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The Age of Desire: Death, Eros and Transcendence in the Work of Roland Poulin

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The Age of Desire: Death, Eros and Transcendence in the Work of Roland Poulin

Death is undifferentiation.
[Anton Ehrenzweig]

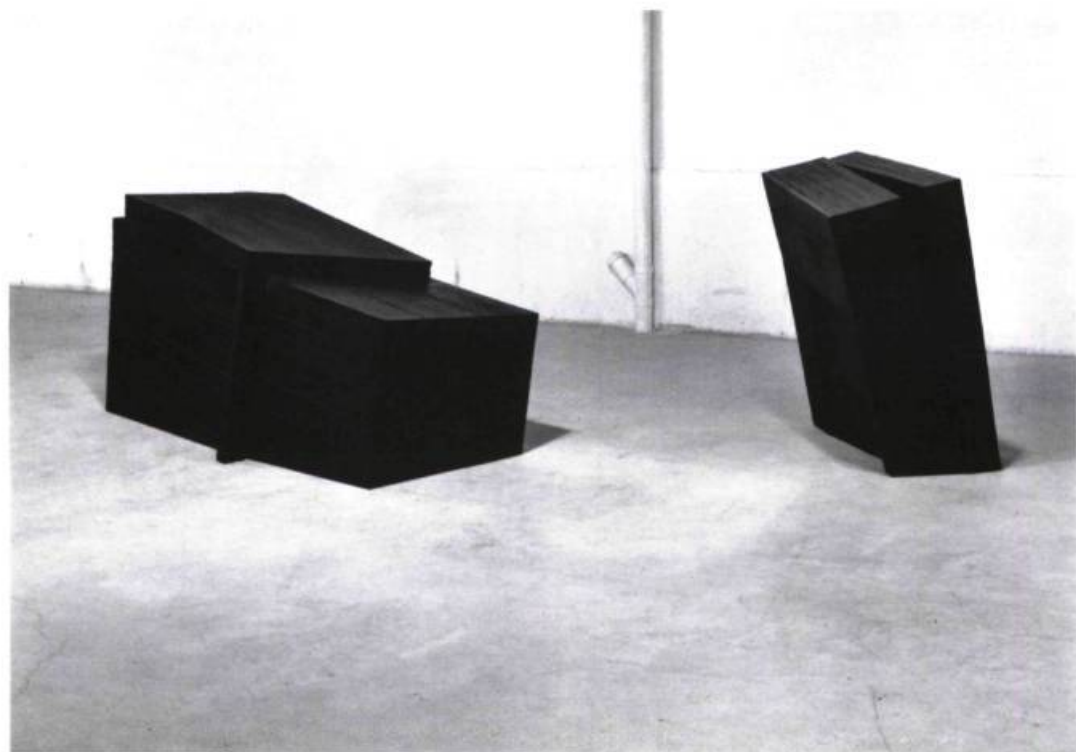
One's first impression of Roland Poulin's new work (as exhibited at Galerie Chantal Boulanger, February 13-March 12, 1988) is of an imminent coupling of component elements. This moment of imminence soon gives way to an unsettling sensation; a vague feeling of being ill-at-ease. The larger element takes on the likeness of a crouching entity, perhaps stalking the other? But the other, recessed, is seemingly poised to receive it?

There is also an oppressive aura — that becomes, however, somehow exalting, with continued viewing — of sheer mass. The surfaces are highly stratified, revealing layer upon layer sandwiched together in a sort of living sedimentation. The haunting patina, black as brushed charcoal, but with burnished inflections of a blood-like red like the incandescence of a dying sun, opens up a horizon that swallows the gaze that would appropriate it. And sooner than one had thought possible, one is led into the depths.

Our freely varying perspectives on this coffin-like form begin to evoke the sort of torpor that weighs on the body libidinally aroused; the larger of the two elements seems hunchbacked by another form lying languidly atop it, indissolubly wed to it. This strange symbiosis exacerbates the corporeal aura of the work and seems to propel this element toward the other element, that Other it seeks to penetrate, that recessed cleft that *might* encompass it. But the sense of implicit interaction, of erotic communication is undermined or perhaps enhanced by an angularity that, one begins to suspect, in its irregularity, frustrates coupling. Then, too, the conjunction of elements is almost a disjunction, the elements seem frozen in a kinetic dance, a dance of desire but also a dance of warning; of death.

It becomes evident that Poulin has radically widened and deepened his vocabulary by rendering more overt and palpable its always latent thema: the dualism of Eros and the death-drive.

It is not uninteresting, I think, to note that Freud discovered the importance of the death-drive while seeking to fathom the nature of the repetition-compulsion, that syndrome whereby fixations block the circu-



Roland Poulin, *Le temps ralenti (à Hélène)*, 1987. Photo: Richard-Max Tremblay



Roland Poulin, *Le temps ralenti (à Hélène)*, 1987.

lations of excitations and disrupt the equilibrium of the organism. So, too, Poulin, confounds our first expectations of unity and completion; thematizing ruptures and discontinuities as component elements are frozen, apart, in their very horizontal disparity and contiguity. This thwarted conjunction of signs lends the work its forcible sense of fragmentation.

Freud conceived Thanatos as a primary instinct aimed at the return of the organism to an inorganic state.¹ This is interesting in that these forms, felt surrogates for flesh, also seem curiously inorganic, as in coffins or containers of the dead.

Destrudo pervades the work. Yet it can only be studied, as was the case of Thanatos for Freud, in its fusions with Eros.

Poulin's recent sculptures have been likened to sarcophagi "that devour flesh".² But they are really sarcophagi turned inside-out. Here is no interiority that could act as a maw consuming the dead; but a total volume that becomes a surrogate for the body itself; an interior and exterior together with all the integrity of a structural mass, the very stratification of which suggests an experience of temporality "slowed down" which enmeshes the viewer.

The incarnate codes of the Eros libido do not invaginate these shadowy hulks; they are inscribed like shadowy signifiers in the strata of their surfaces, extending themselves horizontally, as across the interior and exterior surfaces of a body.

Alphonso Lingis says: "The paths of free mobility turn upon themselves without issuing on a source or an exit, describing a labyrinthine space by their displacement and passage. There are intersections and encounters, and the encounter is each time fled in terror or in gaiety, and the light traces out transparent walls, secret thresholds, open fields and empty skies..."³

In Poulin's work, the libidinous labyrinth is alternately built up and undermined by the imminence of a union that never takes place and the suggestion, always latent but highly-charged, of alignable but impossible forces. This space without verticality, this space without depth, is not, however, a space without time; even if that "time" is a strange phenomenon; this is a 'dilated' time as differentiated elements approach undifferentiation, plunging the observer into that abyss of being before the other is assimilated within one's own corporeal axes — an abyss, a gap in which vectors which seem too long for convergence are frozen in divergence, destined forever to evade fulfillment of meaning whole forever promising it.

While it may seem simplistic to discuss this work purely in the context of death and erotic desire, in many respects it is the main point of the work, as Poulin himself avows. The contrariety of the work stems from the interplay of the aura of Thanatos — as inorganic dead matter — and the erotogenic, organic totality of each element. This reciprocal incarnation is as true for

each element as it is for their interaction. Each element incarnates the death-drive in its dark schema as it lives in an asymmetric relation with its Other; as it luxuriates in the tomb-like opacity of its flesh. Here is no inscription of a subjective desire; but of a de-centered subject, caught between desire and its fulfilment.

M. C. Dillon has said: "In the dehiscence and de-centering moment of reversibility, there is the embryo of distantiation which may develop into the spectatorial remotino of thematic reflection. The structures of erotic reversibility, however, are primordially *ek-static*: They are lived rather than contemplated."⁴

Poulin has transposed these structures convincingly to a sculptural idiom wherein his thematic reflection itself becomes a sort of transcendence. A death-world soliloquy becomes a potent dialogue with the lived-world.

Fernande Saint-Martin has argued that Poulin's stature stems from his reflection and "a technique that is always sensible of the semantic and syntactical relevance of the elements used."⁵

This is still true, and Poulin's current work is important in that he has taken his work much further into the domain of Eros and Thanatos, ever deeper into the paradox of human life.

James D. Campbell

NOTES

1. Sigmund Freud, *An Outline of Psychoanalysis*, Standard Edition, 23: 149-150 (London: Hogarth Press, 1964).
2. Johanne Lamoureux, "Roland Poulin", *Roland Poulin: Sculptures and Drawings* (New York, 49th Parallel, 1986), p. 11.
3. Alphonso Lingis, *Libido: The French Existential Theories* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), p. 76-77.
4. M.C. Dillon, "Erotic Desire", *Research in Phenomenology*, Vol. XV, 1985, p. 161.
5. Fernande Saint-Martin, "The System of Sculpture", *Roland Poulin*, exhibition catalogue, (Montréal: Musée d'art contemporain, 1983), p. 17.