

1985

## Jene Highstein: Shapes in the Stream

Donald Bartlett Doe

*Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, University of Nebraska- Lincoln*

George W. Neubert

*Director at Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, University of Nebraska- Lincoln*

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# RESOURCE AND RESPONSE

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## SHELDON MEMORIAL ART GALLERY

**T**his exhibition of Jene Highstein's sculpture initiates a series of exhibitions entitled the *Resource Series*. This series is a two-fold exhibition program, the first is: *Resource and Response* which will be a series of small scaled exhibitions in response to current issues and ideas of contemporary American art and artists. These *Response* exhibitions are to be far ranging in subject and content, but will reflect a regional component. The second part of the *Resource Series* is entitled *Resource and Reservoir* and these exhibitions will be drawn from the Sheldon Gallery's important permanent collection and will focus on subjects and themes in American art.

Each of the exhibitions in the *Resource Series* will be complemented by a published brochure not only to serve as an interpretive guide for the public, but also to help document the content and scope of the Gallery's permanent collection.

This *Resource and Response* exhibition of Jene Highstein was organized in response to his recent selection (for National Endowment for the Arts: Art in Public Places Grant) by the City of Lincoln Mayor's Sculpture Committee,\* to be commissioned to create a public sculpture for downtown Lincoln (adjacent to Old City Hall).

Highstein, who resides in New York City, has until recently received more exposure

and support of his sculpture in Europe. He is one of the few selected American sculptors included in the current inaugural exhibition of *International Survey of Recent Painting and Sculpture* for the Museum of Modern Arts' opening of the new west wing. Highsteins' sculpture/work is founded in the modern tradition but with a seemingly avant-garde detachment which at first is difficult to comprehend. But on its simplest terms, may be viewed as a ceremonial marking, akin to the Stonehenge formation.

I am confident that the selection and commissioning of Jene Highstein's sculpture for the NEA's Art in Public Places will serve as an important humanizing element to the redevelopment and revitalizing of downtown Lincoln.

As the City of Lincoln will soon be unveiling an important monumental work by this American sculptor, it seemed appropriate that the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery bring together a selected group of examples of the artist's work as an introduction to our community and also to bring a deeper understanding of the artist and his oeuvre.

George W. Neubert  
Director

\*City of Lincoln, Mayor's Sculpture Committee: Mayor R. Luedtke, Jack Campbell, Dale Gibbs, Mike Seacrest, JoAnn Kimball, Art Thompson, Norman Geske.

**Born in Baltimore, 1942; Studied at University of Maryland, Philosophy (B.A., 1963); University of Chicago, Postgraduate Study Philosophy (1963-65); New York Studio School part-time study (1966); Royal Academy Schools, London, Post Graduate Diploma (1970); Lives in New York**



JENE HIGHSTEIN

**Black mound for Suzi,**

# Jene Highstein: SHAPES IN THE STREAM

“...a pure spirit grows beneath the surface of stones.”

Gérard de Nerval

In black concrete or cast iron or torch-carved steel or (most recently) Pennsylvania granite, Jene Highstein's sculpture approximates the shapes of projectiles or cones or boulders. "Nobody else," one critic observed, "makes anything really like his rounded, heavy shapes.... They are hardly organic, and hardly geological, but both at once. All the pieces are 'life-sized' but not 'lifelike'. Nothing moves, vibrates, or grows."<sup>1</sup>

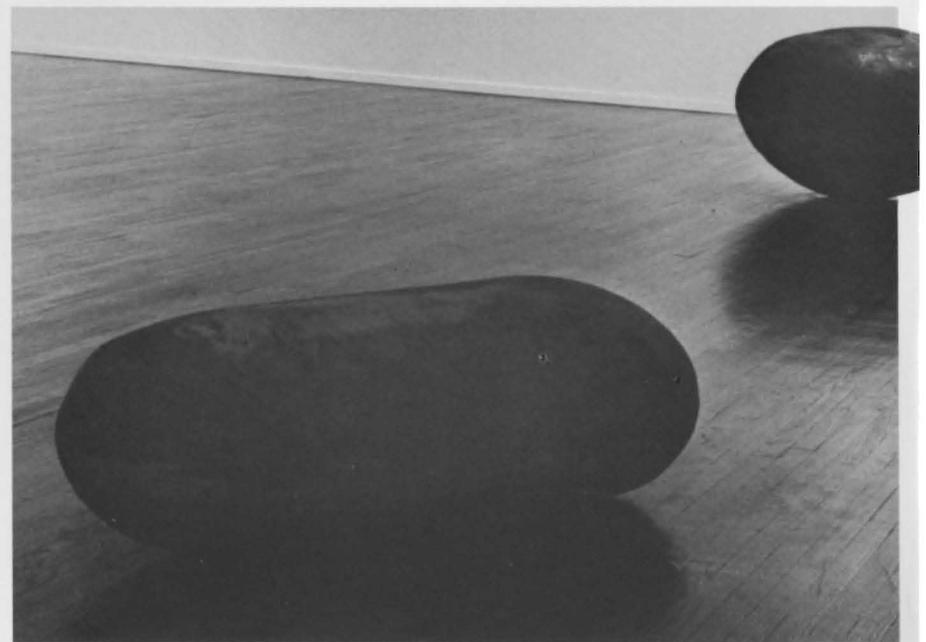
As uniquely his own as his more recent works are, Highstein's earliest efforts as a sculptor were anchored in the confluence of Earth Works, Conceptual Art, and Minimalism. *Water Image*, an outdoor piece executed in 1969, involved only a fishnet, 40' x 3', spread out over a field. *Negative-Positive Cast of a Hole*, done the next year, was somewhat more complex. The artist excavated a triangular hole, four and one-half feet on each side, and filled it with red plaster. When set, this was lifted out and set near the hole, one side carefully parallel to one edge of the excavation.

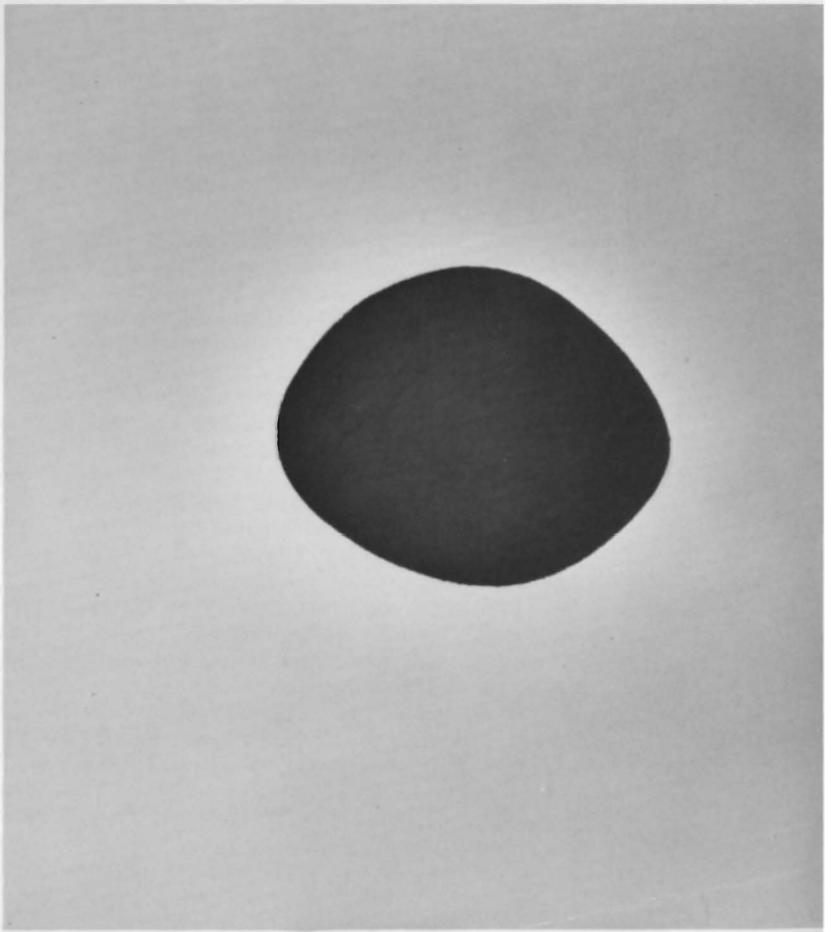
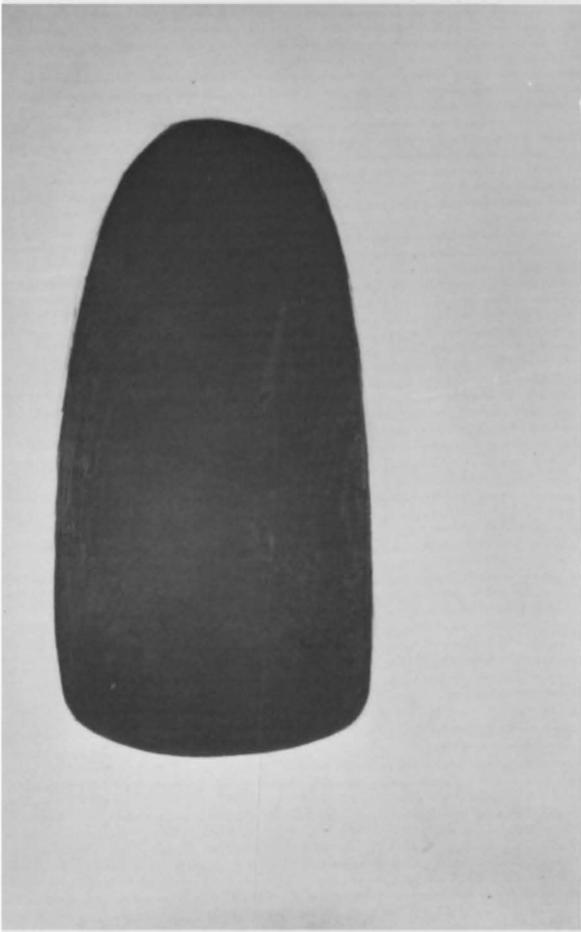
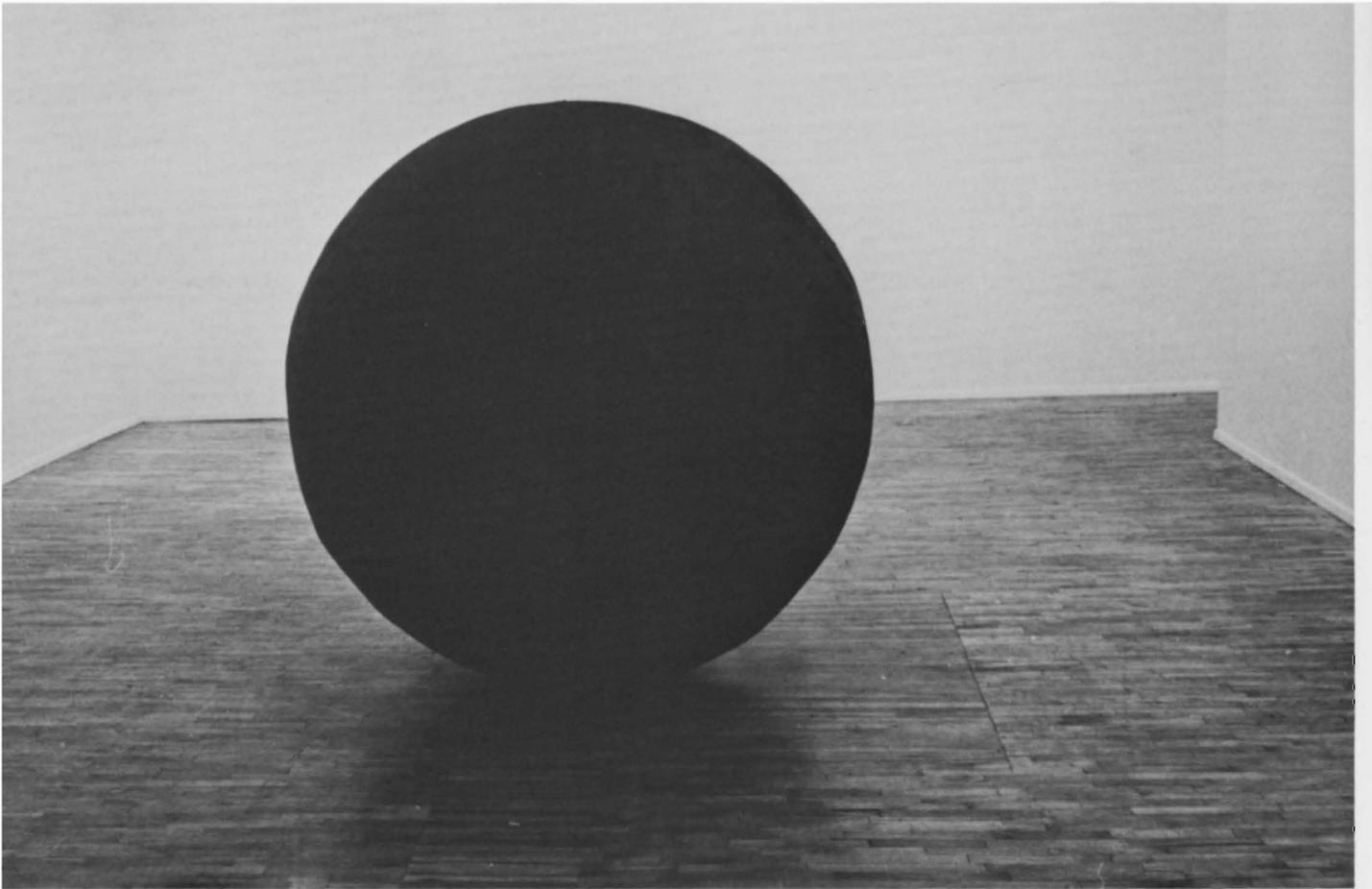
Ephemeral and closely tied to *Art Povera*—a movement which insisted upon the use of impoverished materials like dirt and grass—these works still offered a more tangible shape for ideas than did much of the work being done around 1970. In that year, many artists were ready to applaud Robert Rauschenberg's statement: "The Establishment is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake."<sup>2</sup> For social and political as well as aesthetic reasons, there was a widespread concern with *how* one perceived as well as *what* one perceived. Often, this meant that the "art object" was no more than a report on the artist's activities.

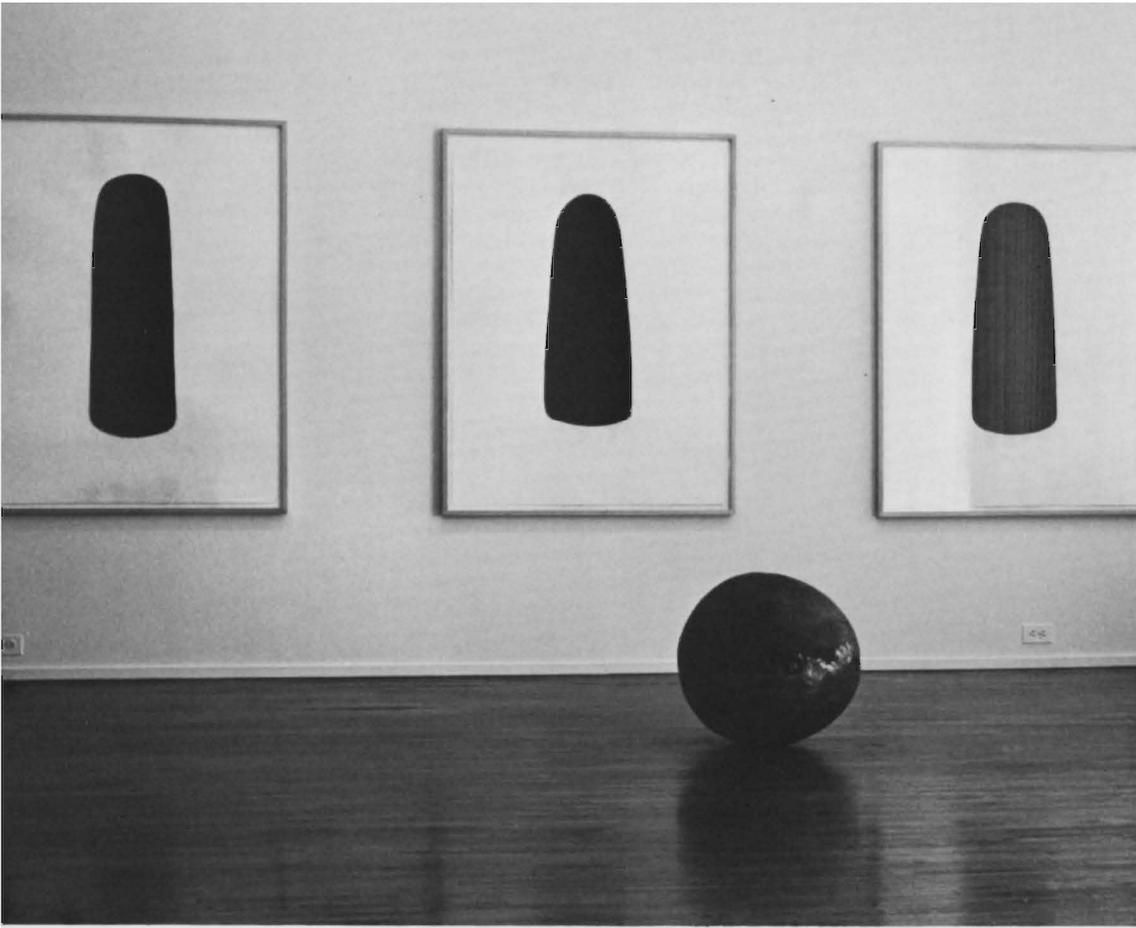
In Highstein's work (he was then actually a student at the Royal Academy in London), wit and irony were allowed a more physical presence. *Water Image*, the title tells us, is a fish(net) out of water. *Negative-Positive* compresses the additive and subtractive processes of traditional sculpture into a single work, a work destined to erode back into (or be subtracted toward) the ground from which it was made.

Returning to New York, Highstein rented studio space in a decaying industrial neighborhood near Coney Island. At this site, which he called the Condemnation Blight Sculpture Workshop, he installed several works which he made available for public viewing during the fall of 1973. Made with cast-off materials, these works continued the artist's connection with *Art Povera*, but were mainly concerned with giving shape not to wit but to space.

*continued on page 5*







CLOCKWISE  
FROM TOP LEFT:  
*Eye-I,*  
*Black Sphere,*  
3 drawings and  
iron casting  
3 iron castings,  
Pastel and chalk  
on paper,  
Pastel and chalk  
on paper,  
2 castings: *Boulder*  
and *Lozenge,*  
3 iron castings



One untitled outdoor piece, for instance, was made with the creosoted pine of old telephone poles. Cut lengthwise, three poles were set upright in the ground — near an extravagantly polluted canal — so that the poles described the points of a triangle. The poles were adjusted so that the rounded sides faced away from the center of the triangle, the flat sides faced the calculated center. So arranged, the poles served to outline a volume, creating the sense of a contained, triangulated column of space in what was actually open air.

At two alternate spaces in Soho, at 10 Bleeker and 112 Greene Streets, Highstein continued works which gave shape to space. Like the telephone pole piece, these too were executed with an economy of means. In one effort at 112 Greene Street, for example, the sculptor placed two curved plates of rusted steel at a considerable distance from one another, the convex surfaces facing each other. He then bridged the distance between the convex curves with a single thin beam. At once, this work is Minimalist in character — two elements rising from the floor and a third unadorned element linking the two and describing a rectangle — and at the same time generating the sense of a “slab” of space contained within it.

This period of the young sculptor's career, it is generally felt, culminated in a work which employed two 16" diameter pipes which spanned the width of the generally run-down, once-industrial space of 112 Greene. The black seamless pipes were placed intuitively; the one nearest the building's entrance at a height of 8'8" from the floor, the one rather near the rear of the enormous space at a height of 6'4". These differing heights exaggerated or compressed the viewer's perspectival grasp of the interior space and, as Carter Ratcliff noted, transformed the viewer's experience of the otherwise empty room: "...the division of space into upper and lower sections is a highly charged, overlapping one that changes constantly as one moves about. Finally the division is overcome however; while the visitor must remain, physically at least, in the realm of the lower pipe, the eye learns to inhabit and ultimately to unify the entire cavernous space."<sup>3</sup>

With the 112 Greene Street installation, Highstein found himself focusing on the shape of the pipes he had employed.

What interested me about the pipes was the curve of them, the fact that you couldn't see the other side. I wanted to make something that was curved and I thought of making a sphere. I worked on it a long time and found the dimension of the sphere and from then on it was just a practical problem to make it.<sup>4</sup>

It is reported that the making was not easy. Finally, however, Highstein constructed an armature of wire supported by steel beams.

Over the wire, the sculptor spread a veneer of black concrete, producing an object slightly more than six feet in diameter with a rough, hand-worked surface. Installed in the Holly Solomon Gallery, *The Black Sphere*, 1975-76, seemed, at least to one critic, to continue the sculptor's concern with spatial issues:

As it sits alone in the middle of the gallery space, it of course contrasts itself with the enclosing rectilinearity...the dull black concrete surface of the piece has a particularizing regularity which makes a strong contrast to the decorously clarified finish of the gallery's interior.<sup>5</sup>

Since 1976, certain aspects of Highstein's work have continued their link with minimalism. The shapes he has explored are as simple and unified as *Black Sphere*. The gallery and outdoor installations have continued the Minimalist concern with the notion of gestalt: an emphasis on the viewer's perception and response to single, unified shapes and the impact those shapes have upon their environment or setting.

In another view, however, Highstein was never purely a Minimalist. The making of his work is far removed from the Minimalist policies of industrial fabrication and precise geometry. Works such as *Turtle*, a huge, ovoid berm of concrete over a wood and wire armature installed at the Galleria Salvatore Ala in Milan in 1976, or another *Turtle*, exactly a ton of iron cast in a similar shape and shown in New York, or works such as *Bullet*, or *Boulder*, or any number of untitled pieces from the late 1970's and early 1980's, have about them phallic qualities or the shapes of rocks in streams. These pieces are, in the sculptor's words, "attempts to capture the feeling of solidity, of solidly planted mass, for an indoor situation."<sup>6</sup> Whether roughly finished and intended for interior spaces (like *Boulder*) or smoothly polished and set outdoors to glisten in the Florida sun (like *Bluefish*), they convey a planted stability, like weather-finished rock, half-buried in a meadow. In such works, as Marjorie Welish has noted, "Highstein insists on sculpture's geomorphic metaphor by adapting the weight, stability and inertia of stone, even while continuing to work in cast metal."<sup>7</sup>

Very recently, Highstein has actually chosen stone as his material. In the projected work for the City of Lincoln, Nebraska, the sculptor is shaping two quarried blocks of granite, one slightly more than nine feet in height, one reaching approximately eye level. The former will be quite slender, the latter a low, fat shape derived from an original block eight feet wide, six feet thick and five feet high.

Destined for a small grassy park next to the rusticated stone of Lincoln's old City Hall (the park is actually being designed to accommodate the sculpture), Highstein's granite will echo the roughly hewn quality of the architectural facade. Intuitively placed, the work will not be another structure in an urban setting, but will structure the space of its greened environment.

## CHECKLIST

### Sculptures

1. **Untitled, 1980**  
solid iron casting  
24½" x 30" x 32½"  
Lent by Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Chicago
  2. **Large Lozenge, 1980**  
solid iron casting  
15" x 43" x 17"  
Lent by Paul and Camille Oliver-Hoffman, Chicago.  
Courtesy, Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Chicago.
  3. **Boulder, 1980**  
solid iron casting  
20" x 32" x 23"  
Lent by the artist
- ### DRAWINGS (Lent by the artist)
4. **Untitled**  
pastel  
50" x 38"
  5. **Untitled**  
pastel and chalk  
50" x 38"
  6. **Untitled**  
pastel  
38" x 50"

This structured—or re-constituted—space links the Lincoln piece with the sculptor's most significant early work at 112 Greene St. and, more generally, with the minimalist's concern with gestalt. At the same time, however, the minimalist's usual refusal of mystery and allegory is, hereby, disregarded.

Set without any visible base on a groomed lawn, Highstein's rounded shapes will be installed adjacent to a downtown intersection busy with commuter traffic and semitrailers. In this context, encounter with the work promises to be astonishing. Massive, enormously heavy, these blocks of glittering black granite will inescapably bear a relation to the cromlechs of Brittany, the dolmens of Stonehenge. Quite apart from their formal transformation of city space, they will ineluctably offer a mythic quality too, suggesting an ancient site for burial or ritual, a gathering place for wandering tribes of the prehistoric Great Plains. Thus, in their most general impact, these carefully selected and sited stones can be expected to sharpen the viewer's sense of space and compress time and continuity. These aspects of Highstein's work can eliminate a peril: Do these stones only imitate or reiterate the "weight, stability and inertia of stone?"

The granite, after all, is in no sense traditionally carved but "interfered with." The stones will approximate a kind of preserved natural event: the accident of a glacial deposit perhaps. (In any case, does one question the presence of boulders obviously very difficult to move?) In a fashion, in other words, the work could simply seem to be a pair of stones: Given their intended dramatic placement, they may not necessarily engender the question, "Is it art?" They may pose, however, a variation: "Is it art yet?"

These questions have been raised often in the history of 20th century art, only most notably by Marcel Duchamp and Carl André. They summon the famous remark by Robert Rauschenberg, "I want to make art in the gap between art and life."

In that gap, in the zone between art objects and all other kinds of objects, many of our most important artists have chosen to work. This region of exploration appears to be what Wright Morris once referred to as "The Territory Ahead," the territory Huck Finn set out for because he was all too familiar with the restrictions and conventions of his Aunt Polly's world. Jene Highstein seems plainly to have pushed into that territory; his shapes lie in the stream of art because he has helped alter its course, allowing it to flow over the levee which once kept art separately channeled from the world of ordinary things. Welish asserts, "It is to his considerable credit that Highstein manages to make us see his art as sitting on the contemporary rim of a vast sculptural history."<sup>8</sup> The works themselves, rounded, stable, dense, nearly unmovable, are anchored in references to the natural world, to the human history of shaping stone, to the need to transform space and give it an intense specificity.

Donald Bartlett Doe

## JENE HIGHSTEIN

The artist was given his first solo exhibition at Lisson Gallery, London, in 1970. Other major one-person shows were held at Galleria Salvatore Ala, Milan, 1974; Galerie Rencontres, Paris, 1975; Holly Solomon Gallery, New York, 1976; Ugo Ferranti Gallery, Rome; Mollet-Vieville/Najar Gallery, Paris, 1978; Droll/Kolbert Gallery, New York; University Art Museum, Berkeley, 1979; Ace Gallery, Venice, California, 1981; Oscarsson Hood Gallery, New York; Young Hoffman Gallery, Chicago, 1982. He has also been included in over 100 group exhibitions. His work is found in the following permanent and renowned private collections: Victoria and Albert Museum, London; Holly and Horace Solomon; Count Panza di Biumo; Solomon Guggenheim Museum; Nathan Manilow Sculpture Garden, Governor State University, Illinois; University of Chicago; The Museum of Modern Art, New York; Dallas Art Museum; Chase Manhattan Bank; Prudential Insurance Company; Rose Museum, Brandeis University; Musée de la Ville de Paris; Bank of America; Grove Isle Sculpture Garden, Miami; Rijksmuseum Kroller-Muller, the Netherlands and the City of Lincoln, Nebraska.

## Footnotes

1. Ted Castle, "Jene Highstein: A Full Roundness," *Artforum*, Oct., 1979, p. 39
2. Robert Smithson, "The Establishment," *New Observations*, 1970, p. 38
3. Carter Ratcliff, "Form in the Active Mode," *Art in America*, July-August, 1974, p. 62
4. Castle, p. 40
5. Ratcliff, "New York Letter," *Art International*, April-May, 1976, p. 52
6. Conversation with the sculptor, August, 1984
7. Marjorie Welish, "Jene Highstein at Droll/Kolbert," (Exhibition review), *Art in America*, January, 1980, p. 112
8. Welish, p. 112

## Acknowledgements

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