

# Walk-in sculpture at Ringhouse

Rituals/Systems  
Ring House Gallery  
to March 13

review by Gunnar Lindebury

In an artistic milieu of inarticulate, esoteric and plastic sculpture and painting (or, as curator Liz Wylie would say, "a post-Caroline vein of late modernist abstraction"), the socio-emotional statement.

While they may at first assault a connoisseur's sense of restraint and aesthetics (you wouldn't want to put them in your tea parlour), these room-sized sculptures adapt to and pass beyond the limits of space and history to take form on many levels of perception and understanding. We, as audience/participants are invited into the worlds of these creations, to shape and form them through those perceptions.

What world of ritual do these artists describe? Upon walking into Robert Hicks' *Object for Disposal*, one might well be party to a Celtic burial ritual. Richly adorned vessels are set on tripods surrounding a body (à la George Segal?), which rests upon two hand-made wooden benches.

The body is covered with a brown mat of jute, resembling the dried grasses of southern Alberta prairies. The vessels are bound with aged copper and hung with leather, bone, antlers and stone gathered from those same prairies.

*Object's* material and construction speak of a craftsman's talent and of Hicks' past. The artist describes how as a boy in North Dakota he would make traps and other structures, only to find them the next spring. "One can almost feel a presence," says Hicks.

This feeling of age, of artifact, is seen in the careful assembly of the "corpse" itself. Creation of the "corpse" went through a number of stages, beginning with the plaster cast of a model. The cast was then filled with sawdust, and layered repeatedly with Hicks "adding and subtracting" various materials (hence *Ritual*) until the jute mat covered its surface.

Hicks talks of the confrontation of a human body on the horizontal plane as an important element of the piece. The body, an empty vessel with a simple and uniform surface makes a compelling image. The upright, sentinel vessels, "precious artifacts" from a passed life, complete that image: here are the treasures; rich, dynamic, skyward reaching, waiting perhaps to be lit with burial incense, yet within unable to sustain a fire: revealed as a hollow shell surrounding a core of feathers and paper. Here as well lies the corpse, lacking ornaments and accoutrements, superficially poor and physically powerless, nonetheless bodying forth a presence and power which hint at the life which only recently may have left.

Through the interaction of surface and object, then of history and presence, the tension of the horizontal body is expounded.

The artistic tension of Teresa Posyniak's *Web* occurs, if anything, on an even more archetypally primitive level than that of *Object*. Describing her work as a "three-dimensional drawing," Posyniak leads us into a maze of not-trees whose form and interactions allude to our fascination with and fear of the darkness and mysteries of forests.

Seven-foot sticks wrapped in papier mache reach from the floor of this sculpture, woven in and out with lengths of jute, branching into strange curved appendages and cupping, here and there, great felt eggshells/nests which might have housed strange mythical demibirds. In one section, paper spans the stems and branches, forming long, curved sails, which become ghost shapes in the dim light of the room.

"Don't take anything for granted," warns Posyniak. "Everything reflects you."

"I like to look at it on different levels," she continues. The symbology and mythology of the forest, in all its manifestations of threat and secret temptations, are a very deliberate



Walk-in forest at the Ringhouse

level of *Web*.

Yet Posyniak wants to contrast it to other works she has seen in Edmonton, especially the steel sculptures near the UofA's Fine Arts building. This, she says, is "art" as religion or as an exercise in a military academy... like art has nothing to do with life.

"Kids love my work. I really get off on kids going through my work, relating to it in a very natural way. They really do take it seriously as a real place, not something that's going to be up for three weeks."

The elements of this emotional/mythological thesis remain: stiff, artificial constructs held up by four pillars of concrete (Reminiscent of several Tom Baker Dr. Who sets). Out of these childlike, repetitive plaster of Paris models, how can such emotion be found? Does Posyniak tell us it is exactly this childishness, this ritual, that finds in us a response?

But if *Web* is deceptive, then Ray Arnett's *Holon* lies in wait to spring on us with startling implications. Here, if anywhere, ritual is the way of the artist's work: 300 panels, some with the image of a chest of drawers, are arranged in a room; some hung at the same level around all four walls, and some in a shapeless mass on the floor.

The first response to this arrangement is one of disbelief; here is a meaningless, perhaps obsessive-compulsive production display. Again, the work's true tension emerges in our understanding before it is explicable in our perceptions of the work itself.

The panels on the walls, originally identi-

cal, become distinguished. At one corner, rising from the floor's shapeless mass of potential, is the first (or last) panel. Passing from it to the next, then beyond, one sees as if in a strip of film, the images of the drawers — an image of self or psyche, says Arnett — taking form, becoming obliterated and reformed, contrasting surface and ground, changing colour, changing shade from almost white to full colour, changing form, dropping a line to a seemingly gratuitous stack of panels, and slowly working its way through a textbook of basic artistic techniques back into the mass on the floor. Order emerges from meaninglessness.

Another aspect not immediately apparent is the nature of the panels which look as though cast in the mold of Calgary artist John Chalke, although Arnett denies a connection. Each one is based on a square of particle board which is mounted with individually-made balsa models of the chest of drawers. These are topped with home-made gesso (a mixture of chalk and glue), which is then sanded away to reveal the outline of the drawers.

This repetitive "additive-reductive" process results in a rather curious phenomenon: "each object is precious, and while this 'preciousness' is undone by the reproduction, that doesn't take away from the individual quality of each piece," says Arnett. "Art is a celebration of paradoxes."

The second implication of the "additive-reductive" is to introduce multiple levels to the system of panels; as if it were

doll. Arnett reveals a Bach-like penchant for variation on a theme within an entire piece or the helism/reduction found in Douglas Hofstadter's *Gödel Escher Bach*. Thence, *Holon*, a creation of Arthur Koestler meaning an entity which is part and whole at the same time.

The process of *Holon* is totalism: to keep adding elements and placing them in a hierarchy without removing anything, explains Arnett, and the result is a binary system — in which opposites are related and ranked in an infinite cycle.

In contrast to the intellectual approach of *Holon*, it is the incongruity of substance and image of surface and object we see in *Web* and *Object* which emerge in Lylian Klimek's *Atuan*. The allusion to Ursula Le Guin's *Tombs of Atuan*, of the Earthsea trilogy, is not unfounded: Klimek's work is composed of three groups of structures (from Eva Hesse?) which are patterned on old architecture and give the mood of hollow shells and ancient tombs.

In the first group, three long triangular frames with shelves of varying lengths (resembling skewed Christmas trees or skeletal Daleks) are strewn with shredded rubber.

In the second, wood surfaced with a coloured, dried mud mixture leans up against two tall, long triangular structures. The image is of a bizarre concrete lean-to.

The third consists of three structures, again coated with the coloured mud, which look as if they were oil derricks or skeletal buildings. Like the first two, it exhibits an awkward angularity which is accentuated by the fall of light across and between the frames.

Klimek tries to evoke the mood surrounding architecture of other ages and people. She recalls that as a child she was fascinated with remains of pioneer buildings, and with Native medicine rings and burial grounds — gain perhaps echoing Le Guin?

The intent in *Atuan* is not to replicate — "someone else did it better that me a long time ago" — but to bring out the lines and planes and weights of the buildings and remains. As such, Klimek intends that the work should be interpreted on many levels.

Indeed, the interpretations are complex. Here is a structure of modern shredded rubber which recalls the moss covered framework of what may have been a building. There, a concrete lean-to seems to approach a description of the modern Native — their culture and lifestyle cemented into the past. Again, the tension of surface and substance invites us into a world of primitive emotions and memory.

The weakest and least dynamic of the five works is Adrian Cooke's *Sentinel*. A single structure dominates the piece; a garishly painted eight foot "temple" object, on the top of which sits a triangular artifact reportedly removed (liberated?) from a barn door near Turn, Alberta. One "leg" of the "temple" is painted with orange and white checks that make it resemble a barber pole, while the other is simply red, the sheen of which Cooke says is intended to make the object "precious."

Surrounding the "temple" are four gas markers, two foot tall chainsaw carved posts, patterned after markers somewhere in southern Alberta. These are also painted in a red and white checkered pattern, but lack the garish sheen. This parallel painting pattern is intended to establish a link between the markers and the "temple."

The gas markers do, in a sense, form an invisible boundary around the "temple," adding to the imposing and sacred appeal of the object says Cooke, thus lifting it beyond its origins.

And granted, the piece does have a certain emotional appeal; a "gateway to the Roman Empire" haughtiness. Most eight-foot phallic symbols do. But in the context of the other sculptures of *Rituals/Systems*, it doesn't stand up beyond the initial impression.