CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, NORTHRIDGE

ENVIRONMENTAL SCULPTURE
Concrete As a Bridge Between Man and Nature

An abstract submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Art

by

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ABSTRACT

ENVIRONMENTAL SCULPTURE
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by
Joseph J. Friedman
Master of Arts in Art
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STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

The completion of a Master of Arts Degree in Art, sculpture, to be specific, often takes on a certain peculiar air when it comes to putting down on paper the purpose of the work done in accomplishing a Master's Degree.

When a graduate student plans a Master's Thesis outside the Performing Master's areas, it usually consists of a well laid out plan of research and accomplishment. He states what he wants to do, why, and how he will go about it. There is a definite plan that allows the candidate to know his progress and when he is finished.

The Performing Master's in Art presents a different situation. It would be extremely difficult for an artist to set a specific goal in his development at the end of a
specified period of time. He is probably unaware of what he will be doing in his work at the end of six months, let alone a year, two years, or three years. Therefore, the exhibition that an artist puts on as partial completion of his Master's Degree probably represents only a space in time. The works shown may be those executed in a space of several years, and therefore, show the mark of change, because an artist is always changing; or it may be only one or two works that represent that artist as he is only on the day of his exhibition.

I have chosen to show works that took in the neighborhood of two years to execute. But, they still represent only a very small period of time in my artistic development. In this abstract, I will briefly discuss the nature of my medium, cast concrete, and its relationship to my work. I will also describe the elements inherent in my work and catalogue the sculpture that I have presented in my Master's Exhibition.
DEVELOPMENTAL NOTES

The medium that I am working in at this time, has certain characteristics that require special considerations. The medium is concrete. Cast concrete originally attracted my attention when I was taking sculpture as an undergraduate course at UCLA around 1960. It was not the material, concrete, that had attracted me, but the method of casting it. I saw ordinary wet beach sand being used in a very simple, straightforward manner. The process could take place at the beach, directly above the tide line, so that the sand was wet and packed, or it could be done anywhere else with the sand confined in a box, wet down and packed. One simply carved a negative mold form in the sand and then poured in plaster, concrete, or any other casting material. This is the same way that sand-cast candles are made. There was nothing new about using sand as a mold material; sands of different kind have been used to cast metal for centuries. I was attracted to the straightforwardness of carving the mold in the sand. It is possible to make very intricate forms, including deep undercuts, even tunnel structures that penetrate to another area of the mold, without the sand collapsing. That is, provided great care is taken in not putting too much stress in any one place or that the sand doesn't dry out and collapse.
When I began working towards my Master's, I decided to revive my interest in sand casting concrete. It didn't take long to realize that if I wanted to get the most out of the medium, it would be necessary to devote a major amount of time to picking up technical know-how. With every project I attempted, new technical problems arose. Initially, whenever I had to lift something out of the mold, I had to muster five or six men to help with the lifting. Eventually, I had to spend a great deal of time constructing equipment that would make it possible to lift and move each concrete piece by myself.

Another major problem involved the wet beach sand as a mold during hot weather. When the mold would dry, the form collapsed. To alleviate this, I embarked on extensive experiments to find an additive that would either keep the mold from drying out or hold the form when it did become too dry. The solution finally came in adding four percent fire clay to the sand.

It is not necessary to talk about concrete from a technical standpoint in this paper, because that information is available elsewhere.

In a relatively short time, I became less interested in the casting process and more interested in the form to which concrete lent itself. The casting was then done in any type of mold that suited the form and could be fabricated in the least amount of time.
I attempted to deal with cast concrete on its level, drawing from it the feeling and emotion that the material evokes. Concrete, with its various aggregates, is a man-made material used primarily as a building material. It is associated with big, massive structures, with the idea of strength and support, with weight and immobility. I quickly developed my own feelings about concrete. I saw concrete as man-made, but very closely related to nature because of its earthen ruggedness and durability. As man-made stone, it belongs primarily in the environment, closely related to landscape as well as architecture. All of my sculpture seems to require being placed in and related to foliage and other natural environmental elements. As if a material taken from nature should be returned to nature.

At no time did I ever attempt to disguise the material with paint or color that suggested anything except possibly stone, because I saw the central character of concrete to be man's attempt to simulate or take the place of natural rock in a material more easily shifted to man's needs. Also, to cover the surface would make no sense, because the weight of concrete would have made it a ridiculous material to use. If I didn't want anyone to know what it was, I would be better off using a lighter, more manageable material. But, at the same time that I did not disguise the medium, and thereby deny the nature
of the material and its obvious weight, I did begin to play games with the emotional character evoked by concrete. I found myself designing sculpture that defied, if not denied, its weight and immobility. I seemed to want my sculptures to appear as though they had little or no support, at least not enough to handle such heavy material. The sculpture may even have a feeling of movement to it that opposes the natural downward, solid idea evoked by this heavy product. The forms that create this element of defiance frequently evoke a feeling of tension as a byproduct of upsetting the natural, expected, character of concrete.

Another element injected in several of my works is that of surprise. In one case, it may be a surprise interior; in another, it may be an unexpected texture.

The most predominant element in my work, and the one that suggests my present direction, is contrast. This is seen primarily as contrasts of textural form. I was interested in the visual play between rather regular, somewhat symmetrical forms having a very smooth even texture on surfaces that are from geometric to smoothly curved or gently undulating and surfaces that may be very coarse, jagged, rough or wildly undulating. The choice of the specific texture contrast would be dictated intuitively by the basic shape. The textures and surfaces would contrast with each other as much as possible,
almost to the point of being opposites but still remain within their context. The last sculptures executed for my Master's Exhibition illustrated that the texture and form I was working on revolved around the obviously man-made, smooth, geometric forms in contrast with what appears to be almost naturally eroded, organic texture and form.

There is one other element that is only partly explored in my work so far. That is the element of water. Water is an indispensable element in the formation of concrete. And, after it has set, water continues to harden and strengthen this material. It is only natural that water would continue to have an affinity to concrete in a sculptural form and give it strength in an emotional sense. I find that I will work out a design for a sculpture, and I will find that water works well within it as an added element that seems like it was designed into the piece, but if left out, it doesn't leave the impression of something missing. This may seem peculiar, but I see it as an expression that water running on and about concrete is a natural extension of the material and actually gives life to it, and releases its tensions.
CATALOGUE OF EXHIBITED WORKS WITH NOTES

UNTITLED #5

Untitled #5 is sometimes referred to as the Dual Monolith. One rectangular block sits solidly on the ground with another of similar shape sitting solidly on the first block. The two blocks are closely related by their shape and size as well as the similarity of texture that covers the interior of each block. The sculpture is made one by the open passage between the two. This is an example of a piece that would work well with water added. The water would come from openings in the upper inside corners of the top block and run down over the interior, undulating surface.

UNTITLED #6

Untitled #6 was designed specifically as a fountain. Yet, if the water is not running, different feelings are evoked without the absence of water giving the impression of something missing. Tensions are created by the juxtaposition of the two primary forms and the seemingly flimsy support for them. The texture on the interior is so forbidding that it would consume or at least scratch an intruding hand. But when the water is turned on, most of these feelings disappear or are relaxed. The water sheets over the top, creating small pools on part of
it, then drips down to the second level releasing the tension between the two forms and almost giving the illusion of helping to support the upper form. In the interior, the jagged forms become islands in a lake. The water then runs over the edge and drips from the underside and again relieves the tension in the sculpture and gives the impression of helping to support it.

UNTITLED #8

53" x 35" x 38"

Untitled #8 suggests a cell splitting or a mitosis form. A good deal of feeling of outward motion and tension is created by this form. The defiance of concrete's natural tendency is there. The concrete takes on some elasticity and movement. Water could drip from the interior as if in a cavern. It would even give the feeling that the splitting object was alive and sweating or bleeding. This sculpture was, by far, the hardest to execute of those exhibited.

UNTITLED #9

48" x 24", base 22" x 30"

Untitled #9 is a round column form. This sculpture best exemplifies the direction I was working when my Master's Exhibition opened. The column is smooth and geometric on the top and bottom sections. In the center, being squeezed by the man-made forms, is a section of organic texture that appears to have been naturally eroded away. This area defies detection as to how else it
could have formed. On its high base, this piece takes on a monumental, architectural quality. There is tension created by the pressure on the center section and this very heavy piece proves to be sitting on only a few short steel rods atop its base.

UNTITLED #10  
36" x 26", base 38.5" x 22"  

Untitled #10 could also be known as the Dome II because I originally attempted this piece at an earlier date, but due to technical problems it did not work out. The defiance of the emotional qualities of concrete is in full flower in this piece. This concrete sculpture, which four strong men can not lift, is supported only by eight thin steel rods. Further, its very shape suggests upward movement rather than down. When a viewer stands normally, all that is seen is a domed shape, resting on steel rods which in turn rest on a brush finished metal plate. Then he sees that a light is projecting on the metal plate which draws him to bend down and look under the sculpture for the light source. He does not see the light source, but he discovers the angular interior of the piece. The light also adds to the uplift of the piece by projecting down as if to push up off the base like a rocket.

UNTITLED #11  
36" x 8", base 38" x 28" x 16"  

Untitled #11 is a disc form with a hole in the center that is reminiscent of the form of an ancient
coin. The disc's round, relatively smooth outer surface quickly turns to undulating, organic form and texture as it thins and moves toward the center where the surface disappears into the opening void. The two sides of the disc differ somewhat in coarseness of the texture. The disc can revolve on its base to allow either side to be presented or left at an angle. The way that the edge of the disc rests on the base gives people an uneasy feeling, as if the disc might fall or roll off.
CONCLUSION

Since I began working in cast concrete, two questions kept coming up from people I associated with, met, or asked for help: "Why do you work in concrete?" and "Have you ever considered switching to Styro-foam?"

It was somewhat like a very tall person being asked, "How's the weather up there?" There are obvious answers to the first question; it has interesting texture, feel, versatility, and its cheap. But, in the back of my head, I occasionally felt there might be a psychological relationship between my size and weight, and that of concrete. Generally, you wouldn't expect someone 6'2" and 240 lbs, to work at something too delicate. Another thought was suggested to me by a passage from the book, "A Modern Book of Esthetics", edited by Melvin Rader. The poet Friedrich Schiller maintained that the source of both play and art is overflowing energy. Even when a lion, for example, is not hungry or mad, it playfully expends its surplus energy through roaring. Though I used to get a great deal of exercise in athletics, in recent years, I have gotten little exercise. I could be transferring and expending energy to and through my work.

An accident I had about a year ago, that involved the weight and bulk of my concrete and nearly injured me severely, made me pause to ponder over what I was doing.
I was working in a very heavy material. Was it the right material to use? Could I do the same thing in another material? Was it worth the sweat and risk to use concrete? The pause to ponder reinforced my feelings that I was working in the right material for the type designs I was working on. Cast concrete has as much or more flexibility as most castable materials. In addition, it has the undeniable quality of permanence. The character of the material could only be duplicated in stone and that would not be an easier alternative. I decided intuitively and by educated experience that my designs were best served by the use of concrete in their execution. How long this will persist is anyone's guess. I am always changing. And this space out of time will pass on to be replaced by newly evolving ideas and solutions for their realization.
Figure 1

Untitled #5

73" x 24" x 14"
Figure 2

Untitled #6

40" x 46" x 46"
Figure 3

Untitled #8

53" x 35" x 38"

Base 42" wide
Figure 4

Untitled #9

48" x 24"

base 22" x 30"
Figure 5

Untitled #10
36" x 26"
Base 38.5" x 22"
Figure 6

Untitled #11

36" x 8"

Base 38" x 28" x 16"