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John Greer

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Throughout his 20-year career John Greer has brought personal wit and a finely tuned sensibility to bear on a diverse range of materials, processes and images, all the while attentive to their metaphoric and expressive possibilities. In this exhibition, *Connected Works*, he employs a similar variety of strategies — installation, oil-stick paintings, shaped wall objects — in addition to the more central preoccupations of the sculptural pieces.

These subtly powerful works, produced during his recent five-month stay in Pietrasanta, Italy, emphasize the practice of sculpture as consisting of simultaneous acts of continuity and critical renewal. In choosing to go to Italy, where the extended tradition of carved and cast sculpture is everywhere evident, Greer was obviously seeking ready sources of high quality materials and easily accessible technical expertise. However, he also seems to have thrived in a cultural context rich with collective memory and individual artistic achievement. Perhaps for the first time, he worked daily in an environment in which the pleasures and particularities of shaping stone into sculpture were taken seriously and cherished. The mutually respectful interchange with local, highly skilled artisans must have been a pleasant contrast to the less supportive attitudes in Nova Scotia.

Greer has always been mindful of the necessities of craft, regardless of the medium. He seems to understand his current material and its capacities so thoroughly that the process of carving is totally subsumed in the physical reality and perceptual disclosure of the three-dimensional image. He refuses to allow the obvious identification accorded a subject through literal representation to stand for more resonant sculptural possibilities. He seeks a more profound experience, which is achieved when internal visual and material structures are integrated with a dense and meaningful iconography.

With *Sleeping Wills*, the viewer participates in a strangely haunting work that trades on a collective anxiety about snakes. Consisting of five vaguely life-sized representations of coiled snakes, this sculpture embodies an anxious condition of attraction and separation. Carved from differently coloured marble, but shaped in similar spiraling configurations, the units psychologically and visually combine and separate according to a logic of similarity and difference. With heads hidden by their rhythmically coiled bodies, the snakes seem to be sleeping, but are tense with latent action. Moving among these stone images, disbelief is suspended; the psychological tension is palpable. As attention is directed toward a single object, there are always others beyond the direct gaze. Circling these spiralling forms, the viewer notices that the inanimate stone seems to have an energy of its own. As the pace of movement around each object increases, amazingly, the snake seems to pulse, to expand and contract beyond the capacity of observable fact. It ceases to respect its material limits and a simple, rational reading. Like the latent power of the Mind, like the waiting force of the Will, the deceptive object needs only conscious engagement to come alive.

A related work, *Resonance*, proposes a complementary situation between two separate but apparently equal representations of snakes. A carved marble version is reflected in, and could have been used to cast, its polished bronze opposite. They are visual and material echoes of each other. As intrinsically related entities, they resist a hierarchical response and seem to form a mirrored whole.

Other sculptures in the exhibition also unify images and processes in insightful ways. *Caligula Dreaming* consists of a black marble snake placed on a grey felt and red oxide canvas representation of a goddess-like form derived from a cast-iron axe head. The goddess shape declares a psychological and physical distance between the viewer and the snake. This encourages speculation about the relationship between images rather than physical interaction. With *Folding In On Itself*, a circular snake form is carved at the top of a white marble column emerging from a black base. A pattern of cross-hatching is carved in the column and modulates the play of light on the surface. The asymmetrical snake image subverts the architectural stability of the column. The object remains as a fragment of another order of culture.

In *Temple of the Order of Chaos*, Greer again successfully conjoins architectural reference with anthropomorphic detail. In this most eccentric work, he has fashioned a navel-eyed, four-legged animal / temple which is affixed to a black pedestal. The other side of the animal / temple has been left in its raw marble state. The contrast between the polished, carved image and the original quality of the stone could be a telling reference to the relationship between culture and nature.

Tucked away in a corner of the gallery, Greer's installation *Kouros in Flight* combines postcards of classical carvings of male figures with elastic cord 'drawings' of paper airplanes. Using two-dimensional and three-dimensional images of the distant past and an elusive present, Greer suggests that history and memory depend on point of view. This point of view allows for a connection with the more modest works, the oil-stick paintings and wall objects, which further explore related images of snakes and spatial situations. However, it is Greer's carved marble and cast bronze sculptures that confirm his place as one of the most compellingly thoughtful and accomplished sculptors at work in Canada.

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