

MURRAY MACDONALD/R. HOLLAND MURRAY : RECENT WORK

Though there appears to be little visual affinity between the work by Murray MacDonald and R. Holland Murray, a kindred spirit does exist. Both artists express a strong interest in their ethnological origins as the content of their work. Inspiration is drawn from religion, from evolutionary signposts, from the archaic, and from primitive ritual. Their work is symbolic, communicating universal aspects of spiritual events and the human condition, an art form suggestive of emotional awareness where rational language is merely explanatory. Shared formal concerns for "truth to material" and frontal orientation also becomes apparent. Theirs is a new and cogent syntax which merges with the mainstream of postmodernist ideology.

Murray MacDonald works in cold-rolled steel and aluminum plate, the materials of an industrialized Northern culture. Architectural studies at the École des Beaux Arts in Paris and at the University of British Columbia have led him to explicit architectonic references in his sculpture. These references are not presented by way of similitude but more in "essence". They are coded responses to the spirituality of the architectural monument and of technological wonders. They are also decidedly Euro-American in source. In *Untitled*, 1983, (cat. 7) for example, Romanesque arches have become the dominant architectural component, a sequence of tripartite vaulting first appearing in fourth-century Rome, then pervading religious and institutional constructions across Europe.¹ The paired vertical columns in *Untitled*, 1984, (cat. 5) bear striking "spiritual" resemblance to the piers of suspension bridges such as those in Vancouver (Lion's Gate) or San Francisco (Golden Gate). As MacDonald began his career as a West Coast (Vancouver) artist, this reference becomes not only structural but specifically geographic. Thus by virtue of the subject and choice of material, MacDonald is closely aligned with culturo-technological history. Whether the origin of this expression is conscious or subliminal, it is nonetheless a cultural ego-ideal² — an attitude representative of a distinct group — an industrialized Western society. While this archetypal³ aspect of MacDonald's work is trenchant and abiding, it must be considered secondary to more formal concerns of the manipulation of space. The contrary is true of R. Holland Murray.

Murray's work is inextricably culture bound. The artist consciously and fervently seeks to explore the cross-fertilization of European and African cultural traditions. His approach can be considered "Blackstream", the refusal to deny the reality and existence of negritude within Afro-American society and within twentieth-century Western art. It is a non-passive ideological position established not to create or enunciate differences, but to examine the larger experience of history and culture in conflict with one another. Murray goes beyond the collision of ancestral traditions to the *prima materia* of experience that underlies all art and life.

Since 1979 Murray has been moving away from his early interests in painting on a two dimensional surface toward a manipulation of colour and image on mixed-media assemblages.⁴ In these recent compositions wood becomes the principal element, the physical and psychodynamic centre of the work. By Western standards wood is a substance most expressive of the artist's mother African cultural lineage. More importantly to Murray, it is a medium with physical characteristics that readily lends itself to painting, polychroming, carving and attachment. A summary catalogue of materials affixed to Murray's totemic creations include : feathers, hair, bone, teeth, plaster, cement, coins, leather, cloth, stone, bells, and shell casings. The artist employs this grab-bag of materials as a means to challenge "the assumed references inherent in the original objects,"⁵ and by juxtaposition, "to question the dichotomy between African and American visual vocabularies."⁶

Both MacDonald and Murray use standard size, factory-shaped material and remain faithful to the intrinsic properties of their chosen mediums. MacDonald uses each material so distinctly and appropriately that his sensitivity to the properties of the metal becomes manifest. Steel is utilized for its tensile strength, its relative bulk and its dark, matte (oiled) effect; aluminum for its light weight, manageability and ethereal, reflective quality. The artist does not paint his pieces as a means of cancelling disparities or of disembodiment the substance of the work. The bold literalness of steel plate and aluminum sheet is heightened by a manipulation process that leaves no marks of the "handling" process to distract from "surface". There remains no choppy irregular slag and kerf as a result of cuts made in steel plate with an acetylene torch, nor the wavy edges with transversal ridges produced by using a band saw. There is no evidence of bead formed by the fusion of parts. MacDonald's sculptures exist in a somewhat mystic state that tends to deny

procedural antecedents. In this sense they are minimalist in voice.

Much of Murray's thought and work is based upon the apparent assumption that the image is inherent in the material itself. He often sorts through discarded wooden studs and planking in search of twisted, knotted and cracked members whose flawed natural existence suggest an aesthetic use (see *The Prophets*, 1985, cat. 8). This concept is reminiscent of primitive tribal place-making - the choice of village sites that has as much to do with ideas of spiritual order as with the practicalities of proximity to food and water. Like these sites, Murray's assemblages, in a sense, pre-exist their rendering. A similar pre-existing force is at work in the enhancement of surface. His style of embellishment moves back and forth between the decorative and the expressive. Decorative elements come out of a meditative use of geometry and colour; patterns of symbols combined until a spirituality or relevance is intuitively sensed. Amulet-like adornment using "found" objects suggests anthropological sources of inspiration and sets up ethnic connotations. An overall pervading sense of the handmade supports the strong reference to primitive ritual art. Murray is charting a precinct of the "spirit" larger than the individual⁷, yet existing as part of his self-conscious, cultural identity.

The spatial/sculptural concerns of MacDonald and Murray are at once similar and different. The work of both artists places an emphasis on frontality. In MacDonald's small metal pieces, the manipulation of the observer⁸ to an optimal point of viewing is the prime operative principle. The observer becomes a participant by being drawn to the "face" of the sculpture. This is achieved, in part, due to the inference of "entrance" - openings allude to tunnels, passageways or doors; ramps and stairs beckon the viewer to approach. Symmetry and centripetal force also play important roles. Viewed parallel to the main axis of the human body and at right angles to the sagittal plane, these sculptures are pure demonstrations of bilateral symmetry and reflection. For example, in the aluminum piece *Untitled*, 1983, (cat. 6) observation must be made directly from the front if the illusionistic space is to be fully perceived. Reflections of the ramp on the sculpture's two wings radiate from the central axis appearing to form an arc greater in angle than the ninety degree corner in which the piece rests. The concept of centre is enhanced through the use of symmetry/reflection and through the exposition of four-square logic. The works are horizontally grounded and the uppermost parts are always parallel to the floor. Contours are strongly linear; profiles are

contained. Active elements of the sculpture are sandwiched between the floor and the horizontal limits causing the interior components to become more dynamic due to the rigidity of their confines. The tight boundaries of these works turn all the vitality generated by the play of pure "internal" geometry back within the sculpture. MacDonald establishes a "spiritual space"⁹ at the centre of his pieces - an afferent core, remarkable for its sense of compressed energy.

Murray's concerns with frontality have much to do with his legacy as a painter¹⁰. Indeed he has referred to his assemblages as "environments on which to paint",¹¹ and as some of his "best paintings."¹² Works such as the totemic, world tree entitled *The Prophets* were largely conceived on, and oriented toward, a single perceptual plane. The prophets symbolically represented are arranged so as to be logically read from left to right, in chronological order : Abraham, Krishna, Moses, Zoroaster, Buddha, Christ, Muhammed, Bab, and Baha-u-llah. The spatial arrangement of the uprights spread along a narrow horizontal base and the manner of embellishment suggests a frontage that demands priority viewing. Masks such as *Untitled*, 1985, (cat. 13) eliminate all vantage points other than frontal by virtue of their attachment to the wall. Still other works including *Serendipity*, 1985, (cat. 9) and *Variegation*, 1985, (cat. 10) direct the viewer to a peep-hole or window. While these "boxes" more than any other pieces by Murray, seem to initiate cycloidal observation, they nonetheless momentarily halt the spectator at the artist's "chosen" vantage point - that of the optical viewing device. Despite varied asymmetric form, a multipartite construct, the disparate nature of component elements, and the use of uncircumscribed space, the temptation to circle these assemblages is diminished by Murray's projection of a convincing magnetic "front".

Murray MacDonald and R. Holland Murray have found their respective idioms. They are just now coming into their stride. At this juncture, it is time to step back, take notice, and let the expressive energy, spirit and integrity of their art works prevail.

Allan Pringle