

Robert Prenovault At the canal complex

Kim Sawchuk

Volume 6, Number 3, Spring 1990

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/9789ac>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Le Centre de diffusion 3D

ISSN

0821-9222 (print)

1923-2551 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Sawchuk, K. (1990). Review of [Robert Prenovault: At the canal complex].
Espace Sculpture, 6(3), 44–45.

construction, reveals Lipchitz' complete assimilation into Cubist non-objectivism. While it is a superb little work, the form still seems to be illustrative and descriptive, rather than part of a functional, expressive aesthetic.

Lipchitz continued to adapt and transform the Cubist vocabulary throughout the 20's. It was at this time, in his small-scale bronzes, called "Transparents", most of which were unique casts, that an inherent vitality, a stronger collage exploration of positive and negative values, material mass and void begins to appear. He becomes less of a Cubist stylist, more completely the master of his own creative destiny and later wrote that he was «escaping from the iron rule of syntactical cubist discipline».² Lipchitz describes *Chimène*, one of the last of the "Transparents" executed in 1930 as «a woman's head and hand, like a plant or a flower».³ For its free, fluid style this work has a graceful monumentality that surpasses the heavy-handed compression of form, and quasi-religious thematic that he sought in his large-scale public commissions.

Adjacent to the "Transparents" are Lipchitz' monumental "subject sculptures" of the 20's and 30's whose expressive anguished forms vary greatly in quality. *Figure* (1926-30), *Joy of Life* (1927) and *The Cry* (1928) are strong, expressive works, whose sculpted mass and spatial interplay achieve a contiguous harmony. On the other hand, *Reclining Woman* (1921) or *Meditation* (1925) have an exaggerated expression combined with an overblown workmanship that overwhelms, and confuses the viewer.

In looking at the diverse array of works from the post-war years when Lipchitz moved to America, we become aware of how lengthy his career was, and how prolific an artist he became. He outlived his generation, and his immense energies seemed caught in a dilemma, returning to previous themes, adopting earlier forms, dropping them, experimenting with maquettes, playing with the ideas which had preoccupied him in Europe. There is a strong vision in the astonishing variety of work here, but the styles vary, are inconsistent in quality, and ultimately

reveal an indecisiveness, a lack of direction. It led Clement Greenberg to state that Lipchitz was «unable to develop a principle of inner consistency; none of the different paths he takes seem to lead to the next one».⁴ Curator Alan Wilkinson suggests that this inconsistency was merely the evidence of an explosive imagination, an uncontrollable vitality that was the driving force behind Lipchitz' vision. The comprehensive, consistent forms of Alberto Giacometti, Jean Arp or Henry Moore are nowhere evident in Lipchitz' work. Whether this is a weakness or a strength may finally depend on how strongly our view of the history of art must rely on a basic consistency of individual aesthetic as a measure of relevance.

Of all the later works, it is the small bronzes, the spontaneous interpretive allegorical pieces that seem the most fascinating. They are imaginative, delicate forms, and have none of the Baroque gaudiness, the justification of material mass for its own sake, that we find in the later monuments such as *Notre-Dame de Liesse* (New Harmony, Indiana) and *Our Tree of Life* (Mount Scopus, Israel). The *Beautiful One* (1962) is an example of this open freedom of expression that can no longer be called Picasso-esque. For these later works of Lipchitz' do deserve attention, if only to counter the others. They are indeed evidence that Lipchitz continued, later in life, to seek a new language of expression.

And so, at the end of this exhibition, we are left grasping to understand, straining to lift the weight of this artist's idealism to find the pure expressions of beauty which lay beneath. These inner turmoils, seen in the strength and mercurial variation of Lipchitz' life's work did indeed cause him to defy any clear, historical categorization in his later life, and more often to his detriment of late. This, as much as his early work, undoubtedly cast him into the mould of that vague, ill-defined, catch-all phrase "true Cubist" expounded so cleverly in the Tate Gallery's 1983 show *The Essential Cubism 1907-20: Braque, Picasso, and their Friends*.

This show will be on at the Art Gallery of Ontario until March 11, 1990. It will travel to the Winnipeg Art Gallery (May 13 - Aug. 12, 1990), the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City (Oct. 6th - Nov. 25, 1990), and The Jewish Museum, New York (Jan. 16 - April 15, 1991). ♦

1. H. H. Arnason & Jacques Lipchitz, *My Life in Sculpture*. New York: Viking Press, 1972, p. 85.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 95.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 115.

4. Clement Greenberg, *Art & Culture; Critical Essays*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1961, p. 201.

ROBERT PRENOVAULT AT THE CANAL COMPLEX

Nov. 1 - 30, 1989

Kim Sawchuk

Robert Prenovault has set himself a challenge. A sculptor, who for many years shunned representational art for more abstract formalism, Prenovault sees the body not simply as a vessel with symbolic or social significance, but as matter and volume. «I've introduced the body into my work to replace another element. I used to work with elements where there was an organic shape interacting with a very linear geometric shape. I've replaced these organic shapes with the body thinking that's all I was doing.» His recent show at the Canal Complex, *Concretizations*, is a manifestation of this vision and this innocence: the body cannot avoid signification because it is at the centre of so many contentious discourses. The show presents a series of cement figures that have been made by moulding a live body in plaster. The result, replications of live bodies, are placed in juxtaposition with elements symbolic of our industrial era.

Although the five pieces in his show are representational on the surface, they play on many borders: the line between abstraction and figuration, of nature and technology, visibility and invisibility, of the transition of liquids to solids. As he says in a recent interview: «I'm approaching this whole process on the line between these questions to see what happens on that line...» As the title suggests, concretization refers to the process of objectification that occurs in thought, the concrete or cement that has been used as the primary material, and the process of transforming the cement from a liquid to a solid.

In fact, the artist's statement does not address the body per se, but the metamorphosis of liquid to solid. It is the material, wet plaster, and the time involved in the procedure that gives the body moulds the appearance of passivity and liquidity. The body must be relaxed to hold a pose for at least one hour. As the sculptor explains: «When it is applied, the body becomes a liquid form, but very rapidly the plaster hardens and the body disappears. It becomes like a stone. But it still looks like water.» This transformation of liquid to solid, of the softness of flesh to the hardness of stone, is very much alive in these works.

According to Robert Prenovault, the bodies are

meant to call attention to the immutability and the properties of the materials themselves. This stems from his perspective of human life as not simply human, but as animal and mineral. «I empathize strongly with what we call inert matter. Stones, clays, and metal. I feel that these experiences are in me. If I play or work with these materials it is because they are akin to me. Not because I want to have matter I can dominate.» Yet, our affinity with materials, particularly our involvement with the materials developed since the industrial revolution, such as steel, cement, asphalt, electric lighting, is often aggressive. In cities, we are crowded together within the sights, sounds, and smells of fabricated materials. Like the body moulds, we are shaped by them. However, the work alludes to a dichotomy between our need to interact with the materials of nature, and our present situation of living in cities where the concrete has become natural to us. What happens when you confront the two? These questions point to the dilemma faced by the artist: how can one balance this abstract vision of the body as matter and volume, with the matter and materials endemic to our present condition, and the situation of the body within the specificity of our present epoch?

All of the pieces reflect this contradiction. They play not only with the body as matter and volume, but with this confrontation of technology and the body: however, it is not any body, it is the gendered body of the female subject, who is objectified in the works. In *Au pied du mur*, the figure of a woman lies with her back to the spectator. The suppleness of her figure is integrated into gravel bits of which the cement is composed. Is she disintegrating or reintegrating? Her sleeping form, which holds itself for comfort, is violently exposed to the eight bars of fluorescent lights which imprison her. Ironically, the predominance of the fluorescents makes it more difficult to focus on the body, because of the power of the light and because of the visual intervention of vertical lines. Although, the cement figure is clearly whole, we are blinded to the whole, as we are blinded to the experience of our bodies as whole in a culture which fragments the body into so many zones of concern and target areas of policing, but as well because of the problem inherent in the process of representation.

The sculptor explains this question of representation by reflecting on his experience with trees and nature: «In the same way as when you cut a tree down to make boards, you never get back to the tree, you are taking one aspect of that tree, using it, and discarding others. I'm using the visual exterior, what you are on the outside, what is the tactile part of your body, to work with as matter. It can never be entirely recomposed.» But as well, the piece enlightens current relations of power. For there is a traditional pleasure associated with viewing the female form, particularly in sculpture where the female model has been passively rendered by the active male artist.

This piece mimics this dynamic of activity and passivity. Our pleasure in viewing is interrupted by the fluorescents. This visibility of this body becomes visible by the hyperbolic use of lighting. In this, the link of the body to power, an authority which operates through its ability to make things visible, is exposed. Symbolically, we are confronted with the mechanics of control; aesthetically, with the play of a solid, dark mass, and a volume of light. However, because of the highly charged symbolic significance of the female nude, I feel we are

distracted from the compositional strength of the piece, and its subtle interplay between the volume of light and the volume of the matter in the form of the gravel and the body. This is exacerbated by the amount of detail on the body itself, which is quite remarkable, but which draws your eye to the body, not to the interplay between the two volumes. Secondly, it is worth contemplating the limitations of a strategy of exposing power by intensifying the relationship of force: does this strategy not entrench traditional patriarchal sculptural values, rather than subverting them?



Robert Prenovault,
Blanc de mémoire, 1989. Béton,
ardoise, acier, 84" x 62" x 76".
Photo: Jean Bernier.

Blanc de mémoire also plays with the visibility and invisibility of the body, but in a different way. Here the body lies half-hidden in a seven-foot high tetrahedron. Three large pieces of slate lean against the bars of the tetrahedron, re-framing the figure contained within the shape. From the floor of the gallery space, it is impossible to view the body at one time. As the title suggests, the memories of the body are exteriorized on the slates, at the same time as the memories of our culture are imprinted on the body: however, in our culture of forgetting, they are virtually empty, except for a few dusty traces. The body is cast in a dark rough cement, giving it an unreal quality which contrasts with its very human shape. In this case it is the texture of the cement, the stones within, that we are drawn to. Because of this texture, I think that this piece expresses the artist's intention to make us understand ourselves as matter.

The piece is well situated within the space of the gallery, located in a skylight that allows us to view it from the top. Because it is a non-traditional zone, we can, as Prenovault states, contemplate «how you are situated within your body, but also how it situates itself in this exterior space.»

However, it is the impression of the body in plaster in *When to Sit is to Jump* that most clearly highlights this connection between interiority and exteriority, and idea of the body as a volume. The body has been impressed into a plaster cube, so that you are looking at the negative impression of the body. The absent body has been suspended in an act of surprise. In this piece, the volume of the negative space left by the imprint of the body makes for a fascinating view of an interior which is really an exterior. Again, we are confronted with the impossibility of seeing the (w)hole despite its presence: one cannot see it in its entirety from the floor because it has been placed along three sides of a cube.

While there is a violence in the pieces - only a fragment of the body of a boy is left in *Jeune homme, il jouait avec les solides d'Euclide*, the harshness of the light, the razor-sharp point of the tetrahedron - there is again sufficient ambiguity so they do not lapse into a didactic, dualistic confrontation of organic versus solid, nature versus culture, etc. etc. There is also play, as suggested by the floating cubes and red ball in *Jeune homme*, or the blue ball, casually tossed aside by the body in *Rencontre du dur et du mou*. As well, there is a solace suggested by the positions. The woman in *Au pied du mur* restfully turns away from the light and from us while we look on in uncomfortable voyeurism; the body in *Blanc de mémoire* is sheltered by the slates. Is the sculptor implying that we may not only suffer discomfort, but derive a security from those things that oppress us, such as our belief in the infinite possibility of technology to solve all of our problems? The total effect of the installation site, with lights, balls, bodies, is of a mad playground.

While the work is more complex and suggestive than this short review can cover, one of the realizations one has when viewing the bodies is the contradiction of representing the body - even with a sculptural technique that is more akin to print-making than traditional sculpture. To paraphrase Roland Barthes, «that which is closest to us is often the most distant.» In this case, that which appears representational is always incomplete, partial, and therefore never absolutely comprehensible to us. Yet, it is impossible to remain neutral to these pieces: part of their magnetism comes from the power of the human body itself and the emotions it elicits in the viewer. The body acts as screen where we project who we are in relationship to our bodies onto the sculptures. In this, Prenovault's objective, to make us see our bodies as matter and volume, is most successful in the pieces where the body is least representational, such as *Blanc de mémoire* and *When to Sit is to Jump*. These pieces are parts of a series of work in progress. It is intriguing to contemplate where matter and the body will take Robert Prenovault in his future works, and where his work will take us.

(Quotes with the sculptor are taken from two interviews: the first, September 17, 1989; the second, October 26, 1989, Radio McGill's *The Postmodern Commotion*). ♦