The Freedman Gallery at Albright College • June 1-September 17, 2007

Henry Saxe

The Anarchy of Space

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A good archeologist can read a bucket of soil as if it were a complex historical novel.

—Michael Ondaatje, *Anil’s Ghost*
For an art historian, deciphering a work of art should pursue a method similar to an archeologist’s. There is a sifting of layers of history: art history, the artist’s personal history and environment, the relationship between materials and intent— a myriad of societal influences balanced with the permutations of individual ambitions. The scientist seeks facts and reasons, causes and effects, within a relatively isolated laboratory— yet, admittedly, not always within a sterile container. After all, in the final analysis, the true excitement of science may be more akin to a genie in a bottle, or a lucky accident.

The difference between a clinical analysis and critical interpretation is perhaps as extreme as the variation between a lab technician wearing latex gloves and a child digging in the dirt. To understand art, it is essential to get down and dirty, to embrace the mire and cultivate seeds of comprehension. This is not to suggest that art is like dirt, but that its potential is all encompassing and a part of an unraveling continuum of comprehension— a reconstruction of our world, a microcosm.

Considering art should be a mobile act of learning and growing rather than a process of classification and preservation. Within the experience of contemplation, the individual perception can cloud the liquid, as in a Petri dish— analytical dissection polluting rather than promoting clarity. The danger is that personal relationships can distort any notion of a possibly empirical truth. Yet, I believe the final creative act of the art object is in the mind of the observer. So, how do I reconcile the fact that Henry and I have been friends for over three decades? Quite frankly, I don’t worry about it. Just as Anil in Michael Ondaatje’s novel is drawn into emotional and personal entanglements, I cannot surgically divorce myself from the larger world. Yet, I am also uncompromising in that I expect more from my friends. My desires and expectations form part of our friendship. So, I make no effort, have no pretense, about trying to categorize Henry. Doing so would be like trying to freeze frame a picture of nature— effectively, a nature morte.
And I have known the eyes already, known them all —
The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase,
And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin,
When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall,
Then how should I begin
To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways?
And how should I presume?

~ T.S. Eliot, Burnt Norton

A measure of Henry Saxe's art is that it escapes the calipers of specifics; and, like a hummingbird, it swiftly evades our concepts of capture and confinement. Some of his earliest investigations into the three-dimensional realm of sculpture incorporated refined— albeit not minimalist— combinations of modular components. From that very beginning, he introduced the flexibility of varied installations and invited the individual to play with the possibilities. He also embraced aspects of chance, bringing rawness, mutability, to otherwise static materials. This flexibility, this fourth dimension of time and change (both physically literal and mentally suggestive) continues to inform his work.

Saxe's drawings and paintings in the Sixties represented a clash between constructivism and abstract impressionism. He combined angular geometries with organic forms— sort of like Tatlin meets Delaney or Hartley. These somewhat contradictory interests created a conflict in how he handled space. At times the result was somewhat reminiscent of Franz Marc's *Fighting Forms*, where two large areas, one black and one red, appear to vie for the eventual dominance of their contained space. The results of Saxe's conflicting components were at times awkward, imbalanced; yet, their interactions were similar to Martha Graham pushing the established perimeters of dance into an erratic spiral of shift and freeze, of motion and immobility. In this sense of time, his drawings were very sculptural as they dealt with concepts of balance, juxtaposition and distribution.
Early on Saxe admired Vladimir Tatlin’s constructivist concept of sculpture as drawing in space, yet he tended to deviate from the restrictions of one norm by stirring up combinations of interests in one series of works, or exploring various avenues of perception rather than stylistically pursuing a tunnel vision approach toward an endgame (as was the habit of many minimalists). This courageous refusal to adopt a signature style within a marketplace has invigorated his work, propelling it beyond static repetition. Seemingly simple, his personal approach is actually as dramatically different as building an aircraft and flying one.

*The Tractor* pieces dating back to 1969 delineated how Saxe incorporated surrounding space and mobility as an integral part of his thinking. The simple modular forms combined like the treads in a tank track. The shape and amount of space available determined their installation: at times laid out in a long linear manner, or stacked and circling back on themselves. So, although each Tractor piece is a single work of art, its nature, its sense of presence can be substantially altered, discarding the notion of a singular object d’art into a realm of numerous permutations. Viewing these works, an imaginative redistribution of parts deconstructs and reconstructs the whole, giving them a sense of liberation. There is a sense that they are contained, but that this pose is temporary; they both embody themselves and suggest their potential. Their repetition, powerful manufactured look, and sense of potential movement recall some of the ambitions of the Futurists.

In 1971 Henry produced the *Triangle Series*, black and white photographs with an architect’s plastic angle superimposed on the image. These works appear to go beyond the relationship between a piece of sculpture into an investigation of space itself. The angular device is placed on images of rural church steeples, cornfields and telephone poles, trees and other objects, causing a formal consideration of natural and manmade objects— their juxtaposition in space. They also introduce the geometric relationship between two-and three-dimensional space without any illusionary aspect of Renaissance perspective. Turning our senses upside down, Saxe employs a new set of perceptual devices resulting in a triangulation of positioning in our minds. But, these are no cheap tricks. Throughout his career, he has been pushing space to new limits.
I first saw artworks by Henry Saxe in a group exhibition, *London, Toronto, Montreal, Boucherville*, at the National Gallery of Canada in 1973. Viewing his work, I felt I was entering a space where a work was in progress: a precarious stepladder, a coil of rope, pieces of steel were scattered about the gallery. Then, I began constructing relationships of objects in my mind. I pictured the artist in his studio, drawing seemingly disparate objects together and, like an alchemist, making them change their nature—making them engage in a mysterious dance of odds meeting ends.

This work was one of the earliest installation pieces ever constructed in North America. With the distribution of objects within their allotted space, the entire work took on an environmental sense of a whole. The enclosed space itself became an integral aspect of the work, and the viewer entered within this delineated space. It was a bit like a modest modern-day Stonehenge. At this juncture I began to understand that what makes art intriguing is not what is easily revealed, but the question marks that remain. It’s somewhat like the difference between a one-night stand and a long-term affair. You have to work to retain the relationship; and, memories in the future may eventually come to mean more than the physical presence of the past.

In *What is Literature*, Jean-Paul Sartre wrote of the act of reading as directed creation. That is, the reader was steered toward constructing relationships and establishing meaning. Further, Sartre (although he was an atheist) spoke of how when we view a landscape, we may assume that someone has preceded us, positioning this tree and that rock in an overall pattern—forming some seemingly rational view of randomness. For our part, we often presume that order and rational thought are a desirable human trait; yet, such limitations impose a stillness on creative acts born from imbalance—the very act of critiquing life itself. Such strictures are also cultural assumptions: the way in the West we view things in the directional thrust of our reading, from left to right; whereas in many Eastern civilizations, the verticality of texts promotes a right-angle tangential reading (or vice versa) of space. The rational design of formal French gardens is at complete variance with the English concept of the garden as a replication of nature. Remarkably, Saxe’s work tends to bend these physical habits
of reading and cultural constraints into a new realm of discovery. Echoing Sartre, Pico Iyer wrote in
\textit{Why We Travel}:

\begin{quote}
Both of them (Thoreau and Emerson) insist on the fact that reality is our creation, and that we invent the places we see as much as we do the books that we read. What we find outside ourselves has to be inside ourselves for us to find it.
\end{quote}

In a 1976 exhibition at the Owens Art Gallery at Mount Allison University, one sculpture, \textit{Sight-Site}, included a roof-like steel frame supported on pieces of concrete and wood. The piece obviously enclosed space within its site, but it also made reference to the larger world within its sights. It had once stood in Saxe’s field at his home in Tamworth, Ontario. This piece reminded me of when I was a child how I would establish compositions between that tree, fence and cloud. In a car, I would pretend that a speck on the windshield was a gun sight, and I would align it with various targets. So it is with our world, from our senses, from our cultural readings, we attempt to construct, to build meaning, from our surroundings: a concoction of perception and imagination.

From the expansiveness of these earlier works, from 1978 to 1980 Saxe constructed much more self-referential compositions in his \textit{Instrument Series}. These large steel plate pieces consisted of stacked plates and structural beams. They continued to develop triangular relationships and explored the intersections of one plane with another. Their very weight also introduced the sculptural notion of mass and balance. Perhaps most importantly, they revealed Henry’s interest in surfaces, in the relationship between planes in space. Instinctively, he had entered the realm of Topology, the study of surfaces.

A series of sectional drawings from 1980 entitled the \textit{Klein Bottles}, solidified his interest. The Klein Bottle is a three-dimensional extension of the Möbius Strip—though in a sense, neither the Bottle nor the Strip could be said to embrace any traditional notion of relative dimensions. They are essentially one-sided surfaces, turning in upon themselves. These concepts extend perceptions of space and suggest ideas of time and space as being cyclical, bending physically, and twisting imaginatively. One is propelled into another complex dimension and almost lost in space. This open-ended mindset can be discomfoting; and, it’s why in \textit{The Poetics of Space}, Gaston Bachelard refers to the corner as the ultimate enclosure of comfort, but also the dead end.
Saxe went from the comfortable enclosures and intersections of the *Instrument Series* to his *Spheres*, with constructions turning back into and upon each other creating an elusive space—always evading the capture of the corner. Like a longing for order, there is a human tendency to think in a linear manner. Geometrical shapes are easier to conceive than organic twists and turns. Henry divorced himself from simplistic or singular solutions to complex problems. In his work, each piece began to introduce a new set of problems, with a multiplicity of solutions.

In the early 1980s Henry also produced a series of drawing/collages that incorporated pieces of wood, appropriated construction plans and strong directional, sectional drawings of planes and space—a meeting of both the analytical and the instinctual minds. His vision was not unlike Cézanne’s belief that all nature could be captured in three basic geometrical constructions: the cube, the cone, and the sphere. As if working through a series of mathematical puzzles, trying to arrive at a structure of coalescence, Saxe eventually selected the sphere as his sculptural archetype.

On a table in his studio, Henry has a couple of small models he is using to work out the complex layers of a composition for some new spheres. He confesses that he is having trouble puzzling through various permutations. Usually he works from an intuitive stance, trying to perceive the work in his mind’s eye combined with the give and take, and trial and error, of the physical act of building.

Saxe’s *Spheres* initially appear to be fairly simple constructs. Upon closer inspection, however, they become increasingly complex. One of the basic tenets of sculpture is the relationship between the container and the thing contained. In these works there is a constant shifting between what is contained by what. While we are observing the exterior surface of components, we are also led into the interior dimensions. Within these works there is a tension between the enclosure of the whole structure and the relative liberty of the individual components. Akin to the Möbius Strip and the Klein Bottle, there is a flux, a process of mental disconnections and reconnections between the interior and exterior surfaces. Trying to get our head around the work, to see the nature of the beast, we are placed into an imaginative process of both trying to trace the assemblage process and

Blue Sphere, 2002, 30 x 40 x 25 inches

Blue Sphere, 2002, 30 x 40 x 25 inches

Blue Sphere, 2002, 30 x 40 x 25 inches
to deconstruct the various shapes into separate phrases in a complex sentence— parsing the verb. So, in the mathematical sense, these are not simple solutions, they are elegant challenges.

Within the Klein Bottle, the inner surface is also the outer surface— one folded into the other. There is a similar warping of space. The inside negative spaces are simultaneously delineated and displaced by the vortex of eccentrically shaped rings, building presence from absence. On an immense scale, these structures could be considered having some of the characteristics of the rings and moons of Saturn: a gravitational force field determining their paths. On a microscopic level, they are akin to the nuclear structure of an atom. The truth, if it may be so called within the realm of an imaginative act, exists somewhere between these two models. The Spheres deviate in that there are no graceful ellipses. There is anarchy of shapes: tubes becoming flat curves, increasing and decreasing the radius of their turns. They abandon any notion of rational geometric structure to become a cat’s cradle of twists and turns, snaking around a global sense of center. The rings interlock and shift, not unlike a puzzle.

If you throw a rock into a quiet pond, it produces concentric circles of waves. If two rocks of differing sizes are thrown at the same time, the two sets of circles vary in size, and, where their expanding waves intersect, a totally new pattern is born. If three rocks of dissimilar size are tossed in the pond, the patterns begin to become more complex: at times amplifying, complementing each other, in apparent harmony, and at times dissonantly negating each other— not unlike a composition by John Cage. All of this action and interaction essentially moves over a two-dimensional surface. So, if a third dimension is introduced, the wave patterns slip over a waterfall, turning in upon themselves and disappearing into a new schema too complicated to read, perhaps even to imagine. Of course, this new configuration can only be sensed in an instant, as the fourth dimension of time has come into play. Yet, it is the very effort, a powerful directing of imagination that propels a deeper understanding of Saxe’s spheres. Discerning patterns in life is, at best, the pursuit of an elusive quarry often cloaked in assumptions and the anxieties of disorder.
Almost like asking us to throw rocks, Saxe invites the participant to engage in a tactile and somewhat perverse act of hurling his spheres so that, in landing, they assume an entirely new configuration, a new character, not unlike going over a waterfall and reemerging. The participant is involved both in the visceral physical act of randomly rearranging the work and in the construction of a new meaning from a visual perception. This situation is obviously contrary to the concept of art as a precious and permanent object (this is the perverse act). The work is destroyed and recreated; yet, the memory of many of the possible permutations may remain just as a new construct erases their former physical identity. Like a great mathematician looking at a topological problem or an advanced astronomer peering into the universe, I believe that Henry sees many, many things, and, that only a small quantity of his perceptions is visible to us. In the midst of our relative blindness, his is a generous act, privileging us with an invitation to become an active participant.

In 1978, in his catalogue for the Venice Biennial, Henry spoke of how he wanted his art to work:

*Drawing on one plane does not look at perspective, whereas if the eye adjusts at different heights, different angles, different lighting conditions, it’s totally different. I just hope that where lines converge and cross over each other, different things will happen from different positions…*

Light emphasizes the worked surfaces of aluminum: burnished, scratched, cut, wielded, the material alternately reflects and absorbs light. Differing viewing angles vary the effects, striving toward one of Saxe’s desired effects. The *Steles* are the best example of this play of light: harnessing a kinetic effect where, as our position changes, so does the artwork. Even these more or less two-dimensional pieces are not meant to be viewed just from a perpendicular angle. One is supposed to traverse the work, seeing patterns appear and disappear, fading in and fading out. Clearly none of Saxe’s artworks are capable of movement under their own power; yet, again, our directed viewing and participation bestows an almost kinetic nature on these pieces.
The surfaces of the Steles have a David Smith painterliness to them, but Saxe then proceeds to draw on the plate with a grinder, or, into and completely through the surface with a torch. This is a reversal of the ordinary method of drawing: instead of the line remaining on the surface of the plane, the delineation is a result of the negative removal from the plane. Consequently, the interplay between positive and negative space is the polar opposite of the norm: a play between negative presence and positive absence. These compositions become concerned as much with what there is as with what there is not. The drawing style is almost that of an early Kandinsky: abstract, almost informal graffiti that also addresses more formal issues. There is an emergence of organic shapes, the shifting of riverweeds that is emphasized by the implication that the negative lines actually lie beneath, beyond a shimmering surface.

A sense of play is embodied in much of today’s art. Saxe is not averse to employing humorous motifs. As in the early use of a stepladder, he sometimes still incorporates found objects into his oeuvre. His pots and pans are unlike most of his other work in that many of their funky forms are figurative in that they are portraits. Some works combine whimsical Ying/Yang positive/negative semi-spherical shapes. Formally, these pieces are interesting in their high relief from wall mounted works. More recently, the Cable pieces present an elegant combination of drawing on plate with the added dimensionality of cables protruding from or entering into the composition. This juxtaposition of two-and three-dimensional parts emphasizes the drawing on the plates, and the cables introduce the element of shadows. Like the Spheres, these works are involved in the reflection and absorption of light, and they cast shadows: another elusive dimension.

Lodge I also incorporates found objects. It is a large assemblage and collage/drawing with moose antlers placed at the top. The shadows of the antlers play across the surface of the collaged area lying below. Lodge II turns the earlier piece on its head, with moose antler shapes worked into the sphere on the ground and two large drawings installed above the sculptural component. These works recall the absurdity of the Dadaists. It is a powerful example of how, over the years, Saxe has managed to combine an almost formalist background with a more humanist position: a place that allows him to incorporate his surroundings as part of his art vernacular. Happily, neither sensibility suffers: they co-exist in a complementary realm.
More recently, Henry started gathering sticks that had been chewed by beavers. In a series of pieces, he included several sticks and miscellaneous objects into collage/assemblage constructions. Again, this was yet another example of combining natural elements into a formal framework. The drawing on these pieces was done with charcoal on very thick paper, which is also etched. Not unlike the Steles, the carved, incised, lines hint at a suspicion of an underlying dimension.

About four decades ago, while most artists were flocking to major cities, Henry moved from Montreal to the countryside of Tamworth. He has made it work: beginning with a small trailer and a large dog. From day one, he was part of his new community. He shared experiences of fishing and playing hockey with a passion more enduring than debating academic art theories in Montreal. Henry's own choice of lifestyles demonstrates his interest in being connected with the countryside—in constructing meaning. He now has a few cows. I saw him gaze with wonder at a newborn calf. He had an empty field with nothing particularly interesting in it. Now, it's his own personal gallery: his field makes sense.

Unlike the clear relationship between cows and a field, as mentioned repeatedly, Henry's work often combines apparently disparate and challenging juxtapositions. It continues to raise question marks in my mind. Like trying to unravel a magician's puzzle, I can never totally comprehend a solution. Alexander, with his sword, had a means of dealing with the Gordian Knot; but, it is much better to realize that often, as in life, beauty lives in the multiplicity of change and not in a singular solution.
There is wisdom in turning as often as possible from the familiar to the unfamiliar; it keeps the mind nimble; it kills prejudice, and it fosters humour.

- Santayana
Modern Times, 2005, 30 x 30 x 30 inches, variable
Counterweight, 2004, 32 x 38 x 30 inches, variable
Stele, 2003, 268 x 32 x 14 inches
Loops, 2007, 72 x 12 x 10 inches
Loops, 2007, 72 x 36 x 14 inches
The River, 2002, 72 x 30 x 12 inches each
Installation, Freedman Gallery
Lids for Richter, 2006, 48 x 12 x 10 inches; Wearever, 2006, 48 x 28 x 10 inches; Campin Out, 2006, 48 x 16 x 8 inches
Lodge II, 2000, 84 x 84 x 40 inches
Lodge I, 2000, 72 x 100 x 16 inches
Lodge III, 2006, 3 x 42 x 2 inches
About the Artist

Henry Saxe is a Canadian artist of an international repute. He represented Canada at the 1978 Venice Biennale; and his work is represented in virtually all the major public museum and gallery collections in Canada. As well as having artworks in many important private collections in Canada, his work may also be found in the prestigious Christian Keesee Collection in the United States. Aside from the Biennale, Saxe has had major exhibitions in private and public galleries in Canada and the United States, including an important solo exhibition in 1994 at Montreal’s Musee d’Art Contemporaine. He has been the recipient of numerous grants, prizes and awards. In 1989, he received the distinguished Order of Canada from the Queen’s representative, the Governor General of Canada. In 1995, the Province of Quebec awarded him the prestigious Paul-Emile Borduas prize.

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