more to do than come over and sit by me and criticize the damn thing. We did this many times. I would go all the way around it, and keep circling it in my design. Somebody mentioned that it didn't look like it grew, it looked like it was.

AM: Was what?

WR: It was what it was. It didn't grow in stages. I just kept marking, and I wasn't an expert at the thing, but I had a good idea. You don't need that much to do a boat, because the damn thing is in pictures. We don't live in Halifax or somewhere boats are really around the place, but I just knew enough. And I had been coming off those fibreglass years, with those cast things I was doing. I was ready to sculpt in a different way, yet still pursue the organic, the fibre, and all of those things. But what this boat had was thickness-- and I didn't blow it. *I somehow didn't blow it.*

AM: What's at the back of it?

WR: *pointing with his cane at the stern:* That's kind of the brain back there, and it has the steering mechanism, and the churning engines. But then it could be something that has nothing to do with a damn ship. It could be a walrus, an airplane, whatever... Two guys were delivering the stuff, and the one says--he was a picture framer--: This thing works with two opposing forces. It's something very gentle and caring, and it might have led its kind. But it might have thumped other species or kinds on the head. Then somebody else told me something that was pretty neat: that it had led its kind through birth through the whole cycle of life back again, to death. So it saw beginnings, and it saw endings.

[He touches the charcoal grey fibreglass surface of the piece.] The thing is still smooth with all that fric-frac on it.

AM: What's fric-frac?

WR: I just made that up. Fric-frac is texture. Flip-flop. I told David [Liss]: with the lighting, make it dance.

AM: Will you do any more ships?

WR: I have a feeling I'm not.

AM: No more ships?

WR: No more ships. And I think there might be a big, drastic move in my work again. I'm being pushed, with the health thing. And that's kind of neat, too, sometimes. I told this to somebody: When you're young, and you've got all that energy, you can screw around a lot. Myself, I just want to see a little more before I go, and, you know, that period I had in the 1980s, it probably helped me be a better person.

AM: A dry period?

WR: It wasn't dry, I just wasn't exhibiting. Then I did exhibit in New York [1995-2005], and, curiously, maybe I thought I was safe. I had this bullshit relationship with my own country. It was something I imposed on myself as much as people imposed it on me. I just sensed that I wanted to *get some stuff*, as Greg Curnoe would say, and I had to earn it. And I wasn't sure what it was I was searching for.

AM: What have you learned about *Ghost Ship*, seeing it here at MOCCA?

WR: It's more total. Let's walk around.

[Standing by the port side, looking toward the stern]: I have never seen this view. It has a confrontational nature, almost like a wall on this side. The other side allows you to see inside its belly, inside its scoop, to look at the opposing dance of the greys, and the greys nearing black. I told the guys, when they were lighting it, to keep some of those blacks inside. *[Moving down the port side toward the stern]:* When I made these parts, I would do them in links, but I knew I would have to get the whole thing swinging. It's like swing in music. How does swing happen? I was delighted to find this out when I played with my band. Swing is slow-down--shuffle, as it were. And with the angles and the notches, I echo the curve. *[Pointing to the small wedges supporting the ship]:* I had to put those buggers in, I just had to. I wasn't going to put in a metal contraption to hold it up--I just said, Screw it--and it works. The ship kind of *lopes* over things a bit. As the ship is coming in on its last lung, it says: *I've been going for seven thousand years, and I need a rest.* That's kind of what I wanted. I think when you strike on an element of human nature, and you come across something very beautiful and very sad, you're lucky to have seen it, to have experienced it. For an artist, it's even more significant, because you're in there with the dynamism, building the thing. Half the time you don't even know how it works. It was impossible, in places, to build. I had to turn the thing upside down, get inside, grind it out, then reinforce it. *[At the rear, on the starboard side]:* I saw this rear end and the rudder, and I saw it from the road, and I said, it's not big enough. So I attached a piece to it, to give more chunk to it...The last thing I did with this baby was pull it over a bit. To swing it!

Walter Redinger: Return to the Void: The Ghost Ship and other tales from the ether. Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art, 952 Queen Street West, Toronto. 3 February - 11 March 2007.

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