

Ghost Ship

THE SOUTHWESTERN ONTARIO SCULPTOR WALTER REDINGER REVITALIZES A MYSTICAL PRACTICE
by JOHN BENTLEY MAYS



No ideas but in things, wrote the American poet William Carlos Williams in 1944. He did not know Walter Redinger, who came of creative age a couple of decades later in London, Ontario, and in Toronto. But in writing that terse line—a controversial proposition about reality, a summary manifesto about art, a world view in five words—Williams could have been prophesying Redinger’s art, which his words perfectly characterize.

Everything is on the surface in Redinger’s intensely eccentric work in all mediums: no text, no formidable cultural theory, can be invoked to explain or ease the ouch of what the artist does. The intense, crowded drawings that Redinger turns out ceaselessly at his studio deep in the farming country of southwestern Ontario are surely open to interpretation, but, ultimately, they do not satisfy the viewer’s hunger for deeper meaning. They demand to be taken as the strange thing that happens to paper when the artist’s dotting and daubing and delineation flips beyond reason into a self-immolating creativity, extinguishing whatever symbolism or higher significance we may be tempted to wrest from the dense thicket of gestures on the page.

So also the sculptures. To viewers inclined to look for recognizable figures in all art, some of the large cast-plastic pieces—always Redinger’s best-known works—may resemble fleshy bulbs and bulges, earlobes or breasts, glands or sinister growths under the skin. In a 1998 review of Redinger’s work at Mitchell Albus Gallery, which represents him in New York, the *Times* critic Roberta Smith saw in them “a slightly creepy, corporeal aspect, an interest he shares with many of today’s young artists. Irregular in shape and surface, his red plastic wall reliefs are gleaming melting blobs whose smooth protrusions and folds can suggest a phantasm out of ‘Ghostbusters’ or the body’s interior greatly magnified: perhaps a swath of muscle or the inside wall of an artery.”

Spectators who like to invest abstract sculpture with figurative meaning in this way have, I suppose, their reward. But over the period of observation the sculptures deserve, the identity of these objects gradually becomes less obvious. They shed their allusions and settle into being what they are: enigmatic, inert, logicjamming apparitions, fantastic and unmeaning things that lodge them-

The winter exhibitions at MOCCA and St. Thomas gave Toronto gallerygoers a valuable reintroduction to Redinger's art, which has not been seen in Canada's largest art centre since 1994. (His work has been displayed frequently over the last decade, however, in London, Ontario, and in New York.) But despite the definite public worth of these recent museum and gallery shows, Redinger's remarkable new work is certainly best seen in its rural Ontario birthplace, where I first encountered it late last year. The shadowy cinder-block bunker in which *Ghost Ship* was fabricated, amid the clutter of older sculptures and raw materials, provided a mysterious, dusk-like atmosphere that was peculiarly right for viewing a piece that hovers between fact and fiction, dark fantasy and dense materiality. The works later shown at St. Thomas similarly carried their fullest imaginative force in the studio, installed as they were high in the dark over the thick, furious commotion of Redinger's Room, an experimental undertaking in black and white that combines paintings, sculptures and drawings into a spinning churn.

In whatever context we find it, however, Redinger's work deserves to be seen and appreciated for what it is: an involving, hectic and (as far as I know) unique project in contemporary Canadian sculpture. No ideas but in things: absent from this art are the metaphysical complexity and weight so treasured, so keenly sought, in Western painting and sculpture from the Renaissance until the unquiet death of poignant meaningfulness in the time of Warhol and Judd. We live now in an era rife with revivals and recuperations of this lost art-historical and symbolic depth, some deeply engaging. But Redinger's project is not among them. Behind his current work stand the Minimalists, whose sculpture eloquently embodied the disillusioned, postmetaphysical mood of the 1960s, the decade in which Redinger emerged on the Canadian art scene. Behind it also stands the artist's own long career as a maker of odd forms that totter on the unsteady, contaminated edge of reason.

If, like William Carlos Williams and the Minimalists, Redinger is a mystic—as I believe him to be—his mysticism is similarly one with no place for God, transcendence, closure. It offers no resolution of the unsatisfied hankerings and essential doubts that constitute the modern condition. Neither does his mystical method ever relax into melancholy for some past attainment snatched away by the engines of modernity. Nowhere more urgently than in the works recently shown in Toronto and St. Thomas, Redinger's practice painfully exposes the no ideas but in things of our existence, the radical and eternal now of our anxiety. ■

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