The Curious Matter of Time and Space: a Conversation Between Michael Warren and Noel J. Brady

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the curious matter of time and space - a conversation between Michael Warren and Noel J Brady

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For 35 years Michael Warren has been carving out an existence from raw material, one that has at its heart an existential quest for belonging. He is an advocate of the spiritual, seeking for his art an “existence apart from the world of everyday objects.” Sculture, he says, “is an expression of matter, the same that comprises the world and is subject to the strains of existence and the accidental”. At the Factory where the title piece of his current retrospective Unbroken Line (at Visual, Carlow) was made and at his studio home “Letatlin”, Michael reaffirmed the tenets of his art previously published in art catalogues and publications. Beyond these, he is known by his work that occupies the contingent space of buildings by various architects in Ireland, especially those by Ronnie Tallon of Scott Tallon Walker. Michael has engaged in a form of enquiry that focuses on the condition of man, on existence and the mystery of the human body and spirit. He explained that the title Unbroken Line is partly inspired by Stanislavsky’s An Actor Prepares. “In order to be a total being, he [the actor] has first to discover a past and envisage a future for the character he is playing, to be authentic. It is an unbroken line of continuous being, about making, in my case, sculpture that heightens the sense of being wholly present, full awareness of the here-and-now.”

Warren maintains a quiet and persistent curiosity of the here-and-now” (mw). This ongoing inquiry has generated distinct sculptural expression in a number of media, but is most expressive when made in wood. It is tempting to place the work alongside minimalists like Donald Judd but it defies such simplification. This is best illustrated in the debt he feels he owes to Simone Weil, especially her work Gravity and Grace:

“Man only escapes from the laws of this world in lightning flashes. Instants when everything stands still, instant of contemplation, of pure intuition, of mental void, of acceptance of the moral void. It is through such instants that he is capable of the supernatural.”

Simone Weil 14

In many of his works one can see not merely one figure but two, as if choreographed around a centrifugal centre, attempting an escape – united by the same desire to fly – from their earth-bound imprisonment. Current pieces still exhibit this activity even though they are amongst his most dense, massive creations. It is somewhat ironic that the piece that has given impetus to the “Set Personaggi”, inspired by Pirandello’s play Six Characters in Search of an Author, and “Caryatids” suggest a greater appreciation for mass and density. Carved from Douglas Fir, Redwood, Monterey Cypress, Spanish Chestnut and Badi / Opee (Bilingua Nauclea diderrichii) they exhibit the surface, density, color and texture of cotten steel. In others, like the “Fallen Caryatid”, the exposed grain is allowed to weather, creating secondary images independent of the “precise cuts and angles”. It is this interplay between the controlled and the accidental that enlivens the work.

“Man only escapes from the laws of this world in lightning flashes. It is an unbroken line of existence apart from the world of everyday objects”. Tadao Ando 5

Michael is concerned that “one of the most unspoken aspects of contemporary culture is that our attention is being diverted from that stance. There is a continuous questioning in art. In a very strange way the accumulation of questions constitutes a form of answer.” (mw) This ongoing inquiry has generated a distinct sculptural expression in a number of media, but is most expressive when made in wood. It is tempting to place the work alongside minimalists like Donald Judd but it defies such simplification. This is best illustrated in the debt he feels he owes to Simone Weil, especially her work Gravity and Grace. It is the material reality of the pieces that confirms the dramatic and dynamic presence. The low timber altar pieces in “Talchul a’ Solais” remind me of turf which has been harvested and left to dry out in the sun, distorting and twisting as it releases up its moisture. We spoke about the nature of sculpture having been once part of something else, the forest, the earth, or the quarry. Many of the pieces resemble a form of quarrying, a carving of living material. The timbers are in some instances highly finished (sanded) but in others they are left raw and expressive of the technique of making with evidence of marker, pencil, dog-iron and chainsaw. Even the curved “Stele” are carved, though logic might suggest a steaming and bending process. “Set Personaggi”, inspired by Pirandello’s play Six Characters in Search of an Author, and “Caryatids” suggest a greater appreciation for mass and density. Carved from Douglas Fir, Redwood, Monterey Cypress, Spanish Chestnut and Badi / Opee (Bilingua Nauclea diderrichii) they exhibit the surface, density, color and texture of cotten steel. In others, like the “Fallen Caryatid”, the exposed grain is allowed to weather, creating secondary images independent of the “precise cuts and angles”. It is this interplay between the controlled and the accidental that enlivens the work.

“This tense relationship between inside and outside is based on the act of cutting (as with a sword), which to the Japanese is not cruel and destructive but is instead sacred; it is a ceremonial act symbolising a new disclosure. To the Japanese this act has become an end in itself. It provides a spiritual focus both in space and time.” Tadao Ando 15

The contextual nature of his work echoes Greek thought about landscape. Like the Tholos at Delphi his work sets a datum against which the natural world is seen, compared, and brought into new relationship. In adding an observation...
about Louis Barragan’s use of delineated space, he confirmed the depth of his knowledge and understanding of architectural space. His philosophical background does however demand high degrees of clarity and precision in such discussion especially where concepts of space and place are the concern.

gravity
At the heart of matter is a concern for the centre. It is this centre that generates the Boccioni and Malevich-like constructions of early years. It is the interpretation of two or more parts explicitly, as in “Lieu de Rencontre”, or implicitly in “Sei Personaggi” and “Caryatids”, that requires a centre to hold the composition. Gravity is the central theme of this desired expression. Gravity is made known to us through weight, pressure and mass. “Sei Personaggi” and “Caryatids” exhibit these attributes in probably the most direct and uncompromising manner to-date. Within these masses, like the Ronadini Pietà by Michelangelo that he frequently visited when in Milan, is a form trying to escape the confines of the mass, trying to escape the bounds of the earth. Michael’s dream is to find a sculptural algorithm that would establish the specific gravity of a place, drawing on the history, the culture and “genius loci”.

The arrangement is chance-driven but there is a precision about the dimension, the angle, the placement and the absolute logic governing the masses. In another space, a garden or courtyard, the arrangement would be different. The five pieces contain within them the ghost of the thing removed and this now becomes the coda for the piece. What was form for one becomes the void for another. As a Symbolon they are evidence of the artist’s particular relationship with space and time. The courage of the artist to open such avenues of investigation should be lauded but as Michael indicated when he paraphrased Picasso, “inspiration exists but it must find you working”.

Notes
[6] A singularity is the theoretical point at the centre of a Black Hole where all matter, time and space are compressed into an indescribable mass of infinitesimal density.
[7] A Symbolon is an ancient Greek tradition where an object is broken between friends which, when reunited, demonstrated their kin, their friendship.