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Abigail Golodik

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Steel Sculpture: A Study of Monumentality

By

Abigail R. Golodik

Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for
Honors in the Department of Visual Arts

UNION COLLEGE

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ABSTRACT

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ADVISOR: Chris Duncan

This thesis is an exploration of steel sculpture and how each form varies in characteristics and prominence depending on size, shape, and color. I am inspired by graphic design and clean forms, and wanted to realize this aesthetic in my sculptures. The thesis work includes four steel sculptures made of two inch pipe and other maquettes and sketches to show the construction process.

Through sharp angles and clean lines, I play with perspective, making viewers feel the presence and tension of my forms. I begin with sketches, construct maquettes, and use these as a blueprint during the final production. Drawing inspiration from Mark di Suvero and Carol Bove, I was able to achieve the sculpture at a monumental scale and perception, which their work mostly explores.

Preparations

The first step in creating this thesis work was deciding which route to take. Having experience working in painting, photography, digital design, and sculpture mediums, I had to choose one to focus on. My initial thought was to work on a digitally inspired project including digital fabrication methods. This would include working with Digital Art Professor, Fernando Orellana. I had previously worked with him on a individual project involving digital fabrication that led up to a solo show called *Totem*. In this project, digital techniques were necessary, but I soon realized for my thesis project, I could achieve the same results by hand without digital planning. I decided on a sculpture thesis in which I could showcase my craftsmanship and love of working with my hands. I was also excited to work with Chris Duncan, the Sculpture Professor alongside Patrick Healy, the Studio Technician. I thought with their sculpture history and construction knowledge at my disposal, I could create a great thesis show.

Once I had decided on a medium and department, I could begin mapping out and prepping for the upcoming year of work. In the Fall term of 2017, I took a Sculpture Independent Study class. The goal of this was to brainstorm for the direction of my thesis project and to also prepare myself for the upcoming two terms of constant work. I did not want to waste any valuable moments trying to think of concepts when I could be bringing them to life in the studio. My Independent Study experience allowed me to try out many different ideas. My style is normally described by clean lines and precision, so I experimented with a rougher and less refined finish. This “rough” style involved a lot of plaster and unfinished metal surfaces. I was less strict with the cleanliness of my metal grinding. I didn’t mind if surfaces rusted, or if plaster was burnt or chipped from the welding process. The baseline idea for this experiment was to create volumetric bar sculptures. A lot of my previous work was very planar, so I wanted to give

the current pieces more dimensionality while playing with surfaces of the volumes, whether it be sheet of steel or plaster. *Mixup* (**Figure 1**) involved a heavy base of stone and steel, and a single bar that protruded and bent at many angles in a hectic formation. I was instantly drawn to the arrangement of the bar in the air, stemming from one base point and extending out. It seemed unstable but also very grounded, and I wanted to continue to test out this look. Inspired by *Mixup*, I began to create the first sculpture of my thesis collection, *Big Mic* at the end of the fall term. I worked over winter break to finish it. *Big Mic* was the perfect start of the collection because the base idea is so versatile. *Big Mic* (**Figure 2**) is constructed of 2" steel pipe and stands about 8' x 8' x 64". I could take this single material of steel pipe and create many different forms with it. Using this material would allow me to explore the gesture of the sculptures all through the use of line. When the idea to use pipe was solidified, I was still unsure of the meaning that would motivate this sculpture.

Meaning

Unsure of the motivation behind my work, I began to really think what this collection would be about. One day, a stream of thoughts popped into my head:

When I die how will I be remembered? How will my art be remembered?

Most things decompose eventually, but a lot of our waste and garbage will sit on this earth long after us. Among the things that last are the ancient monumental creations that are made of stone. The structures often hold the name of the ruler extending their prominence into our time. I would like to explore this idea of permanence and time through sculpture. In a study of monumentality, through scale, color, and materials, I hope to find my context in the world and how I may or may not be remembered. With a focus on line, perspective, and foundation, I will seek to evoke the

feeling of longevity in the structures. These sculptures may be how I am remembered, or they may not be, but that is up to how the world perceives them.

To be clear, this statement is not nihilistic. It may sound like it is depending on how the reader interprets it, but this is not the case. I find a lot of meaning in the time and effort I put into my work. When I ask, “how will I be remembered?” and “how will my art be remembered?” I question the position myself and my work has and will have in the world. One potential answer is to build as large as possible, and make my work as memorable as it can be. In ancient societies, construction of large and extravagant structures was the premier way to display royalty and prominence. I do not necessarily mean this about myself, but if I follow this tradition that has worked so well, maybe it will help increase the impact of my work. Ancient societies have always served as an inspiration to me. The beauty of their architecture, the attention to detail, and the longevity of their craftsmanship have all struck me deeply. Being a Classical Civilizations minor has allowed me to explore more about the societies and cultures of the Greeks, Romans, and Egyptians. A factor that makes their construction so grand is the type of materials used, such as stone. Simply by being carved or constructed out of more expensive or rare stones changes the value of the piece, and adds to the grandiosity of the work. These societies’ usages of permanent materials that take intense effort to destroy shows that their structures are meant to be everlasting.

Inspiration

Before moving on to the construction of the next sculpture after *Big Mic*, I found artists that I thought fit a similar style as mine to draw inspiration from. I was instantly drawn to the work of Mark di Suvero and Carol Bove, because of their scale, forms, and color schemes. Di

Suvero works at a monumental scale and Bove at a more lifesize one, but both still are creating a dialogue between the sculpture and the viewer based on this scale. Many of di Suvero's pieces include moving parts or serve as almost a playground (**Figures 3-5**), and Bove's work takes on a more personal relationship because of how similar in scale and feel her pieces are to people.

Mark di Suvero has been a major source of inspiration in my work. His monumental outdoor sculptures utilize industrial I-beams. His forms vary from simple to complex, but always maintain a playful feel by incorporating moving parts, or hands-on features such as benches or swings that get the viewer physically involved in the work. He has created so many pieces that are located across the globe, which I believe this speaks to the versatility and relatability anyone can have to the sculptures. When searching through his work, I happened upon some lithographic prints he had made. They are simple brush strokes, but are able to capture the movement of his sculptures. Some examples of this style of his work can be seen in **Figures 6-7**. My initial thought was to attempt to incorporate printmaking in some manner, such as quick monoliths in a similar style to di Suvero, but I realized it would have disrupted my working methods if I pursued this. In a future project, incorporating other mediums would not be an issue, but since this project was on a strict schedule, I had to be cautious. Instead of making prints, I would document the sketch and planning process carefully.

Mark di Suvero's work instantly draws attention because of the sheer scale. The industrial materials used and the bright, vibrant colors of di Suvero's pieces immediately contrast with their outdoor environments. The bright oranges and reds pop out against the green and blue environment. Even when in a city setting, the sculptures manage to have a similar effect. Perhaps this is because of the I beam being taken out of the context of infrastructure, and turned into animated sculptural forms. This life-like aspect of his sculptures inspired me to use a similar

approach to my own work. My work would be more about the connection between the different bars, creating conversation within the sculpture itself and the viewers. Often di Suvero's work has a center core and pieces that intertwine around it. I wanted to explore my connections of the pipe, since *Big Mic* was a single line not interacting with any other segments.

Similarly, the work of Carol Bove that inspires me are single rectangular volumes that are bent in different directions. **(Figure 8)** What draws me to this work is the single line the sculpture grows from. These simple turns and bends give it its personal characteristics specific to that sculpture. Even with something so simple, the form becomes human. The way in which she uses the juxtaposition of perfectly shaped objects with bent ones, as if they were crushed or manipulated by the solid object, creates a dialogue between these two aspects **(Figure 9)**. It could be related to people's relationships, or a crushing feeling. These sculptures are also interesting because of the color choice of the pieces. Even though they may be crushed and bent, they still have a pristine coat of paint to make the bends look almost natural. Normally, distressing an object would leave visible evidence behind, but her solid paint at the end completes the piece as one and speaks to the outside look of an internally bent structure.

Process

With the idea solidified and sculptures in mind, the next step was to begin creating. I soon realized that this very specific process was the most important part of my project. *Big Red* was created based on small sketches in my notebook from a quick movement I wanted to capture. Over winter term I took Drawing 1 with Laini, so I went to her for some advice about how I could display the final work. I showed her all my sketches and bits of paper from designing and planning. She first suggested I keep them in a safe place to keep the drawings in

good condition. She also suggested drawing on mixed media paper to have more refined drawings, so I could then use all of these bits of paper in the show. She showed me multiple shows she had gone to in which the artist displayed these preliminary notebook sketches as a way to further explain the planning and outline of their show. I liked this idea because if I included simple sketches in my display, it would not take away attention from the sculpture the way printmaking or painting may have. It was important to stick to one medium and to not display work from other mediums in order to maximize cohesiveness. Displaying my sketches would be a great way to incorporate a wall into the exhibit, and to show how much thinking and planning goes into the sculpture until I am pleased with the form.

This sketching became an integral part of my process. Just a simple line drawing allowed me to expand the amount of potential sculptures, as well as to be more fluid and experimental during this planning stage. I sketched constantly throughout the two terms. When I had a drawing that I liked, I recreated it until I was happy with the final edition. I would then construct a small maquette. This maquette served as the blueprint for the final scale sculpture, and went through many changes in the early stage. I used ¼” steel bar for maquettes, so if I did not like an angle or attachment I could cut it off and try it in a different way. Once a model was complete, I could begin construction of the final sculpture. In this manner, I could work without any digital steps and stick true to a trial and error method based on my plans.

The 2” pipe I used to create the large scale sculptures had existing black paint on it that had to be removed in the areas that I would be attaching components to or working near. On earlier sculptures I ground the paint off, but by the last I used an oxy-acetylene torch to burn it off. This allowed me to maintain the surface texture. With an emphasis on sharp edges and clean lines, I decided to cut off the end of the bar at a 60 degree angle. Next, to finish the open hole, I

plasma cut ovals that would cap it off. These ovals were then welded on and ground down to a completely flat edge. This grinding stage was the most time consuming, as I wanted the joints to be perfect. I strove for the connections to seem natural, as if the bar was bent perfectly by an outside source. I started with the regular grinding disk, then moved to a sanding disk, and finally the air compressor sander. This step was necessary for *Omes*. (**Figure 10**) and *AB +* (**Figure 11**) because these pieces consisted of separate pipes and not a continuous line connected, like *Y - IZ* (**Figure 12**) and *Big Mic*. Interlocking different pipes together involved cutting out an oval hole out of the side so that the other pipe could lock in. These joints were the most difficult to work on, because of how tight the space was to maneuver in.

This entire process was driven by precision and my vision for a polished final piece. It is a true reflection of the amount of time and effort spent on the sculptures, as well as my personal aesthetic for my work. Adapted from my digital art style, I bring the same caliber into sculpture. Although this is the case, at some point I had to show the mark of my hand in the work, and stop worrying about grinding every little bump down. I eventually found the perfect balance, and was able to show my mark while also leaving the work highly finished. This is evident in the bases of *Y - IZ*. They are cut from 1" thick steel plate, and involved a lot of grinding and patching to get them to the straight edge they are. The oxy-acetylene torch was also used to cut these bases. I found at some point I had to stop grinding, and be complete with the pieces. With the bases, I left more of my mark to show these were created by hand, and not by any machine.

Exhibition

The thesis work had to be completed by May 13th so the show could go up and be ready for the opening reception on Friday, May 18th. It didn't take long to carry *Y IZ*, *Omes.*, and *AB +*

sculptures into the gallery. I had installed *Big Mic* in the Arts Quad outside, and that was where it would remain. All of the sculptures had their bases prepped with sliding pads as to not scratch the gallery floor. Since *AB +* stands solely on sharp points of the pipe, I laser cut 1” circles of clear acrylic to put underneath it. The most time consuming part was deciding what to use and mounting the sketches of my work. I decided I would also include some of the maquettes, so I constructed small shelves to hang within the sketches as a collage wall. I mapped everything out on the floor of the gallery, and then was able to mount within my wall space. I used nails that protruded from the wall and magnets to mount the sketches. This would give them more resolved look by having some depth off of the wall (**Figure 13**).

It was refreshing to see all the pieces in the gallery together. Although each had a specific personality when standing alone, together, they worked very well. Despite varying in colors and forms, the movement of line was consistent throughout each piece, making the group cohesive. The sculptures had been in the studio space and had not had room to “breathe” in an open space. The sculptures stand alone on the floor without a pedestal separating the viewer from the art, which also adds to the human characteristics they have. The bright colors instantly draw your eyes to the sculptures. I had been concerned about painting the sculptures with the three primary colors, but once they were all seen in the gallery interacting together and juxtaposed against the white walls and light colored wood floor, it was clear the primary colors worked perfectly because of how they stood out.

I am extremely happy with the installation of the exhibition and the final products I created. The outcome was what I had wished for, and the pieces were of the caliber I strove to achieve. This work helped me take a new direction that I would like to keep exploring. The idea behind timelessness in sculpture and in monuments will continue to inspire me throughout my

life and career, and I will keep working towards finding my context in the world by building sculptures.

Acknowledgements

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Figure 1

Mixup
Abby Golodik
Steel and Soapstone
2017



Figure 2

Big Mic
Abby Golodik
Painted Steel
2018

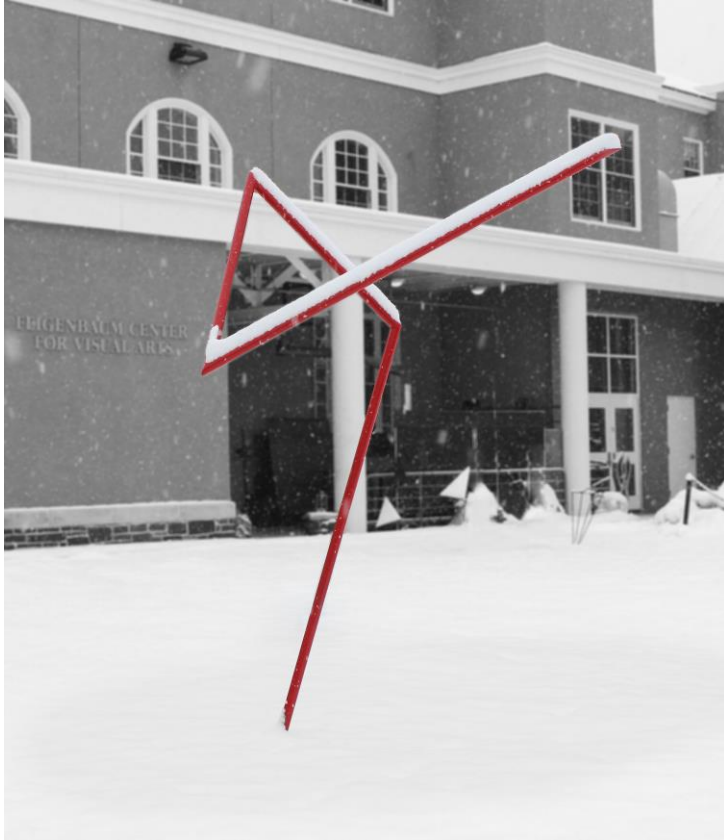


Figure 3

Pyramidian

Mark di Suvero

1998

Collection of Storm King Art Center, Mountainville, New York. Gift of the Ralph E. Ogden Foundation, Inc. Photograph ©Jerry L. Thompson.

Copyright 2016, Mark di Suvero/Spacetime C.C.



Figure 4

Figolu

Mark di Suvero

Painted Steel, Marine Buoys

2005

Collection of the Artist.

Photograph ©Jerry L. Thompson.

Copyright 2016, Mark di Suvero/Spacetime C.C.



Figure 5

Are Years What? (For Marianne Moore)

Mark di Suvero

Painted steel

1967

Collection of Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington D.C.

Photograph by George Bellamy

Copyright 2016, Mark di Suvero/Spacetime C.C.



Figure 6

Planetaire
Mark di Suvero
Lithograph
1987
Courtesy of Artsy.net



Figure 7

Afterstudy for Marianne Moore: Are Years What?

Mark di Suvero

Lithograph (Signed/Numbered) - Framed

1976

Courtesy of Artsy.net

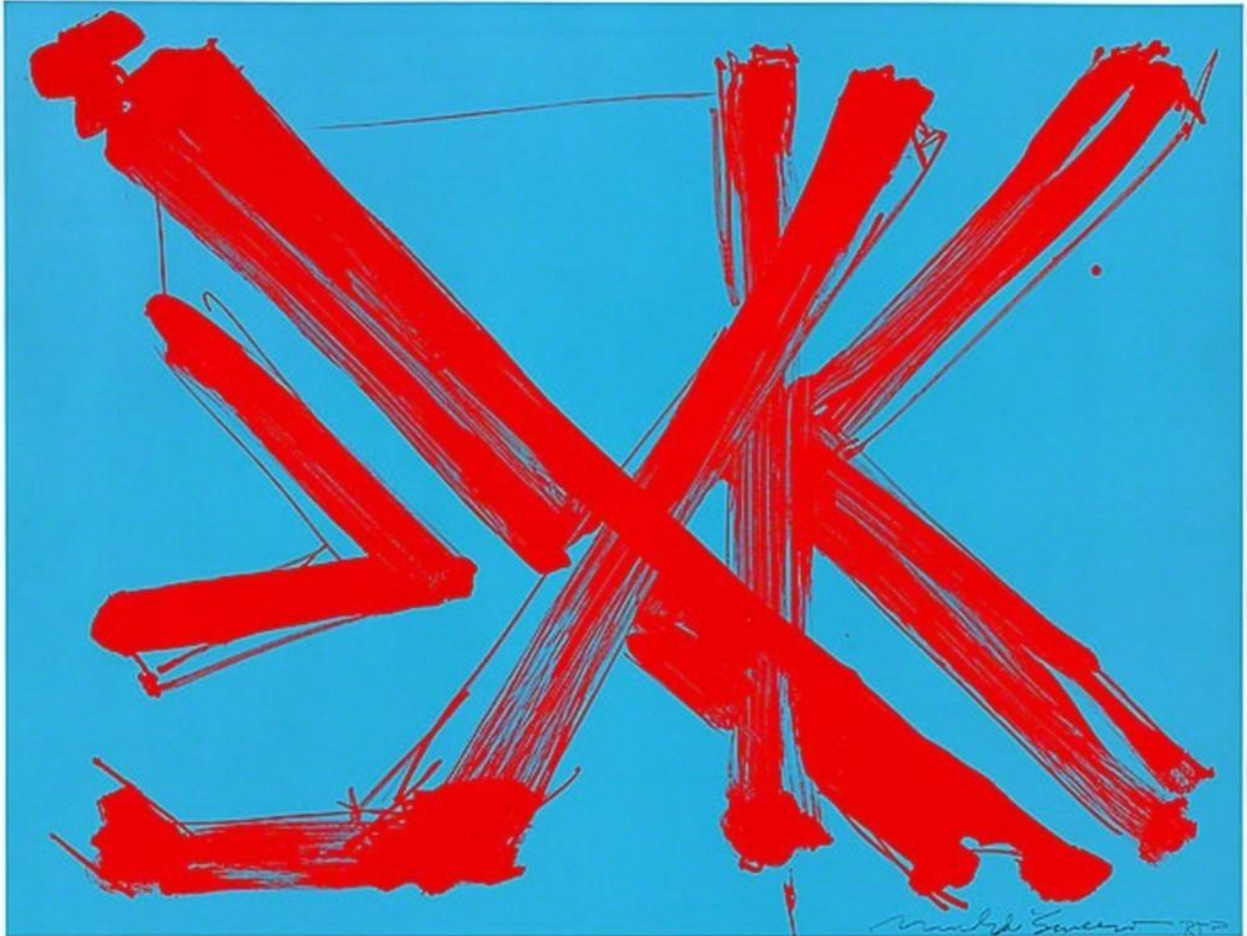


Figure 8

The Plastic Unit

Carol Bove

Installation view from the 2015 solo exhibition 'Carol Bove: The Plastic Unit' at David Zwirner, London.

2015

Courtesy David Zwirner, New York/London



Figure 9

Cutting Corners

Carol Bove

Stainless steel and urethane paint

2018

Courtesy David Zwirner, New York/London



Figure 10

Omes.
Abby Golodik
Painted Steel
2018



Figure 11

AB+
Abby Golodik
Painted Steel
2018



Figure 12

Y - IZ
Abby Golodik
Painted Steel
2018



Figure 13

Process
Abby Golodik
Mixed Media
2018

