

The New York Times

Bold Sculpture for Wide-Open Spaces

By MICHAEL BRENSON

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This outdoor sculpture season is special. What is exceptional is not the number of group exhibitions and individual installations, but their tone. Because there is almost no work on display that was not conceived specifically for its site, the sculpture as a whole is unusually thoughtful about what and where it is.

The sculptures squatting on pebbles, racing across dirt and rising from stone, in sites as far apart as Wave Hill in the Bronx and Prospect Park in Brooklyn, raise compelling questions. What role does outdoor sculpture play in the artistic life of this city? What kind of public sculpture is effective and even possible? What does outdoor sculpture say about New York City now?

The biggest story this season is Battery Park City. Three projects involving four sculptors - Richard Artschwager, R. M. Fischer, Scott Burton and Siah Armajani - were recently completed, and, like Battery Park City's first two art projects, involving Ned Smyth and Mary Miss, they are distinguished by an expansiveness, a breadth of reference and a sense of play. The waterfront plaza of the World Financial Center, the keystone of Battery Park City, in which the stamp of Mr. Armajani and Mr. Burton is clear, is one of the most spectacular outdoor spaces created in New York in years.

But Battery Park City continues to be an undertaking about which it is impossible to feel entirely at ease. While all the artists involved in its fine-arts program have been involved with projects notable for their discretion and tact, this new development flaunts its appeal to big money. On the edge of the superb new plaza, which is almost Venetian in feeling, is a marina - not part of the original design - exclusively for large yachts.

There are other notable developments as well. There have been years in which no black sculptors were invited to participate in summer exhibitions: black sculptors are currently represented in shows on Staten Island and in Brooklyn and Queens. This season also offers "Sculpture in the Landscape: Jene Highstein at Wave Hill," probably the best solo outdoor sculpture show in New York this decade. Mr. Highstein does not take natural forms and then abstract them. Rather he begins with monolithic abstract forms and then carves and models them until they swell with natural, figurative and sculptural associations. His lumpy, skin-smooth sculptures both fit easily into the manicured hills of Riverdale and maintain their independence from them.

As always, there are many sculptors new to the outdoor sculpture circuit. Several, including Robert Ressler, Mark Gordon and Lillian Ball, have made strong statements. Mr. Ressler, who saws and hacks huge logs in a raucous, yet intimate neo-primitive style, has work both at the Snug Harbor Cultural Center on Staten Island and at Socrates Sculpture Park in Long Island City, Queens, which for the last few years have been New York City's most important testing grounds for large sculpture.

This summer's "Snug Harbor Sculpture Festival" is extremely useful in defining the problem of public sculpture in the post-"Tilted Arc" era. It is, in effect, two shows. One, financed by Snug Harbor, was organized by the sculptor Elizabeth Egbert, who began selecting 11 artists last fall. The sculptures by her artists tend to be

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physical, shaped by formal concerns, integrated with, yet independent of, the site, and at ease with what they are. The other half of the show was organized by the sculptor Noah Jemison, the director of the Bronx River Art Center, who was brought in only this spring by the Organization of Independent Artists; he had to select his 10 artists in a matter of weeks. His theme is a return to nature.

He was asked by Lucia Minervini, who was appointed director of the Organization of Independent Artists in March, to make a selection that would include young and old, men and women, Asian and black.

The sculptures by his artists tend to be vulnerable. Their materials are impermanent. The sculptures seem unsure the environment wants them. The artists are more concerned with content than form. Their work may be so discreet that it seems almost to apologize for existing. It is this doubt, this uncertainty about the place of public sculpture that gives the work its edge. New Art Projects Battery Park City

Richard Artschwager's "Sitting/Stance," at the corner of West Thames Street and the Esplanade, is a wonderland of surprises. It includes wood and stainless-steel chairs that suggest ship decks; granite chairs that look like thrones and tombstones, and a miniature street lamp whose lamp is almost literally on the street. Mr. Artschwager's dry wit is everywhere - in the relationship of materials, in the shifts of scale, in the play of architectural associations. The consciousness he provokes in every detail helps to transform a nondescript space into a magical pocket.

R. M. Fischer's "Rector Gate" is a 45-foot-high arch between Rector Park, the Esplanade and the Hudson River. Its poles, domes and Disneyland shapes refer to the site, to the architectural history of Manhattan and to the way lower Manhattan has inspired a century of dreams. But Mr. Fischer never achieves a balance between an actual gateway that settles coolly into its site and a fanciful sculptural concoction that fires the imagination. He has designed an effective passageway but not a magical arch.

The 3.5-acre plaza of the World Financial Center is a collaboration between the sculptors Scott Burton and Siah Armajani, the architect Cesar Pelli and the landscape architect M. Paul Friedberg. The plaza is the kind of space that is rare in New York. It has a tremendous sense of expansiveness that has to do with a knowledge of proportions, with the imaginative use of fountains and trees, with the coordination of eight distinct areas and with the way metal and reflecting glass can make the surrounding buildings seem transparent.

The success of the plaza also depends upon the poetry of Walt Whitman and Frank O'Hara written in the railing by the river and the human and nautical associations of the stone benches. What is so striking is even more than the care that has been put into every detail: it is the belief that every detail must serve functional and imaginative needs. This feeling for the human potential of everything - benches, railings, chairs, pavement and trees - gives the plaza much of its European feeling.

But then there is the yachts-only marina. Just what this will do to the sense of accessibility that is so welcome in the plaza is unclear. The yacht basin says something about the soul of New York now. The plaza is intended to be for everyone, but it is impossible to be there without feeling that Battery Park City is, above all, a haven for the rich.

One of the few outdoor sculptures in New York City that is not site specific is Tony Smith's "Smug," at St. John's Rotary, the entrance to the Holland Tunnel. The sculpture was made in 1973 and reconstructed for this installation. It has not been shown before. It is black, 75 feet long and 64 feet wide, and made of wood.

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Part of what makes the sculpture successful in this traffic site is that the segments suggest the architectural frame of a parking lot that has just caved in. In addition, while in the center of a circle around which cars turn, "Smug" seems to be always moving. It is architectural, and it is crystalline. Because it suggests a creature with many legs, the knuckles of a gigantic fist and a team of acrobats, it is also a series of confident and continuous performances.

New Yorkers now have a chance to see Jenny Holzer's benches in a public site. Four of them, in white marble, are covered with "truisms" - aphoristic phrases and clichés that seem to have been plucked from many different slices of the American pie. The arrangements of different voices and points of view are not arbitrary. Some sequences have weight and wit, like this one: "Selfishness is the most basic emotion," "Selflessness is the highest achievement," "Thinking too much can cause problems."

The other four benches are black granite. There is less inscribed on them. The writing on each is something of a narrative. Together the texts suggest that nurturing is miraculous, sadism inevitable and nurturing and sadism have something essential to do with each other. The clash between them reflects the conflicting tone of intimacy and attack throughout the work.

Don't be put off by the apparent sentimentality of Ms. Holzer's language and the difficulty in locating her point of view. These words written in stone have power. Indeed this is one of the best pieces that has been installed on this site. People enjoy sitting on the benches. Many read the words carefully. The success or failure of this public sculpture will certainly depend upon what its public thinks and feels.

This survey of the last four years of Jene Highstein's work, organized by Jean E. Feinberg, is part indoors, in the Glyndor Gallery, and part outdoors, on Wave Hill's flat or sloping fields. The two parts reveal the different scales with which Mr. Highstein works - as small as a stool or as large as a whale. They also suggest his interest in many different materials, including plaster, silk, marble and wood.

In all the work, there is a strong feeling for shape and a wish to be both suggestive and abstract. All the sculptures seem at the same time physically assertive, meditatively slow and almost pathologically shy. And all are marked by a highly developed sculptural consciousness. For example, "Blondie" suggests the title of Brancusi's "Blonde Negress" and the shape of Brancusi's "Seal." But Mr. Highstein's upright elm also evokes generic shapes of modern sculpture, including a striding figure and a large, almost arrow-shaped head.

The outdoor site-specific sculptures both do and do not belong to the landscape. For example, "Small Temple," a hollowed-out tree-trunk house that seems almost Japanese, is very much at home alongside Wave Hill's strange, creaturely pine tree stalking the field. But the Highstein trunk is larger than any surrounding tree, and since the bark is stripped, it appears to stand naked and alone. And unlike anything else in the landscape, "Small Temple" is both a place for children to enter and a columnar receptacle of light.

Mr. Highstein's sculptures are playful, and there is in almost all of them a sense of potentiality, of something waiting to take shape - waiting to be born. But there are at the same time many intimations of death; a number of the upright monoliths suggest grave markers. The largest sculpture in the show, white, concrete and shaped like a whale and seeming to swim toward the Hudson River, has an archeological feeling - as if it were a giant tomb whose residents had decided it was time to be liberated from the earth. '1989 Snug Harbor Sculpture Festival' Snug Harbor Cultural Center 1000 Richmond Terrace Livingston, S.I. Through Oct. 22

This year's "Snug Harbor Sculpture Festival" is an instructive mess. The stronger part of the show is Elizabeth Egbert's. The part that reflects the present tenuousness of public sculpture is Noah Jemison's.

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The sculptors selected by Ms. Egbert are not bashful. Around one lawn are four big works, by Robert Ressler, Jesse Moore, Lee Tribe and Mark Gordon. All are in some way about movement. The huge egg and rolling pin in Mr. Ressler's "Bread and Water" - each cut from a single block of wood - are actually mobile. Mr. Tribe's welded steel "Time" suggests a wheel, a wreath or a crown of thorns violently and chaotically spinning

Ms. Moore's "Viola in Gamba" is a stringed instrument with six legs - formed with oars - that looks like a gigantic insect.

Mr. Gordon's "Monday 8:00-11:39 AM 22 May 1989" is 32 feet tall. Suspended from the intersection of two telephone poles (suggesting the frame of a teepee) is a big looping chain. Suspended from it like trophies or hanged men are two rows of about 20 black and white horns or tusks made of fired clay. Into this peaceful setting, Mr. Gordon has planted a sense of exploitation and threat.

Far smaller and gentler is Lillian Ball's "Mirage." The sculpture has three parts, "Move In," "Roll Around" and "Go Enter" - none taller than 32 inches. The material is lead hand-forged over mesh. With its changing dialogue between solid and void, round and pointed, the sculpture shifts as you move around it. At one point it looks like a Sol LeWitt wall drawing on grass. From other points of view, it becomes shell- or snail-like, or like miniature huts.

For the 10 artists selected by Mr. Jemison, with the exception of Miriam Bloom, the sense of sculptural movement, of constant development and metamorphosis in space, is far less important. There is also far less interest in the language and history of sculpture.

When the works are successful, they make the public consider the environment in new ways. Mr. Jemison's "Ritual House" is the armature of a small fragile wood hut with morning glories planted around it intended to climb up strings dripping with chips of wood. This delicate, unassuming work points toward African art and architecture. It argues both for a need to respect nature and for the importance of listening to nature if sculpture is to develop.

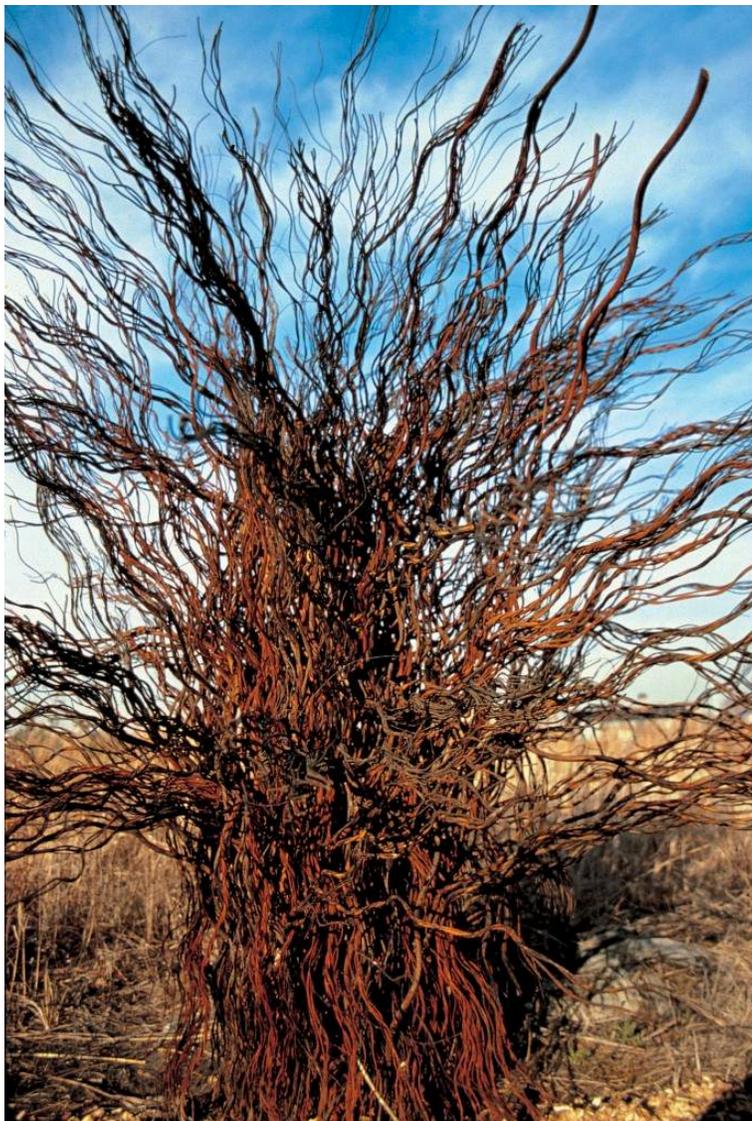
In his "Walking Dead," Lorenzo Pace uses gauze and black tape to weave together figures that we encounter suddenly. One is a bride, carrying rotting flowers. Another is a mummified male - the groom? - lying on the ground. The figures are ghostly and precarious, emblems of the blend of violence and celebration that New Yorkers identify with the parks of their city. 'Sculpture City' Socrates Sculpture Park Broadway at Vernon Boulevard Long Island City, Queens Through March 15, 1990

Socrates Sculpture Park seems particularly raw now. With its large open space by the East River, its patches of dirt and its piles of wood shavings and stones, the park looks like a place in permanent transition where nothing is fixed and anything is possible - a 4.5-acre workshop open to anything any artist who is invited there wants to do.

"Sculpture City" is not a coherent show but rather a group of sculptures, most of them built in the park during the past year. The physical approach and upbeat, good-natured mood of the works is set by the 1969 "One Oklock," by Mark di Suvero, the moving spirit behind the park, who has a workshop adjoining it. His massive building-high steel beams - silhouetted against the New York skyline - which seem to exist in a permanent state of availability for future construction, reflect a moment in American sculpture when anything could be dreamed.

Something of the same mood is present in Robert Ressler's "Baruchashem," with eight rough and sinewy pillars of wood looking like offspring of Brancusi's "Caryatids" who have decided to join hands in an

Israeli dance. It is also present in Tom Bills's towering mass of concrete, whose success depends less upon the mass than upon the powerful cut of the passageway through it. And it is there in Henner Kuckuck's goofy "Three Figures" suggesting acrobatic insects and totems.



But there are other moods as well. Scott Gilliam's "Landing Craft" is a tall yet delicate and airy sculpture in which music is activated by walking in and around the masts. Maren Hassinger's "Bushes" are so inconspicuous in the tall grass that they are almost invisible. Not only are these grasslike clumps of black cable integrated into the landscape, but in their own way they, too, change color and shape. It is possible, however, that the natural grass will outlast them. While the natural grass grows, the industrial grass will eventually come apart, dissolve and be absorbed into the earth. '

With the second "Sculpture Walk in Prospect Park," organized by Mariella Bisson, the park's director of exhibitions, inside and around the boathouse, there is a chance that this park will become a regular stomping ground for outdoor sculpture. With one sculpture by each of five artists, this show is modest. Two works are worth a visit.

One is Tom Bills's stumpy concrete arch -cast on the site and related in shape to the nearby bridge - which prior to the piece at Socrates Sculpture Park had been his largest work.

The other is Mel Edwards's "Boathouse Improvisation." Using found objects, different kinds of steel and simple geometric shapes like circles, squares and rectangles, Mr. Edwards has

welded a sculptural collage. One voice is a chain perched on a grating, another a disk or sun. The song plays in and through them with the help of small, unexpected transitional notes at sculptural junctures that turn this improvisation into a unified composition.