

James Wolfe: Recent Sculptures

by Karen Wilkin

When Julio González and Pablo Picasso began making welded constructions in metal, in the late 1920s, translating Cubist collages into free-standing objects, they transformed sculpture forever, replacing the time-honored opaque carved, modeled, or cast monolith with open, linear, drawing-like structures. This new conception of what sculpture could be—or, more accurately, what could be defined as sculpture—was wholly bound up with their choice of materials and methods. Using iron and steel—the stuff of industry—and joining the component parts by welding—a technique used to make machines and motorcars—was not only a negation of conventional definitions of “sculpture” but also an unequivocal affirmation of modernity. Since then, the radically new three-dimensional language invented by González and Picasso has itself become an entrenched part of the vocabulary of sculpture-making, so much so that in the early 1960s, the critic Clement Greenberg referred to this way of working as a “new tradition,” when he wrote about the pioneering work of innovators such as David Smith and Anthony Caro. In recent decades, in fact, the “new tradition” of constructing with welded steel has been seen as retrograde, as connected to the history of art as carving marble was in González’s and Picasso’s day, and similarly rejected by young hopefuls in favor of soft or scavenged materials intended to seem as startling and as alien to art-making as I-beams were half a century ago.

Yet working in steel continues to engage serious, inventive, modernist sculptors. The reason is simple. Steel is the most responsive and variable of materials, a magical substance that, for those who know how to take advantage of its properties, permits just about anything. Because of its tensile strength, steel can be extremely thin and extend over long spans, allowing sculptors enormous freedom in terms of how they embrace space and describe volumes. But steel can also be massive. It can be turned into flat, thin planes, often of considerable size, or it can be thick and slabby. Steel bars can be round or flat, as dense as girders or as slim as vines. Steel can be bent and warped, and what may be the most seductive thing about it, for artists who work intuitively, it allows for improvisation. Elements can be tacked together quickly so that an evolving structure becomes stable and “real” almost immediately. Things can be added rapidly and removed just as rapidly. With a little more effort (and skill) parts can be sliced and subdivided, shortened or pruned, and, if those interventions prove to have been a mistake, restored to the original configuration with minimal effort. Small wonder that steel has been the preferred medium for sculptors whose work depends upon the history of its making as part of its meaning, sculptors who choose to work without preconception but remain, instead, open to the implications of their efforts as they evolve.

James Wolfe is a master of construction in steel. His distinctive linear, drawing-like sculptures, with their delicate flourishes and emphatic bold strokes, are paradigms of what can be done with this once transgressive material. Like the complex riffs of a virtuoso jazz musician or the elaborate ornamentation of a brilliant bel canto singer, the arcs, twists, and bars of Wolfe’s recent works seem to have come about effortlessly, to have arrived at their ultimate configurations inevitably. Or, to change metaphors, his curvilinear, rhythmic constructions seem to unspool before us like the eloquent calligraphy of some unknown

language—weightless, fluid, entirely specific but hard to pin down. Wolfe’s occasional use of intense chromatic color emphasizes these qualities, further disembodying the steel and forcing us to concentrate on contours and rhythms. Similarly, the way his wall-mounted sculptures play off the flat plane behind them enhances their declaration of movement and what can only be called their individual personalities.

Unlike many of his colleagues, Wolfe is not a found object sculptor. Typically, he himself shapes and forms each element in his work, an approach that can impose limits on the density and mass of his sculptures but also guarantees an enlivening sense of the hand, of the person who made the work, which we sense almost subliminally. Wolfe’s intimate relationship with just about every component of his sculptures makes them notably animated and confrontational. Combined with a striking sense of the playful and with proportions that echo the big divisions of the human body, the result is to make us read even the most abstract of his works as alluding, however obliquely, to alert figures. And then we become engaged by the internal relationships among the sensitively worked components of the sculptures, independent of reference. The difference between a smooth curve and a twist, between a delicate grid and a bold bar, becomes fascinating and expressive.

Wolfe’s works are evidence that when Gonzalez and Picasso claimed an unglamorous, industrial material for works of art, they not only gave future generations of sculptors a new formal language but also new means in which to develop their own, distinctive idioms. Wolfe’s light-hearted, intensely serious constructions pay homage to that “new tradition,” yet at the same time they resemble nothing but themselves: distinctive testimonials to the flexibility of steel and its potential, in the right hands, for eloquent individual expression.

—New York, June 2014

Published on the occasion of the exhibition, *James Wolfe: Recent Sculptures*, at the New York Studio School of Drawing, Painting and Sculpture, July 10-August 10, 2014.