The Second Element

Traditionally, sculpture enters space; it rises up into it or stretches out, through it and across. Bill Scott's recent work in wood places sculpture in air, in the midst of the second element.

When a tree is cut down, that is to say when it is turned down from being *in the air* to lying *on the earth,* the water, which has always been present in the wood, suddenly becomes a problem; as the wood dries out it can crack and break, uncontrollably. The tree, or the large block of wood cut from the tree, must be split open in order to allow it to dry out, to allow the air to get in at the wood. Scott exploits the necessity of this in his work for both its technical and sculptural imperatives.

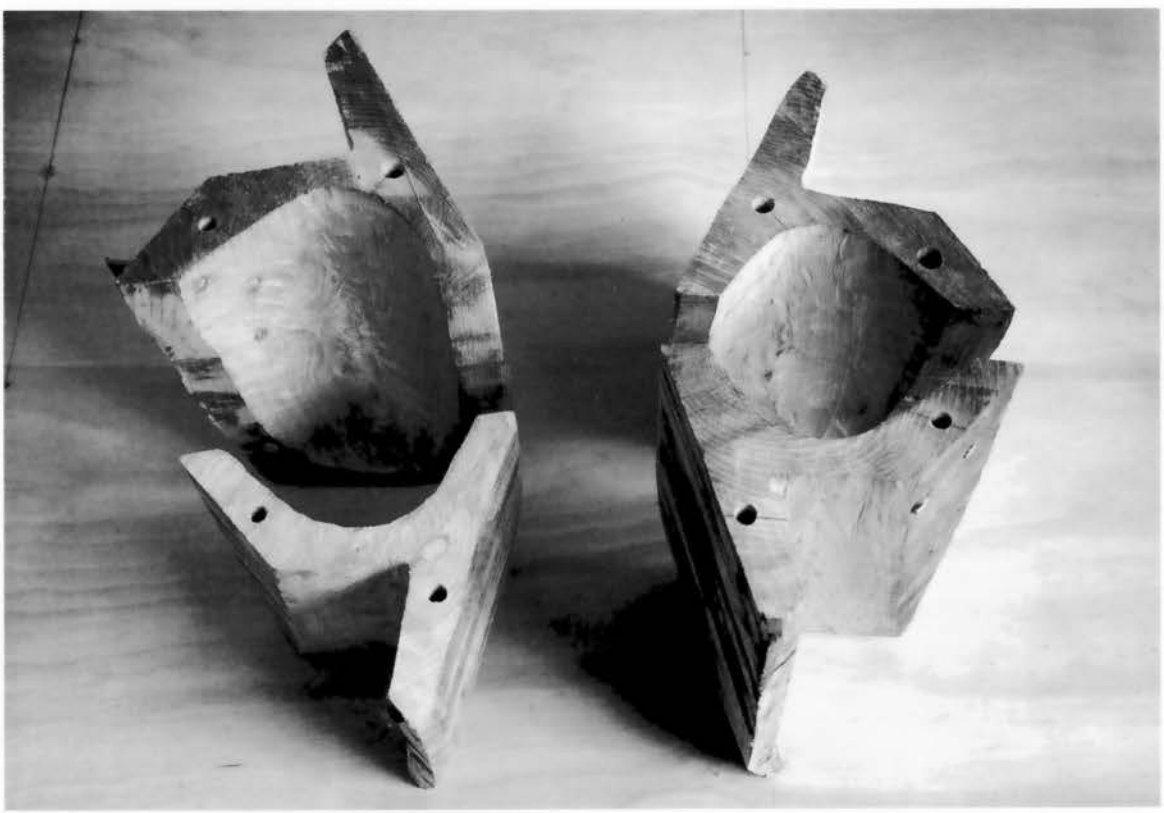
In recent years the artist has preferred to use newly felled timber, which is, of course, especially liable to cracking. He selects a section of the tree, cuts it in half and takes the heartwood out of it quickly with a chain saw. The air circulates and the wood is able to stabilise. As the wood is allowed to breathe, so it is allowed to stand. The two are intimately related; inspiration is recognised as independence. The work's life in the air has to do with its presence before us.

To ensure the stability of the wood, to sustain it in its natural element, is to observe practicalities; it is a business-like practice. The practical produces its own kind of logic. The potential that exists within the symmetry of the divided tree is seized upon. Each half is halved again and then cut further using the same tool. The parts are turned against each other, returned to each other again, and fitted together with wooden doweling pins. In this they perhaps regain something of their original distribution in space, but they have, at the same time, become assembled components in the manner of the more familiar products of the carpenter's workshop. They establish their affinities with everyday objects. Division and assemblage, lightness and strength all have their place and their meaning.

The sculptural form arrived at derives from the same practical logic. Form comes out of the need to stabilise the material. Scale and form come from the chosen tool, its size, capabilities and limitations and the manner of its operation. The tool, which is the outward gesture or sign of the working method, is central to each aspect of the work. The choiceness of the bandsaw's cut or the insistence of the chainsaw's rhythm governs surface qualities, texture and even the very colour of the wood; nothing is hidden. Working with wood in this way has to do with getting something done. Meaning springs precisely from what has been done, from what has been decided upon. Meaning, here, is not a *concern.* Meaning is, always, what is going on.

The work testifies to the strength and immediacy of this kind of thinking, the intensity of practical and formal considerations. There is an inevitability about it all. The form seems to have been determined from the beginning, almost from the point when the tree was cut down. The intellectual and three-dimensional progression begins with the tree, with the wet wood.

As the blocks of wood are hollowed out and cut away they become lighter; they enter the air in a sympathetic way. This is part of their meaning. The lighter form has a different relationship to the floor or the plinth on which it stands. Scott constructs plinths which allow air to pass through. The plinth lifts the work into the air, rather than simply acting as a support for it. Each work is raised to the point at which the density of the surrounding air is appropriate to its needs.



Hollowed Units, 1994, 41 x 50 x 40cm, wood

Scott has conceived the present exhibition as an complex installation. Placed between the more solid, carved pieces of sculpture are simple, rigid, open forms resembling pylons, drilling rigs, frames or screens. These are sculptures that have a second function. They control and organise the space of the gallery on behalf of the other works. They *attend to* the smaller pieces. They *mediate*. Their openness and their structure allows them to hold a stillness within the very air of the gallery space which becomes fraught with tension. This permits the more exacting *presence-in-air* that the smaller, more solid forms achieve, to become apparent. The larger, open works thin out the space, allowing a thickness in the air around the denser forms. These forms are then able to breath. The space is thus attuned to the presence and the demands of the carved sculptures.

Pinning parts of sculptures together means drilling holes into the wood, a simple technique which the artist has chosen to employ extensively. Rows or grids of holes puncture the surface of many sculptures revealing that the forms are, of necessity, hollow. The public and private faces of the work are linked to each other, bound together, by points of darkness which are also points of visual weight. The relationship between the exposed and the hidden, between the known and the unknown, turns upon absence, upon a void. These empty spaces, these *lacunæ* in the form, are blackness filled with air and thus take on a special function here. Air is both inside and outside the sculpture; it passes through the wood. Air completes the work. The sculpture is poised there in it. The sculpture is *cast* in the air.

The quality of the physical presence of a sculptor's work is a 'signature' which remains largely unchanged throughout the artist's life. It is one of the characteristics of a sculptor's *œuvre.* For Scott one of the problems for the sculptor, especially for the sculptor who wishes to work figuratively or with figurative elements, is that the projection of form into space, which is inevitable, leads automatically to the promotional. This aspect is not simply a question of the relationship between the work and the space in which it stands, but of the mass, solidity, weight and physical presence of sculptural forms. The gulf between spectator and work is inherent in the physical nature of the work itself; the work exists to be looked up to; this is a function of its tenure of space. This is at odds with the sense, signs and significance that Scott is looking for.

A pierced sculpture, hollowed out, lightened out of necessity and then lightly pinned together, has a completely different physical presence from that of the sculpture of the seamless mass. The surface tension is different. The cracks that appeared in a number of these works during the course of their completion do not affect the meaning of the work, rather they affect the nature of this surface tension. The cracks serve to reinforce the specific quality of surface that Scott wishes to achieve. It is this surface, and its interaction with the surrounding space, which determines our own relationship to the work.

Most sculpture appears to the spectator as clothed and thus always at a distance. Sculpture normally has a skin which manages, and indeed contrives, to separate the viewer from the sculpture. The skin literally puts the viewer off. It is the skin which ensures the sculpture's very objecthood and independence. In this, the skin establishes much of the work's meaning, especially that which comes from the relationship the work establishes between itself and other objects. The skin is the membrane on which our relationship to the work, and the work's relationship to the world, is inscribed. In Scott's recent work this skin, this barrier, is simply not present. The feeling is that it has been torn off and discarded. The skin of other sculptures is shown to be irrelevant. The joining of discrete pieces of wood to form larger works and the piercing, the punctuating, of these forms, produces a *flayed* sculpture, markedly different in its surface from the rigid, immobile sheen of other artists' works. A flayed sculpture cannot even be called naked; it must always be, at one and the same time, both something more and something less than that; it is sculpture in the raw. A flayed form manages to establish another kind of presence, another kind of being in the world. The difference lies in how the surface stands in relation to the surrounding

Intake, 1994, 48 x 58 x 22cm., wood

space and to the spectator. In Scott's work something else has been established; it is an *œuvre* in which the presence of any one sculpture has been developed as a highly personal signature. This is a presence that forces us to understand space as being flooded through with air. The newfound surface allows the work to vibrate, to shimmer, in its element.

Scott's work has a presence which does not seek to command space, but rather to determine a quality of space, to dress itself in that space as air. This is both assertive and discreet, for the work occupies space in the same way that we ourselves do. Through the work the space has become, in Leibniz's phrase, 'the order of coexistences.' We are simultaneous with the work. The work enters into the air, it is in our element. We gaze, it breathes with us. We look to it. It is our own selves that we hear, breathing.

Owen Griffith