Juan Hamilton: Selected Works

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Juan Hamilton: Selected Works 1972-1991
It seems particularly appropriate that the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln presents the exhibition *Juan Hamilton: Selected Works 1972-1991*. It is apparent that Hamilton's encounter with the reductive form of *Princess X*, 1916 by the 20th Century master sculptor, Constantin Brancusi, had a profound impact and influence on his own mature aesthetic. The Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, designed by Philip Johnson, has had on permanent display in the Great Hall this sculpture since its opening to the public in 1963. Though Juan Hamilton was cognizant (prior to his collegiate studies at Hastings College in Nebraska) of Brancusi's sculpture, it seems that the biomorphic and columnar fluidity of *Princess X* had a lasting influence on his own sculptural vocabulary. It was also here on the remote plains of the Nebraska prairie that Hamilton found the solitude to pursue the medium of ceramics--the vessel that became the central metaphor for his sculpture.

This exhibition, a selection of twenty-eight works dating from 1972 through 1991, traces Hamilton's sculptural development from his early, intimate, hand-built raku vessels to the large-scale, monolithic, cast bronze forms to his most recent wood carved sculptures. Hamilton's oeuvre reflects his lifelong pursuit of a universal vocabulary--a formal creation of presence. Committed to quality and the continuum of the modernist tradition, he creates highly refined organic shapes which seem to have been formed by the natural elements of time, wind and water. Reductionist simple, enigmatic and mysterious, Hamilton's sculpture provides a tranquil and meditative quality which evokes something pure and ideal.

George W. Neubert
Director
Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery
University of Nebraska-Lincoln
17. UNTITLED 1986, steel and fiberglass, black lacquer, 49 x 60 x 38 in.

11. FRAGMENT X-O, 1983-91, bronze, 80 x 114 1/4 x 29 in.
Juan Hamilton was born December 22, 1945, in Dallas, Texas. He lived in Colombia, Ecuador, and Venezuela from 1946 to 1960 where his father was a bilingual educational consultant. In 1960, he moved to New York City where he attended City College and New York University. He received his Bachelor's degree from Hastings College in Nebraska. From 1969 to 1970 Hamilton attended the MFA Program at Claremont Graduate School and studied under Henry Takemoto, Paul Soldner, and David Grey. Hamilton moved to Vermont in 1970 where he worked as an independent artist. In 1973 he began work as Georgia O'Keeffe's assistant. He supervised numerous publications and exhibitions of her work and that of Alfred Stieglitz. Hamilton's sculpture is represented in public collections such as the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, NY; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City, NY; and The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL.

ESSAY

Juan Hamilton's new work reveals changes in terms of formal vocabulary and technical sophistication that substantially extend his range as an artist. Because Hamilton is dedicated to quality and to the continuity of tradition, these changes have been evolutionary rather than revolutionary. Newness in his case is never novelty, but a gradual increase of skill and vision. Thus the current matte black bronze sculptures executed during the past two years differ from the preceding sleek, polished bronzes and lacquered bronzes in a number of ways that are significant: they are larger, more distinctively sculptural in their conscious use of all 360 degrees of changing viewpoints, each one different as the viewer moves around Hamilton's subtle sloping shapes. Perhaps most importantly, the new works absorb rather than reflect light. This drawing away from light, as opposed to playing with a seductive flickering, enhances our sense of them as looming, mysterious presences, which display a new sense of gravity, a deliberate heaviness that is more illusion than reality.

That Hamilton began his artistic career as a ceramist may explain why his forms, although they are monolithic, still communicate the personal touch of the artist's hand—the feeling of modeling rather than of cutting out or of slicing a form from a pre-existing block that we normally associate with the monolith. Moreover, there are no hard edges in Hamilton's art: plane meets plane softly, gently - another indication of his decisive rejection of the machine aesthetic that has more characterized recent modern art. Certainly, simple, reductive forms are within the mainstream of modernist sculpture. However, they are much closer to the spiritual aesthetic that originally inspired Brancusi than they are to the materialist empiricism of minimal art.

Brancusi has been an important and acknowledged interest of Hamilton's since he began to make sculpture. However, it was not the repetitions of the Endless Column or the elaborate carved bases which became sculptures in themselves that attracted him to the art of the visionary Rumanian artist. Rather, it was Brancusi's regard for craftsmanship and the artisan tradition, and his ability to convey the complex feeling through the apparently simplest, most reductive means that have inspired Hamilton. Although conceptual artists mistakenly took Brancusi as an ancestor figure, Brancusi himself was a mystic more concerned with theosophy than philosophy, emotional expression rather than cerebral theorizing. In this sense, Hamilton's mysterious hovering forms are also distanced from the objectness of minimal art. Their intention, as well as their expression, is far more consonant with Brancusi's otherworldliness. Hamilton's works are enigmatic undefinable presences rather than specific objects. In this respect, they have in common with the mysterious visionary art of Jackson Pollock and Morris Louis their grand impersonal anonymity. Like Pollock's webs and Louis's veils, Hamilton's vessels are made in a way that is difficult if not impossible to figure out, unless the artist discloses the secret of his technique of making forms that look as ancient as the earth itself. How, for example, can these pieces, which appear solid and weighty as mountains, be moved about? How are they actually made? What gives them their mysterious light-absorbing matte finish, the apparent antithesis of the glossy patina of bronze? First, there is the manner in which the forms take shape: the initial step is building a steel grid...
Some artists have attempted to escape time by denying history. This is not the case with Hamilton, who willingly apprenticed himself to a tradition of craftsmanship, mastering his technique and medium in order to extend its possibilities of expression. The sleekness of his forms suggest a futuristic vision, yet their allusion to the antiquity of stones smoothed and worn away by time lends them a sense of timeless elegance. Metaphorically stretching two ways, lifted from the ground to float or loom above us, yet centered and pulled earthward by the evident force of gravity, these timeless shapes Hamilton has created invoke the contemplative mode of the great visionary paintings of Newman and Rothko, which encourage a state of gratified serenity and abstract purity, where form and matter transcend themselves. Thus the vision of the far-sighted artist rejects mirroring specific moment, searching instead for the universal symbol, and expression of the primordial consciousness of being. Juan Hamilton is among the handful of visionary artists working today who have had the courage to spurn the cheap thrills of the here and now in pursuit of a higher reality.

Barbara Rose
Independent Scholar

Essay written and published for the 1987 exhibition at the Robert Miller Gallery, New York, N. Y. © 1987 Barbara Rose
CHECKLIST

1. UNTITLED
1972, stoneware, ash glaze
9 x 12 1/2 x 13 in.

2. UNTITLED
1975, clay, black lacquer
14 x 14 x 15 1/2 in.

3. UNTITLED
1975, clay, white raku
11 x 14 x 12 in.

4. BLACK CLOUD
1975, clay, black lacquer
13 1/2 x 15 x 16 3/4 in.

5. UNTITLED
1975, stoneware clay, white raku
9 x 15 x 14 3/4 in.

6. UNTITLED
1978, bronze, white lacquer
11 1/4 x 14 x 12 1/2 in.

7. UNTITLED
1978, clay, black lacquer
39 1/2 x 10 x 14 1/4 in.

8. ABSTRACTION
1978, clay, black lacquer
15 1/2 x 18 x 12 in.

9. ABSTRACTION
1979, bronze, black lacquer
26 x 22 x 20 1/2 in.
Artist proof

10. UNTITLED
1981, bronze, black lacquer
24 x 28 x 38 in.

11. FRAGMENT X-O
1983-91, bronze
80 x 114 1/4 x 29 in.

12. DISC
1983, steel and fiberglass,
black lacquer
8 1/2 x 38 x 38 in.

13. UNTITLED
1984, clay, white lacquer
41 1/2 x 10 x 10 3/4 in.

14. UNTITLED
1985, steel and fiberglass,
black lacquer
14 x 45 x 35 in.

15. CURVE AND SHADOW #3
1985, welded aluminum, black lacquer
96 x 288 x 44 in.

16. UNTITLED
1986, steel and fiberglass,
black lacquer
85 x 62 x 31 in.

17. UNTITLED
1986, steel and fiberglass,
black lacquer
49 x 60 x 38 in.

18. BRUJA
1988, bronze, red patina
15 1/2 x 13 1/2 x 13 3/4 in.
Edition: 1/7

19. BLACK MOON #3
1990, steel and fiberglass,
black lacquer
27 x 28 x 28 in.

20. SICKLE
1990, laminated oak, black lacquer
53 x 98 x 2 1/2 in.

21. FOR ANNIE
1990, clay, black lacquer
21 x 19 x 14 1/2 in.

22. EGYPT I
1991, laminated pine, black lacquer
30 x 28 x 27 3/4 in.

23. EGYPT II
1991, laminated pine, black lacquer
82 x 26 x 26 in.

24. EGYPT III
1991, laminated pine, black lacquer
63 1/2 x 39 1/2 x 39 in.

25. MY LITTLE EGYPT
1991, clay, black lacquer
18 x 17 x 15 in.

26. PARABOLA
1991, plywood and fiberglass, black lacquer
70 x 34 x 15 in.

27. WING BONE I
1991, bronze, white lacquer
2 3/4 x 70 1/2 x 3 1/2 in.

28. WING BONE II
1991, laminated pine, black stain
6 x 146 x 7 1/4 in.

ON THE COVER: 18. BRUJA

Sheldon Solo is an ongoing series of one person exhibitions of art by nationally recognized contemporary artists. As a museum of twentieth century American art, the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery recognizes its responsibility to present the art of our time in an art historical perspective. Each Sheldon Solo exhibition assesses the work of an artist who is contributing to the spectrum of American art, and provides an important forum for the presentation of contemporary art issues.

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