

Primitive Elegance: Sculptures by David Hall and Creighton Michael

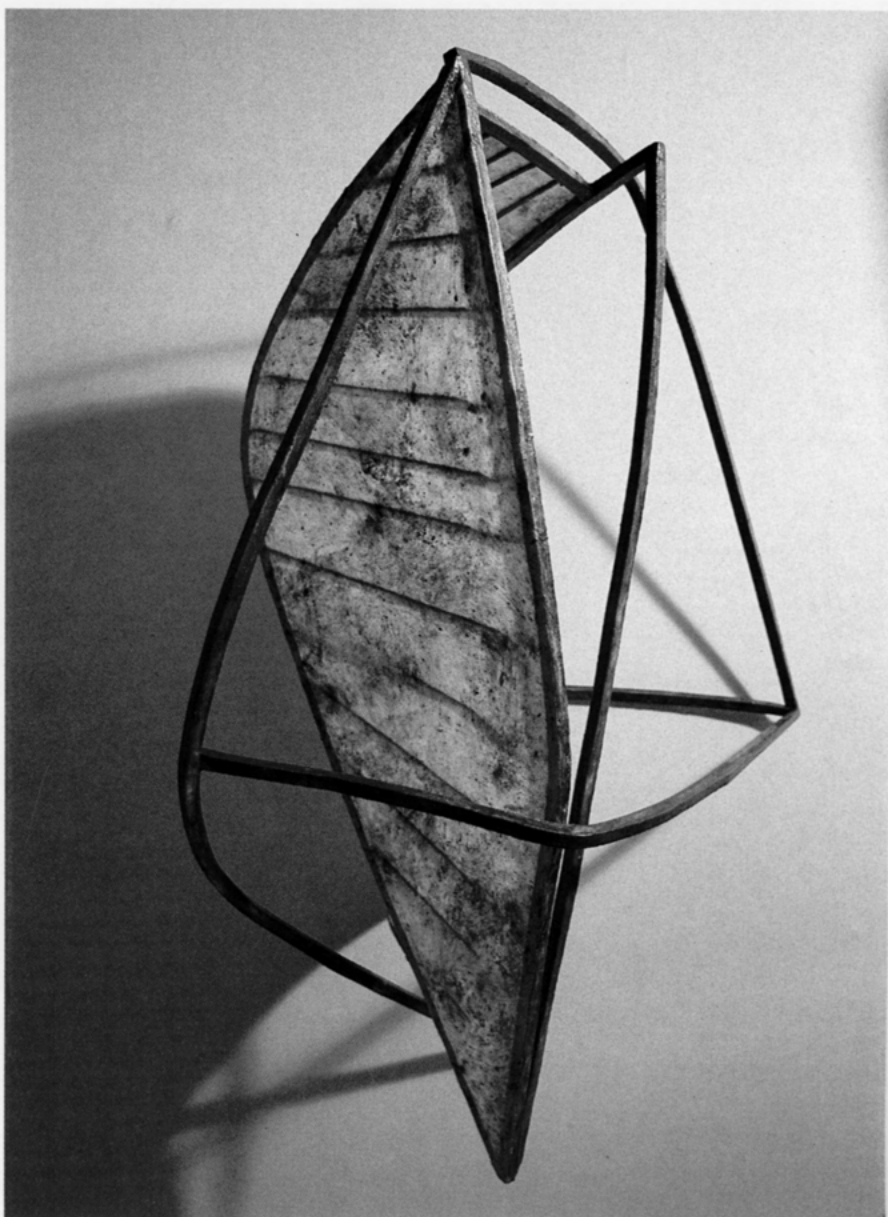
The Fine Arts Center / Cheekwood

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To associate the “primitive” with the “elegant” seems arbitrary at first glance, but the sculptures in this exhibition by David Hall and Creighton Michael embrace this paradox wholeheartedly. More to the point, each artist directly combines elements of the primitive with those of the elegant, resulting in a provocative synthesis of thought and emotion, ugliness and beauty, crudity and grace.

A description of a work of art as “primitive” refers to its appearance: archaic or unsophisticated form, executed with direct, uncomplicated craft in modest materials (such as bone, wood, stone) and the suggestion of a ritualistic function. A genuinely primitive object, its purpose obscured by the passage of time, presents the modern viewer with an enigma: What does it mean? What was its intention? Does its meaning change in a modern context?

Elegance—in the same light—refers to a more subtle selection of materials and a more sensitive handling of forms, all controlled by a balancing of tensions. More than the merely beautiful, elegance suggests a complex reality as revealed by a simple statement. A modern primitive—a folk artist—may produce elegant work precisely because of his limited means.



Creighton Michael

*"Shell 5", 1987 38" x 25" x 22"
Wood, Wax, Paper, Fiberglass*

Hall and Michael share these concerns and deal with them in unique ways.

Hall's works—which resemble models of spacecraft or boats—appear poised to launch into the atmosphere or ocean, yet are clearly incapable of doing so. They sit and hang in a state of suspended animation, conveying the idea of a voyage rather than the undertaking of one. As such, they refer to symbolic objects, similar to those found in burial tombs the world over—those in Egypt, particularly.

Hall creates a peculiar tension in his vessels by distorting their natural functions; they elude our expectations. The “Vehicle For Information” Series depicts boats tilted at acute angles, alluding to the lurch of bows against the waves of the ocean. The clumsiness of the oars on each boat heightens the precariousness of the respective cargos, while the saw-toothed / stone hulls make a voyage seem unlikely. The thrust of each “Vehicle” is constrained by the inertness of the materials (the gravity of the stone, the knottedness of the rope) even as each one appears to be careening out of control. The materials negate the form and function of the boats; the vessels “sink” beneath the weight of them.

The “Energy Devices” and “Rocketships” are similarly designed: the former are anchored in place on the cables by heavy weights and the latter are anchored to the floor by the umbilicus of the power-cord. The “Energy Devices” refer to abandoned vehicles or cast-off farm implements (strung-up high and dry), while the “Rocketships” resemble oversized cartoon fireworks (masquerading as area-lamps!). The potential energy in these works is unmistakable, but Hall again undermines it by leaving out the motors and providing ironic wit: “Zen Energy Device”. The ambiguity between toy, artifact and “real” object; the balance between heavy and light; the conflict between inert and active: each plays a part in Hall's sculpture.

This aesthetic has been further developed in the form of two performance pieces: “Metaphysical Navigation” and “Kyudo” (premiered at Cheekwood). Each performance takes place outdoors at dusk in a setting of light sculptures and electronic “space-music”; each refers to contemporary and primitive ritual events. In “Metaphysical Navigation”, Hall is dressed in a shaman-like costume and holds a divining-rod—both laced with live fireworks—while “dancing” about blindly before igniting a pillar into flames. “Kyudo” (Japanese Zen Archery) involves a similar use of costume, fireworks, music and the ignition of a target. The performances are ultimately metaphors on the plight of an artist attempting to express the ineffable.

Creighton Michael's work also alludes to primitive or found objects, though comparisons can be made to kites, shells, wings, hulls or horns—among others. “Trench”, an early work in five parts, resembles a set of Stone-Age flints. Like all of Michael's sculptures, the textured surfaces and large scale creates the sensation of weight and mass, yet the individual pieces are light enough to be picked up by hand. Their odd placement in the gallery only reinforces the urge to identify the work and draw comparisons to real objects. Despite these allusions, Michael's intentions lie elsewhere: to seduce the viewer into experiencing the phenomenology of the objects themselves.

The seduction here results from his technique of building the sculptures. They consist of Rhoplex-soaked papers layered like skin over a skeletal frame of wood, defining the shape. Over this layer a variety of materials are added: battered sheets of metal (brass, zinc, tin), scavenged bits of waste, acrylic paint, charcoal; surfaces are often sandpapered and abraded. The age of some materials adds to the illusion of a beautiful patina. At the other extreme, some of his sculptures—those with rubbed and blackened surfaces—suggest the transforma-

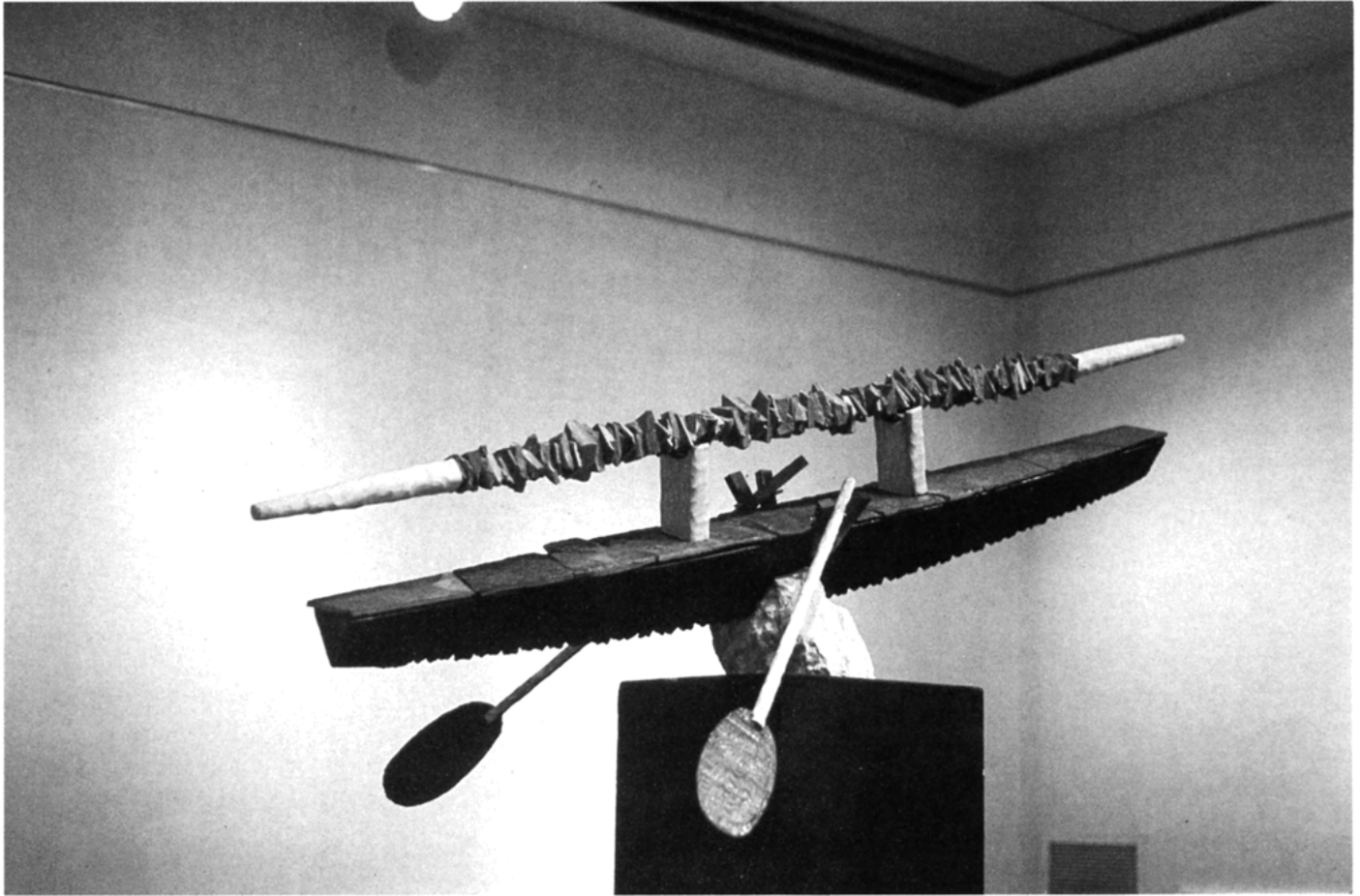
tion of what was once a drawing (charcoal on paper framed in wood) into a monstrous mutation.

Of critical importance is the placement of the sculptures. Michael purposely hangs them low to the floor, juts them out at acute angles or floats them out of reach overhead. This not only intensifies the angularity of each one, it further exaggerates their “objectness” and denies a viewing in the traditional manner. Not surprisingly, work installed in this fashion appears to have grown directly out from the wall or attached itself to it, like a giant chrysalis. One's interpretation of Michael's sculptures is essentially dependent on their placement, as well as their constructed contradictions.

Like Hall, Michael has pushed his work through an evolution which has resulted in an enriched look and a deepened meaning. “Par-Aquaba 2” and the more recent “Shell 5” are not only translucent, but the visibility of the wood framework and the undulating linear elements open the sculptures up in formal and psychological ways. Michael's surfaces are currently more painterly, his structures more vulnerable. The work is more seductive without losing its mystery.

David Hall and Creighton Michael have ultimately done that most contemporary of things: reconciled opposing ideologies and mixed them into a single hybrid. It is with this thought in mind that the works in this exhibition can be experienced: primitive elegance.

David Ribar
Curator of Exhibitions



David Hall

"Vehicle for Information", 1985 Wood, Stone 5' x 3' x 2'

David Hall Sculptures

1. "Vehicle For Information", 1985
5' x 2' x 3' Wood, Stone, Rope.
2. "Vehicle For Information", 1985
5' x 3' x 2' Wood, Stone.
3. "Vehicle For Information", 1985
5' x 2' x 3' Wood, Stone.
4. "Zen Energy Device", 1986
6' x 3' x 4' Canvas, Wood, Lead.
5. "Mechanical Energy Device", 1986
30' x 6' x 3' Wood, Canvas, Stone.
6. "Skyrocket", 1986
7' x 4' x 1' Mixed Media.
7. "Skyrocket 2", 1986
7' x 1' x 1' Mixed Media.

Creighton Michael Sculptures / Drawings

1. "Trench" (five pieces), 1985
5' each x variable dimensions
Paper, Wood, Charcoal.
2. "Buffalo", 1985
82" x 4" x 58" Wood, Charcoal, Metals.
3. "Traveller 6", 1985
32" x 5" x 42" Wood, Brass, Charcoal.
4. "Par-Aquaba 2", 1985
19" x 5" x 98" Paper, Wood, Acrylic.
5. "Shell 5", 1987
38" x 25" x 22" Paper, Wood, Wax, Fiberglass.
6. "Ur 2", 1986
17" x 13" Silverpoint on Paper.
7. "Ur 3", 1986
16" x 13 1/2" Silverpoint on Paper.
8. "Eze", 1987
18 1/2" x 18" Silverpoint on Paper.
9. "Eze 2", 1987
21 1/2" x 18" Silverpoint on Paper.

David Hall

Resides in Brentwood, TN

Education: MFA, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN 1985
BA, University of South Florida, Tampa, FL 1981
AA, Manatee Junior College, Brandenton, FL 1978

Selected Exhibitions:

- 1986— "Space: New Form/New Function", Arrowmont School for Arts and Crafts, Gatlinburg, TN.
"Whirlpool Corporation Sculpture Competition", KRASL Art Center, St. Joseph, MI.
"METAPHYSICAL NAVIGATION", performed at "Summer Lights", Nashville, TN; "The Atlanta Arts Festival", Atlanta, GA; University of Pennsylvania, California, PA; Landivar University, Guatemala City, Guatemala.
- 1985— "Microwave", Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN.
"Sculpture In The Space Age", Huntsville Museum of Art, Huntsville, AL; Lafayette Museum of Art, Lafayette, LA.
- 1984— "27th Annual Delta Art Exhibition", Arkansas Art Center, Little Rock, AR.
"13th Biennial Michiana Art Competition", Art Center, South Bend, IN.
"The Water Tower Annual", WT Art Association, Louisville, KY.

David Hall received the Tennessee Arts Commission's "Visual Artist Grant" for 1987.

Creighton Michael

Resides in Brooklyn, NY

Education: MFA, Washington University, St. Louis, MO 1978
MA, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN 1976
BFA, University of Tennessee, Knoxville, TN 1971

Selected Exhibitions:

- 1987— "Art At The Edge: Creighton Michael", High Museum of Art, Atlanta GA.
"Hybrid", Addison/Ripley Gallery, Washington, DC.
One Person, Craig Cornelius Gallery, New York, NY.
- 1986— "Two Sculptors", East Hampton Center for Contemporary Art, East Hampton, NY.
"The Sculptural Membrane", The Sculpture Center, New York, NY.
"Wall Sculpture", Saxon-Lee Gallery, Los Angeles, CA.
"Natural Sources, Abstract Sculpture", P.S. 122, New York, NY.
- 1985— "Sculpture: The Language of Scale", The Bruce Museum, Greenwich, CT.
"Exceptions 3: Paperworks", Pratt Institute, Pratt Manhattan Center Gallery, New York, NY.
- 1984— "Constructed Image/Constructed Object", Alternative Museum, New York, NY.
"Transformation Of The Minimal Style", The Sculpture Center AATP, New York, NY.

Creighton Michael received a New York Foundation for the Arts Fellowship in 1987 and a Pollock-Krasner Foundation Grant in 1985.