



LEWITT • TINGUELY • PEART: **COUNTERBALANCE**

THE GARDEN AND ITS ROOTS

An Essay on Jerry Peart

Jerry Peart is one of Chicago's foremost sculptors. His works in painted aluminum have been counted among some of the most articulate and successful examples of contemporary public sculpture produced during the past fifteen years. Many of these works, such as *Kabuki Dancer*, *Rainbow Dancer*, and the highly acclaimed *Blue Geisha*, evoke the dance. Their linear rhythms capture an exotic Eastern elegance. Like *Astronomer* and *Wicked Witch*, they are part of a continuing series of works portraying costumed revelers at a masquerade ball. Although massive, Peart's sculptures frequently reveal a whimsical nature through the lyrical fusion of organic and geometric imagery and a daring, intuitive palette of radical color combinations. Their sleek, smooth-surfaced forms, with their dips and twists, curves and folds, are fluidly orchestrated into a simultaneously timeless and momentary expression of energy and movement.

The Garden is Peart's most recent monumental outdoor sculpture. Although it shares a formal kinship with the artist's imaginary masquerade figures, it is as its title implies, very much about plants and

flowers. Its curious abstract forms call to mind the numerous unexpected incidents that make up the wondrous stuff of gardens. A twenty-foot-long piece of rippling green aluminum, for instance, snakes up the backside of the work's dominant vertical element, like a vine growing around a tree or a caterpillar inching its way up a stem. Elsewhere, a crimped and pleated semicircular form suggests the outer edge of a delicate blossom, while at its very top, a green leaflike form unfolds over a yellow vertical element that could easily represent the stamen of a flower.

Constructed in ten sections, Peart's sculpture weighs over four tons and rises to a height of thirty feet, yet its forms appear rhythmic and supple, animated by the illusion of growth. It is as if the artist has distilled the entire seasonal cycle into one dynamic unit. Graceful yellow-green forms, like new growth, seem to hint at spring. Crisp forms painted brilliant blue and bright yellow seem to imply the heat and hues of summer. Broad sloping forms painted purple and Indian red seem to sound a deep resonant note of autumn.

A delightful celebration of form, *The Garden* appeals directly to the senses, as it

Jerry Peart, *Blue Geisha*, 1985, painted aluminum, 39 x 24 x 22 feet. Commissioned by Miglin/Beitler, Chicago.





Jerry Peart, *Splash*, 1985, painted aluminum, 21 x 32 x 16 feet. Commissioned by Metropolitan Structures, Chicago.

should. Standing at the front entrance of the Carillon, it coaxes the passerby into stopping for a look. Here to admire a playful, undulating curve of metal that appears to flutter effortlessly in the wind. There to examine some quizzical shape that looks vaguely familiar, but which only could have been plucked from an enchanted Alice-in-Wonderland fantasy. Everywhere the viewer's eye plunges into refreshing bursts of color. For years to come the complexities and subtleties of *The Garden* will slowly unfurl, like the broad sheets of aluminum Peart has used to trace its surprising silhouette in space.

Peart developed his much sought-after skill as a large-scale public sculptor in Chicago, a city where the everyday is rendered in epic proportions. Here, against a backdrop of some of the world's tallest buildings, "Big" is a long standing tradition. It is one whose significance has not been overlooked by an informal group of highly individualistic sculptors, who not only design, but personally fabricate and install their own huge works. Practicing an essentially constructive style, these direct metal sculptors, as they are sometimes called, pursue an art that is impossible to contain within the walls of galleries or even museums.

Peart came to Chicago in the summer of 1972, lured by the city's reputation for supporting large-scale sculpture and the existence of an established community of working sculptors, which included such artists as John Henry, Richard Hunt, and Steven Urry. Within six months he had his first one-person show, which attracted a considerable amount of favorable critical notice. One of these he impressed was Urry, who recruited him as an assistant to help with finishing work on *Arch*, a large sculpture destined for the now historic *Sculpture Off the Pedestal* show (1973) in Grand Rapids, Michigan. In exchange for working on the piece, Peart received space in Urry's studio where he could work on larger pieces of his own. When Urry left to

seek his fortune in New York a year later Peart took over his studio.

Urry and Peart shared a certain understanding of each other's work. Both chose welded aluminum as their primary material and each had a penchant for organic imagery. Urry's work at the time, with its snakey, vinelike tendrils often linking industrial cubelike forms, was once described by critic Grace Glueck as "jungle plants gone mad." Like Peart, he often tagged his work with quirky, off-beat titles that underlined what writer Franz Schulze called a "winking wit."

From time to time, critics have tried to ally both Urry and Peart to the Chicago imagists, a gritty, street-wise group of fantasists and punsters reared at Chicago's School of the Art Institute and whose work commanded much of that city's press during the 1970's. Both sculptors, however, claimed influences that were more directly in tune with west coast sensibilities, having both attended schools in the west. Peart has even cited a close affinity between his work and that of funk ceramists Rudy Autio, David Gilhooly, and Peter Voulkos.

The Grand Rapids show also included work by Mark di Suvero and George Sugarman. It was here that Peart met these artists for the first time. Henry also had a piece in that show, one which Peart, working as a finisher, had painted. Soon Peart was showing his pieces with Henry, Hunt, and Urry at a number of notable temporary exhibitions of large-scale outdoor sculpture in and around Chicago.

The artists participating in those exhibitions would not only finance the sculpture themselves, but also arrange for the shows. Sometimes they would set up their work in a plaza or park. At other times they used vacant lots slated for future construction. They dubbed the events "pick-up" shows because they brought their work to the sites in the backs of their pick-up trucks. The sculptures, which remained in place for several

months at a time, frequently became an accepted part of the local urban landscape. On a number of occasions their removal prompted public protests. Ultimately, these temporary shows played an important role in gaining public approval of large-scale sculpture.

The most important of these shows, *Sculpture for a New Era* (1975), featured



the work of artists from six states including Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, and Michigan. Installed at the Federal Plaza in Chicago, its emphasis on big welded-metal sculpture had a tremendous impact on defining the course of Chicago sculpture for the next decade and a half.

Henry, a gifted organizer as well as a talented sculptor, was the prime catalyst for the *New Era* Show and many other early successes. As a result, he is often credited as being a singular force in solidifying Chicago's image as a major center for public sculpture. His rambling steel sculptures with their long industrial beams poised in a delicate balance, gained him early international recognition, but in his hometown he was also known as a community leader. In 1975, for instance, it was Henry who provided the impetus behind the founding of *Art in Public Places*, a not-for-profit organization devoted to establishing showcases for public sculpture. A short time later he led the *Sculptor's Group*, a loose confederation of

sculptors serving as a lobby for sculptor's issues.

Pearl shared Henry's organizational skills and astute business sense, and in 1978, the two friends formed ConStruct Gallery, an artists' cooperative promoting large-scale public sculpture. An innovative, even radical idea for the time, ConStruct became a necessity prompted by the closing of the Walter Kelly Gallery, which was then showing work not only by Pearl and Henry, but also Di Suvero and John Chamberlain. Suddenly some of Chicago's most significant sculptors were left without a place to show their work and despite their increasing visibility and growing stature as artists, they could not find another dealer willing to commit to the practical considerations involved in supporting large-scale sculpture.

Pearl and Henry succeeded in interesting a first rate group of sculptors to join them in their venture. These included former Chicagoans Linda Howard and Frank McGuire, and national figures such as Charles Ginnever, Lyman Kipp, Di Suvero, and Kenneth Snelson. But the bulk of the management and the actual physical operation of the gallery fell largely to Henry as its president, and Pearl as its vice-president and treasurer. ConStruct was highly aggressive in advancing the careers of its artists. It not only mounted one-person and group exhibitions in the gallery, but it also established a unique program of traveling lease shows. These exhibitions, which were rented to various groups across the country, consisted of eight sculptures, one by each of the gallery's members. The shows were transported by a semi-truck and came complete with brochures detailing information on the ConStruct aesthetic, the artist, and their work. They also featured a lecture on the work by one of the artists.

By the early 1980s, large-scale sculpture had gained increased acceptance among the public, and ConStruct, in the minds of many, was one of the reasons





why. In a few short years it had garnered international acclaim. It was, however, unable to make the change from infancy into adolescence. After nearly six years of operation, the demands and responsibilities of running a gallery began to interfere with the time Henry and Peart needed for their own work.

When ConStruct finally closed its doors in 1983, Peart, the youngest member of the group, was the most commissioned sculptor in Chicago. Just how strong the gallery's impact was, however, is reflected in the fact that even today, almost ten years after it ceased operations, the ConStruct name is still synonymous with large-scale metal sculpture worldwide.

The directions and immediacy of experiencing public sculpture—of placing a piece of art in a park or plaza with the people—has always interested Peart. As a rule there are no barriers between his work and the viewer. He seldom situates his sculpture on a pedestal, so it is possible to walk right up to one. Sit on it. Touch it. Walk around it, or even walk through it. Look up into it, instead of just looking at it. In this way the artist encourages the viewer to develop an intimate dialogue with the work of art that goes far beyond that which is possible in a gallery or museum.

Part of the reason why Peart's outdoor sculptures are so successful in eliciting public response lies in the various ways they interact with their sites. Some connect with the history of a location like *Riverview* (1979), the city of Chicago's first "Percent for Art" award. With its sweeping, dipping, rollercoaster forms and carnivalesque colors, this work beautifully evokes the dizzying fun and excitement of an amusement park which formerly stood on the site. At the same time, it stands in dramatic juxtaposition to the grim business of the Area Six Police Headquarters and court with which it now shares the site.

Other sculptures, such as the extremely popular *Splash* (1987), reflect more visual concerns. Based on a series of *National Geographic* photographs depicted the whooping, diving ballet of a red-crested Japanese crane, its spirited play of forms with their flighty twists and turns, provide a casually eloquent complement to the motion of bustling crowds at the Boulevard Towers Plaza on Chicago's Michigan Avenue where it sits. To assure the work's effectiveness, Peart analyzed every conceivable angle from which the sculpture would be viewed in order to eliminate the possibility of an awkward perspective that would interrupt or distort the work's visual momentum.

Peart utilized the same care and diligence in considering and researching the future site of *The Garden*. Before designing the sculpture, he collected numerous stories about the area from the local residents, poured over blueprints, and made a scale model of the site in his studio. In the end what impressed him the most about the setting was its green, park-like quality. A sculpture symbolizing plants and flowers seemed a natural choice.

But it is interesting to note that while each of Peart's sculptures are created especially for a particular site, their validity as works of art are never dependent on those specific sites. Instead, the sites should be seen more as points of departure from which the artist weaves his fantastic narratives into an integral part of the architectural and landscape design.

Peart is one of the most accomplished public sculptors of our time. Over the years his work has not only enhanced the disciplines of art and architecture, but more importantly, it has also enriched the human experience. This is the greatest achievement of art.

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Jerry Peart, *The Garden*, 1991, painted aluminum, 30 x 24 x 22 feet. Hesta Properties Inc.

