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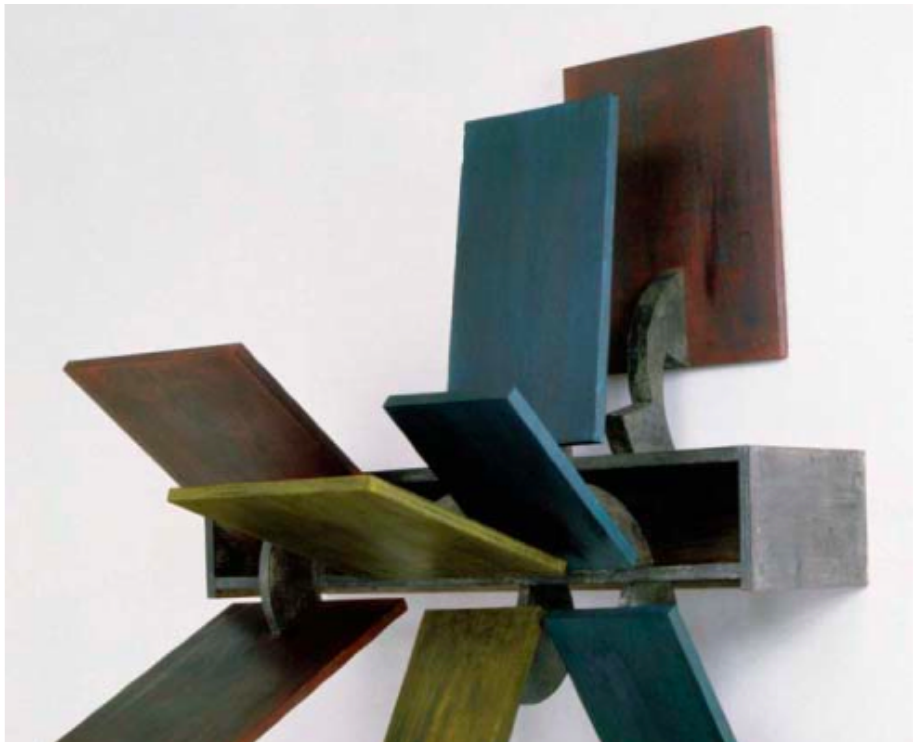
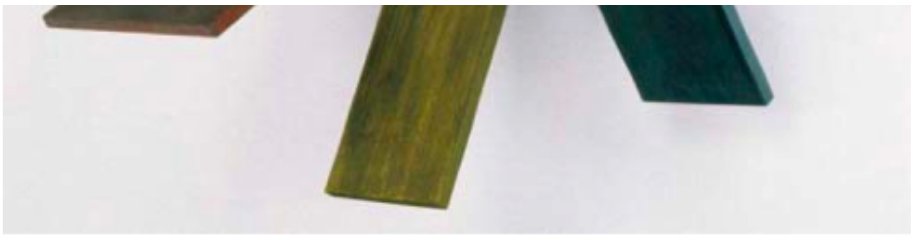
Willard Boepple

Disembodiment and Sensuality

BY DAVID COHEN





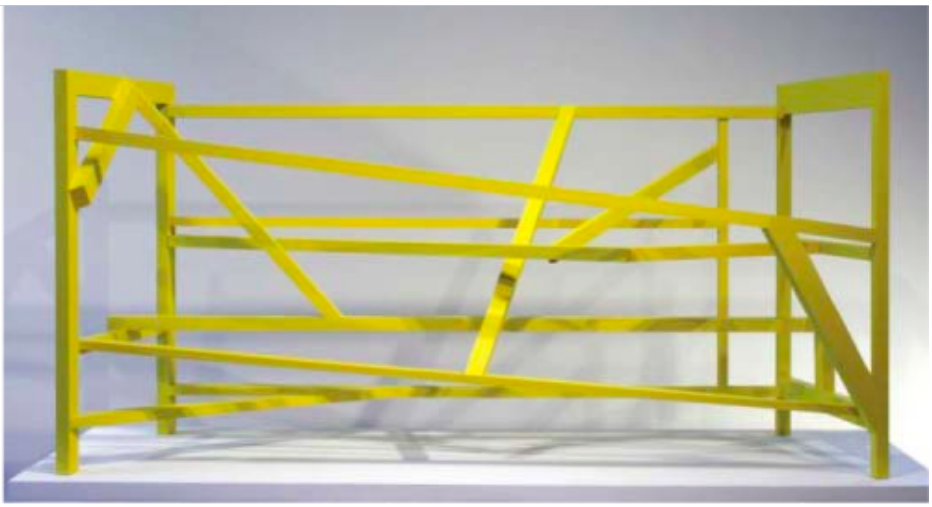
Left: *Barra 2*, 1989. White cedar, 86 x 40 x 47 in. Right: *The Woman who Blamed Life on a Spaniard #4*, 1999. Pine and graphite, 51 x 40 x 27 in.

The sculptures of Willard Boepple are a riposte to Plato. At the very least, they engage in a game of cat and mouse with the Platonic concept of archetypes. Created in series, Boepple's forms are utilitarian, commonplace, timeless things like ladders, shelves, rooms, railings, sawhorses, and benches. Though far from being functional within their given categories, the sculptures are, nonetheless, invariably recognizable and nameable in relation to the object-series to which they belong. They are also radically abstract, in the sense that they remove the viewer from any literal association with ladders, shelves, or rooms to a place where the given object's related phenomenology is pushed to the fore: ascent and descent, storage and display, closure and disclosure. Boepple explores these pairings as dichotomies through processes of elaboration that are, by definition, the opposite of essence.

He works through each series until some hybrid suggests the next step. The ladders begat the shelves, for instance: populating the ladder's rungs with various elements challenged verticality with a new, horizontal aspect. The rooms sprang from a desire to see the shelves in a context. And the rooms, which had dominated Boepple's output since the turn of the century, inspired the new forms of the last couple of years. These frame structures, or "looms" as he calls them, suggest supports for folding, drying, or dyeing fabric or yarn—my own first association was with grandstands at parades. This openness to evolution from one series to the next in Boepple's practice bolsters the sense that experience removed from intended function motivates and sustains his sculptural curiosity when it comes to these primary-structure objects and tools.

Such cool, cerebral, and sometimes aloof sculpture fully embraces an aesthetic of economy. There is an air of classical refinement about Boepple's work that speaks to his origins. In his formative years, both in Bennington, Vermont, where he was born and now works for half of the year, and in New York City, his acknowledged influences were Modernist painters and sculptors like Jules Olitski, David Smith, Anthony Caro, and Donald Judd—all, in their way, reductive artists. (Less so Isaac Witkin, an important early mentor, or Richard Diebenkorn, who first empowered Boepple with artistic ambitions, in California, where he grew up.) But, however pared-down Boepple's structures, they are emphatically *not* schematic. Unlike an early Joel Shapiro house or a Martin Puryear ladder (despite its poetic sense of craft and surface), a Boepple ladder or room would never do as a logo or sign. The resemblance of his streamlined language to store-bought items, the wooden frame of a house, or a ready-made shelving unit is misleading: that bare-bones first impression quickly gives way to a realization of eccentricity and variation.

Boepple's sensibility, it could be argued, is perpetually poised between reduction



Preston, 2008. Poplar, 29 x 59.5 x 24 in.

and elaboration. His constructive approach, his proximity at times to Smith's drawing-in-space idiom, might evoke a sense of the skeletal, but if so, Boepple's skeleton is one yearning for flesh, not the grave—a skeleton with a lust for life.

The evolution of his sculptural ideas, however, rarely submits to a pattern of the simple moving toward the complex, or vice versa; he often bounces back and forth between possibilities. In the ladder series, for instance, *The Weir* (1986), a work in steel, has a stark literalism, except that each rung is punctured so that equal-sized stumps adhere to the vertical sides; *Famous Grouse* (1987), in white cedar,

In *First Shift, Red* (1996), four circular bins resemble the bottom-hinged doors of garbage chutes and mailboxes, apparently arrested at different stages of rotation. The overt theatricality of such depictive gestures is the more startling in sculptures

Futurist machine aesthetic, particularly Umberto Boccioni's *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space* (1913).

The rooms and looms achieve a dynamism of which any formalist would approve by virtue of the viewer's mobility and the cog-

is haphazardly crammed full of irregular lumps and fragments, as if ready to transform from ladder to shelf; and *Natural History #1* (1988), in metal again, reverts to the minimal discipline of *The Weir*. It is a tripod in which the front climbing frame separates like marching legs, the abbreviated rungs taking on irregular thicknesses and positions.

Despite the aura of stasis that pervades Boepple's calm, undemonstrative, clean-cut style, some of his sculptures encapsulate a certain dynamism, at least within his own restrained terms. Developments within the shelf series offer a striking case in point. While spawning the rooms, the shelves also gave rise to two mini-series, one static, the other dynamic. The static group includes what Boepple would come to call the "temples": forbiddingly austere, compact little structures with one or more apertures hinting at a dark interior, the walls otherwise firmly closed to the world. Contemporary with the frame-construction rooms, the temples formed a (literal) counterweight to Boepple's drawing-in-space. The dynamic group arose from shelf pieces like *The Sense of Things* (1995), bringing their static dividers or slats resembling stationary boxes to life in sculptures that seem to be utilitarian structures in motion. With its flaps or paddles, the quixotically titled *The Woman who Blamed Life on a Spaniard* (1998) brings to mind a mail-sorting device.

whose "syntax" (as formalists are prone to put it) remains resolutely Modernist. Art historically, abstracted machine parts caught in arrested motion recall the

nition, even when the viewer is stationary, of thin lines in space. In the larger versions of the rooms, viewers are able to walk into and through the piece, making it a literally

***Room 3*, 2003. Aluminum, 96 x 96 x 96 in.**

kinetic experience. The complexity of angles and planes described by these overlapping lines creates a constant redefinition of relationships. Critics often relate the experience of Boepple's work to music, and with good reason, since this choral conductor's son works so acutely with interval and duration. The looms, though continuing the idea of utilitarian form, even taking their names from industrial mill towns in the north of England like Blackburn, Bradford, and Preston, do so in a toned-down way. These are not easily familiar, let alone ubiquitous forms. Free even of the possibility of literalism and certainly not readily associational, they leave the eye to do all the work. As such, they feel closer to Boepple's Modernist beginnings in the 1970s—assembled colored steel sculptures that took their cue, like so much sculpture of that time, from Caro's work of the 1960s.

Boepple first started to explore ladders in reaction to Caro, reckoning (as had Clement Greenberg, after the death of David Smith) that Caro was the strongest individual force in sculpture. During an extended visit to England in 1970, Boepple met Caro and, just as importantly, several of his followers, among them Phillip King and Tim Scott. Boepple's first group of works leading to the utilitarian form series, sculptures that like *Stick Around* (1979) alluded to fireplaces, shared a ground-hugging horizontality with Caro's early works. (The irregular intersection of bent diagonal planes in *Stick Around*, incidentally, found a later echo in the flaps of the machine aesthetic shelf pieces.) Boepple searched for a vertical form that was not figural—he wanted to be abstract in the sense of having more to do with being non-figurative than non-objective. The ladder series, begun in 1980, fit the bill because the form was emphatically separate from and unlike the body, being triangular and top-hinged, although it followed a function determined by the needs of the body, which it extends.

That Boepple became so involved with an object separate from, yet co-dependent on, the body—which it mimics in terms of its measure and proportion—has, in retrospect, an almost ominous quality, for in 1982, he was struck by Guillain-Barré syndrome. This neurological disorder left him on life-support, completely paralyzed for months, and now permanently disabled. Besides mobility issues that require him to use crutches, he faces challenges in dexterity. As a welder, this new situation forced him to rethink how to make sculpture (he had been Olitski's fabricator, as well as an assistant to Witkin and to the David Smith estate). Since then, Boepple has depended on assistants for the realization of his work, and wood has replaced metal as his medium, though many works end up fabricated in metal. Beyond day-to-day, practical considerations, physical realities have been a determining factor in many attitudes that are fundamental to Boepple's work: craft, medium, scale, and even subject matter.

Enigmatic, intriguing, enticing at so many levels though it can be, Boepple's work can also seem somewhat aloof in its measured, almost blue-blooded calm: surfaces are barely invested with texture; color, though axiomatic, can come across as politely autonomous from the sculptural direction of the work; materials are functional and under-expressive. This is not to say that surfaces are neglected. Some of the steel-fabricated rooms such as *Room 3* (2003), an eight-foot-square frame construction, are burnished to give a dazzling, enlivening finish. The colors applied to the wood pieces are often warm and rich, and there is the startling, occasional bonus of polychromy. But color is invariably a late thought in the evolution of Boepple's sculpture. Color matters to Boepple to the extent that he makes his own pigments and will strip a work down if the color does not work for him, that is, does not assist in the clarity of the form. But one intention of color would seem to be anti-sensual, in that it serves to deprive wood of its distracting natural

***The Way Things Work #1*, 2008. Cast resin, 52 x 22 x 11 in.**

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***The Way Things Work #2*, 2008. Cast resin, 40 x 21 x 12 in.**

qualities. For an artist who started out as a painter—before working for Witkin—it is hard to imagine that, had Boepple had a conventional, hands-on sculptor's career, his priorities would so privilege the visual at the expense of the tactile. Though it is true that for the Caro generation, painting was the paradigm for Modernist sculpture, that the experience of sculpture was "eyes only," until—and even when—sculptors specifically invited the viewer to walk into and through their sculptures. But considering the direction taken by Caro himself, or by William Tucker and Alain Kirili whose early work shared the skeletal aspect of Boepple's sculpture, it is hard not to imagine a sculptor answering the clarion call to enfleshment.

The theatricality of Boepple's machine aesthetic, despite the anti-sensual finish, the alienation implicit in the lack of sensuality, and the need for literal or metaphorical movement in static works all lend an unexpected, existential twist to his sculpture once the element of biography is factored in. Suddenly, Boepple's work takes on an affinity to that of Alberto Giacometti. The haptic Giacometti and the optic Boepple share a propensity for the taut, wiry, and intense.

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A recent commission to design a radio tower in Syracuse, New York, triggered a new series, one that inevitably connects to the Russian Constructivists. It also fuses various elements in Boepple's personal history: verticality, a line in space, the machine as both alien and anthropomorphic, and, vital to his working through assistants, disembodied communication.

Two additional developments are taking Boepple in a different direction. For some years, he has worked for long stretches at workshops in England, with sculptor Phil Stroud, who specializes in cast resins, and with master printer Kip Gresham, a specialist in experimental screen printing. These sessions have produced bodies of work in which color and texture play an integral role, unlike elsewhere in his oeuvre. Boepple's cast resin works, made at Colbar Arts in Queens, New York, include *The Way Things Work* (2008), a group of four sculptures commissioned for the lobby of a boutique office building in midtown Manhattan. These are worked from variants of his shelf series; *The Way Things Work: Flaps*, for instance, incorporates aspects of *The Woman who Blamed Life on a Spaniard* and *First Shift, Red*.

Resin, in Boepple's handling of the material, has twin effects that are, aesthetically speaking, mutually exclusive. It is very visceral: sensing its stickiness, plasticity, and former liquid state adds to the feeling of movement. But it is also ethereal: the intense color—blood red in the case of *Flaps*—is suspended rather than adhering, and the form is semi-transparent. The sensation of seeing inside and through excited Boepple, recalling his experience of the traversable room sculptures. But an ability to see right into the sculpture makes the inside more mysterious, not less, rather like an x-ray.

The screen prints grew out of the resin sculptures and the desire to extend the sense of seeing-through an image. They are monoprints, each impression a unique arrangement of the stencils in differing color variants. The first few images came directly from elements in the resin sculptures and explore an abstract, ideographic vocabulary. There is both emphatic flatness and layering, with the overlap of planes determining color mixes.

In both resin casting and screen printing, Boepple has found ways to work in which his assistants, too, depend on chance. It could also be said of both the resins and the screen prints that the results reconcile the haptic and the optic to the extent that they entail both disembodiment and sensuality.

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