Douglas Bentham: The Tablets

Esperanza: an elegy for a love once remembered, now lost

For centuries, artists and art admirers have been captivated by the brooding message purveyed by the painting by Nicolas Poussin, Et in Arcadia Ego. The Arcadian shepherds happen upon a phrase engraved upon a weathered, ancient tombstone, which could be paraphrased: Even in the land of Arcadia, death is ever present. They express astonished dismay at the revelation of the tragedy of our mortality. Art and artists, however, have chosen to adopt an opposite posture. Like the Poussin painting, they conspire to cheat death, to defy its inevitability and create emblems of permanence intended to last for posterity. Ars longa vita brevis (Art is long, life is short) is an aphorism attributed to the ancient Greek physician Hippocrates. It has been a rallying cry for artists, a solace to bolster them against the trials and tribulations of the trade. Take heart. At least know this: history will remember; your reward, although delayed, is assured. So, as I commence my art historical funerary procession through the aisles of Bentham's The Tablets to assess and report their message, I need to pause and remember yet another famous piece of advice from the very same author, The Hippocratic Oath: First, do no harm.

What do we encounter? Douglas Bentham's The Tablets consists of twenty-seven same-sized welded-metal assemblage sculptures, displayed upon sanded, unpainted pine plywood plinths arranged in symmetrically-aligned rows. We have customarily seen Bentham as the creator of unitary objects. Each of the components in The Tabletscould stand alone as an individual art work; the exhibition instead being a gathering of works drawn from a related series. However, this is evidently intended as a composite, an installation, and we are compelled to address it as such.

The chosen descriptor, The Tablets, is specific; they are not The Plaques or some other secular variant. Their physical scale and overall rounded-top appearance sends us off to thoughts of Mt. Sinai, The Ten Commandments and all things Judaic or biblical. Yes, Moses smashed the original tablets, and yes, these Bentham Tablets are pieced together, but still this is not working for me. Yet, I still find myself whistling through the graveyard whether it is the re-enactment of The Legend of Sleepy Hollow or the prairie version of the Terracotta Warriors (The Tablets do have some semblance of the appearance of a display of suits of armour). At its face, there is something melancholic, introspective and wistful about this work.

I suppose some of it is self-evident. They are composed of assembled fragments, remnants from a time past and other lives lived. Unmistakably, components are sourced from in memoriam commemorative plaques. Forged in bronze as permanent lasting tributes offered by their beloved families and friends,

somehow, these tokens of endearing lasting affection have ended up on the scrapheap. Even eternity has its day. Bentham expropriates these and other found metal objects; he cuts, crops and molds them into his compositions. He has selectively chosen to retain some letters as complete, decipherable words, others are left as inferred phrases that we inevitably find ourselves puzzling to piece together: HU-MAN, DIE, HELL, DE-ER, HER, OH/Mother/TRIBUTE, Memory. All interspersed with floating dates, presumably birth/death dates. (Is this the textbook definition of cryptic?). One could amusingly observe that in museum parlance the exhibition label copy is referred to as its tombstone data. Bentham disembodies these signifiers from their corporeal source. This is not a eulogy solely for Hamlet's Yorick, we are all implicated. Bentham includes pictorial vignettes of a rosary, a rose, wheat sheaves, pine needles and maple leaves. It is not as though these are time specific. Regardless, the choice of these decorative embellishments conjures associations with another time and place only faintly recalled. Archeology and the evidence of time passing apparently persist in current-day Saskatchewan, equally as it does at the site of Aztec ruins, classical Greece or Arcadia.

A huge swath of historical sculpture has been devoted to funerary commemoration from the pyramids to cenotaphs, to portrait busts and Maya Lin's Vietnam Veterans Memorial. However, at every turn Bentham has 'sponged away' (ground away?) all references to specific people. The works are exhibited on the plinths, often set at a 45-degree angle, holding in check some of the blunt allusions to cemetery tombstones. He may be referring to the passage of something other than persons.

Most evidently the analytic cubist pictures of the 1910s by Braque, Picasso and company spring to mind. The inclusion of typography fragments, overlapping planes, accentuated framing devises and a sonorous palette of uniform, near-monochrome brown-ness recall their trademark compositional conceits. If these remained mere formal design elements we could wrap this up; we are witnessing the transposition of a respected modernist, stylistic pictorial precedent into bas-relief sculpture. However, The Tablets will not cooperate, the works are shape-shifters. Somewhere lurks a recollection of the delightful, playful, abstracted compositions of Paul Klee. The planar, frontal slab structure of these Bentham works leads us to recall the idiosyncratic surrealist sculpture of Alberto Giacometti of the 1930s and the corresponding reprise by Max Ernst in the 1940s. At this point we are heading out of formalist territory into the domain of psychology and poetic narration.

Many sculptors are obsessed with mass, weight and the density of material substance. In essence an underlying presumption about sculpture, even abstract sculpture, was that it was essentially grounded in notions about the human body. The trunk, as the largest component, acted as the central core qualified by offsetting smaller gestures represented by the appendages of arms, hands, legs, feet and head. During the heyday of modernist invention in the 1960s and 1970s it was widely discussed that in order for true innovation in abstract sculpture to evolve, it had to shatter this presumption. Sculptors such as Anthony Caro, Andre Fauteux, Robert Murray, as well as Douglas Bentham, conspired

compositions that ‘vacated the middle’. They spread their formal elements laterally to the ‘periphery’ of the work, or else scattered, disjointed and spread separate objects throughout a room. Bentham’s works reverse this process and return to founding principles. Each coalesces around their middle.

Like Ernst’s sculptures, The Tablets works strike me as personages, or at minimum they exude personality, emblematic of individuals. Although they are composed of assembled, near-same-sized boxes, each is irregular. The sculptures strike a pose, contrapposto, jaunty or jocular, asymmetric and organic, but definitely neither rectilinear nor mechanical. If they had been displayed upon pristine white plinths they would assume a different comportment; the natural colour and grain of the unpainted pine softens the aura of deathly pallor. I may not be correct that these sculptures are human in their nature; however, they are most certainly humane.

Yet, viewed from a different angle they take on the appearance of architectural structures assembled in compartments. They are Moshe Safdie Habitat 67gone mad, rows of Venetian tenements, a prairie palazzo. One has me smiling thinking Chrysler building meets Transformers robots meets Tatlin’s Tower replete with gargoyles. All have some form of ‘cap’, a notable top flourish whether it be arches or a spire. This side of The Tablets has me considering the art of the early 1960s, pre Expo 67. Elaborate bas-relief textural treatments and decorations adorned the surfaces of otherwise stern geometric buildings. This proclivity too is a victim of time.

The Tablets works are Janus figures, split personalities. On the face they are the storefronts of Western Canada decked out with street-side, false-front ostentation masking a modest, plain-Jane smaller structure behind. Is this nostalgia; if so, for what? Do they lament the passing of the era of the hand-built prairie town? Does it long for the possibility of embracing an art that is narrative, representational, sentimental, personal and filled with deep emotion?

The Tablets works do an ‘about face’. They have a front and a back. They are presented consistently with all ‘fronts’ facing forward as we enter. None are interspersed with backs showing to the front. We only view the backs and the obverse viewpoint after we have travelled deep into the installation. The fronts are rich in text and ornamentation. The flip side of Bentham’s Tablets pays homage to the grand tradition of 1960s – 1970s modernist formalist abstraction: Michael Steiner, Anthony Caro, the David Smith Cubi series, and importantly to Bentham’s own auspicious contributions to this very movement. On this side of the artist’s temperament, the plates are burnished, text and images ground off, and the planes richly coloured by patina and material switches. This is territory well-travelled by the artist, and so we perhaps pause less and accept that it is offered as counterpoint, not the main point. It is evident that Bentham could have made complete works, consistently using either one stylistic approach or the other. It is precisely because of their duality that we are forced to contend and grapple with this material fact as being integral to their message. The Tablets are a collective portrait of the artistic travels of a senior artist. Does either side represent his past, deep past, or else his present and future? There

are offered clues and inferences, but no clear path. Like the Arcadian shepherds we are left to discern our own meanings: philosophic, psychological and aesthetic.

The sad reality is that Hippocrates' eloquent offer is cold comfort. One half of his equation is assured: Vita Brevis/ Life is Short. On the other hand, Ars Longa/ Art is Long is not at all a certainty. Not all art and all artists will survive the passage of time. Only through the power and poignancy of our poetic musings do we deny death its victory. Douglas Bentham's The Tablets recounts a love affair with art. His work expresses unabashed affection toward the inspirations that shaped his past and present. Fashions for artistic styles sometimes ebb and flow; some momentarily drop out of public view. Douglas Bentham's fondness for the profound lessons drawn from the accomplishments of the past is imprinted upon his art and memory.

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