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

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.”[1] Sculpture, he says, “is an expression of matter, the same matter 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 a very strange way the accumulation of existence and the mystery of the human enquiry. He admits that although the work is, on the face of it, entirely non-figurative, figurative is implied from the outset.” He adds that his study of anatomy for four years as a student has, for instance, informed the “the proportions and the interrelationships of mass and void”. Michael describes his work as a precarious balancing act. “The way my work meets the ground is very important, the way it lifts or is undercut. There is always a contrary presence. It is predominantly about weight but there are issues of levity as well. In the end what I am interested in is the paradox, weight and levity together. This I can equate with the human condition as I see it. Weight can be read as an analogy for the limits of living. That sense of uplift is a kind of hope.”[2]

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 / Opepe (Bilinga Nauclea diderrichii) they exhibit the surface, decorative and texture of corton 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.

“It should not be hard for you to stop sometimes and look into the stains of walls, or ashes of a fire, or clouds, or mud or like places, in which, if you consider them well, you may find really marvellous ideas.” Leonardo da Vinci

Michael is less circumspect than many artists about the way in which people engage with the work. “During the inaugural show in Visual, Carlow, I gave special dispensation to anyone wishing to touch and smell the large timber baulk of my “Fallen Caryatid”. Interaction with the material is a good thing.”[3] With Unbroken Line, a choreographer is arranging a contemporary dance piece to engage directly with the installation’s five scattered elements. While these unit-forms in painted steel will not exhibit the same “unbelievability” as his beloved timber pieces, their assembly and lay-out in the context of the exhibition illustrate the need to establish a sense of place, being in a place, and engagement with the work, hallmark preoccupations and key to unlocking the sacredness of this and other works.

Michael is concerned that “one of the most unspoken aspects of contemporary culture is that our attention is being scattered over ever-greater areas largely because of modern technology, keeping us further and further from the here and now, diminishing our capacity to feel inevitability in any given place.”[4] Considering the place and placement of any of his pieces, a great deal of thought and effort is put into the platform on which the work stands and from which it gains strength. In the installation “Piazza” [5] the platform became the sculpture, probably his clearest invitation yet to the audience to contemplate place rather than object. He had earlier observed, “during the course of making large outdoor sculptures such as that in Andora, I found that there was something magnificent about the platforms themselves.” In this his thinking is more closely aligned to eastern sensibilities. We are too used to Western aesthetic principles based on contrast and opposition, whereas the aesthetics of grey and graduation offer hope in resolving the inherent mysteries in life. He found the following Tadao Ando quote I have used elsewhere, as particularly resonant of his position:

“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

The contextual nature of his work echoes Greek thought about landscape. Like the Tholoi at Delphi his works a datum against which the natural world is seen, compared, and brought into new relationship. In adding an observation

[1] Michael Warren has been concerned about the inevitability in any given place.

[2] “Man only escapes from the laws of this world in lightning flashes. Instants when everything stands still, intervals 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

[3] “It should not be hard for you to stop sometimes and look into the stains of walls, or ashes of a fire, or clouds, or mud or like places, in which, if you consider them well, you may find really marvellous ideas.” Leonardo da Vinci

[4] It is this interplay between the controlled and the accidental that enlivens the work.

[5] Tadao Ando

[6] “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

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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 Recontre”, 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 Ronandini Pietà by Michelangelo that he frequently visited when in Milan, is the specific gravity of a place, drawing on the history, the culture and “genius loci”. The arrangement is chance-driven but wherever they wanted to fall - just so long as they fell somewhere on the rectangle. This action I repeated a couple of hundred times until I got this one.” [ews]

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 [7] they are evidence of the artist’s particular relationship with time and space. 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 bond, their friendship.