

PRESS RELEASE
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Sculptor Ted Berryman at the Santa Ysabel Art Gallery

LEARNING TO SPEAK

The Artist's Narrative

"If art could boast, it would speak of redefining nature, bringing one to a more natural order again and again toward the ultimate sanity." Thus the sculpture of Ted Berryman teaches ~~him~~ to speak. In speaking through the unconscious of his hands, the sculpture becomes ^{not} the language of its maker, nor its own narrative, but is nothing more than hearing itself.

The pieces in this show represent a radical transformation for the artist. Look at these pieces; the startling consciousness of them, and then compare what you see to this review of sculpture by Ted Berryman done ten years ago:

"Flamenco' seems to have been sculpted by the wind. It is fragile, yet vigorous, delicate and rhythmic wood of a flamenco dancer and was sold before the show opened."

Indeed, up until only a few years ago, Berryman's style reflected an organicness that paid homage to the materials he worked in -- lyrical curves that brought out the grains of the oaks, or the patterns of marble, or the hardness of granite.

This show exhibits the explorations of the artist into more personally relevant themes, with almost an urban sense of divided consciousness, although Berryman has

always lived away from the city, now living in a remote mountain area of Southern California.

Berryman writes of this transformation:

“Finally, when I set the tools down and stood back I saw something that I had made, but couldn’t see that I had burned through a decade of myself. . . . Letting this prompt my memory, slipping back to when vigor blew through me impulsively, remembering back to when I first began to carve up chips of matter, to carve up wood, then stone, young, I see it was a runaway apprenticeship whose season was bound to end. It was Spring.”

Several of the pieces here let you walk with him on that transformation. You will see some sculptures that have a kind of symphonic grace, all sublimity and tenderness, and some that more disturbingly speak of Berryman’s emergence from being in exile from himself. An exile, he believes, that came about as a result of not recognizing his own changing nature.

In the artist’s own words:

“Such are the dangers an artist lives with, because the artist, through the blooming and shattering of intensity, changes in the process of work. The danger being that if the process and object outflank the artist’s awareness, willingness, or capacity to change, then some sort of physic splitting seems to take place: Exile.”

One of this show’s most powerful images is *Christ Crucified*. Commissioned by a Catholic church in San Francisco some dozen years ago, but never paid for and thus never delivered, the piece is described by Berryman:

“Day after day I pondered something I couldn’t see but carved away a piece of wood. Sharpening the tools just right, noticing how the grain shifts, shuffling through the chips, the smells. . . . It was started when the air was beginning to stir and was becoming green and humid and as heavy as some

fire with the earnest tendrils of spring, and finished only after pods had lost temper, tendrils their vigor, seeds lost. . . . Joy was the day, each day.

“Christ Crucified was cried and carved as an ascending growth of roots, or scions extending like running children up over Christ’s head: a prize of passion. Blind. Futureless. . . . The eternal symbol of the cross, but with a horizontal member visually reduced in value, the buckled knees and the weight of the head, the draped slabs of ribs, becoming the only melancholy referents to the pathos, the ground, to weight, to the burden of livelihood. The vertical devaluing personality, uncategorical community, concrete particularities of policy. Body weight is not explicit, but is only implied; its recognition not significant of place of placement but of displacement: Exile.

“The knees buckle together under no weight, tenses between earth and sky. The torso hollow as if completely overwhelmed by the fight of forces, the bitter victory of time. The horizontal dimension is lost. Implied is the attitude that there is no point on the horizontal axis that has value enough to restrain its loss.”

This is the work of an artist consumed by knowing and exploring. A tour of the artist’s studio finds one long wall of bookshelves, holding a few collections of art studies, but mostly holding a wide range of poetry, philosophy, and psychological works that give hint of the search for purpose that courses through all Berryman’s work. Indeed, even the accidental breaking of one of the artist’s most significant pieces inspires insight into the reason for that breakage. Here, he describes in elaborate detail the “story” of his piece, *The Pieta: Flower that Comes Out from Beneath the Broken Stone*.

“You can see that the stone has been broken. The circumstances of this accident reveal the mysterious effectiveness of postponing ‘Law,’ of bringing Law inside oneself and holding it in a state of anxiety. When the

stone was completed it was too long for how brittle it was. It reached too far, a common weakness of the Law. Overextending themselves, each arm opposed the center, and were no more than three inches in diameter, and spanned ten feet from tip to tip. The broken pieces of granite, however, remain a part of the piece and can be seen, tragically, here in the gallery. Anything that is so long and so brittle is framed by the whole issue of breakage and correction of balance.

“I was pleased with this ‘sculpture.’ It was completed. It spoke of skill, single origins, distinctness, inviolability of place. But soon a vague dissatisfaction set in. I began to see it as intolerably complacent and smugly self-sufficient. I started to resent the way its arms conquered territory; its long reach pointed inward to the perfect sphere between the two arms, and flanked by the regality of lotus petals which symbolized, like a mirror, its flawless symmetry. Speaking of rejuvenation, its center, in being so ‘eternally’ joined to the single axis, seemed to deny forever the opposite axis, and therefore radical ‘feminine’ change of the Law.

“So I named him. He was definitely a ‘him’ and I named him Marvin. Yes, the Law was named and in being particularized it was stripped of the power it gets from operating in secret. The Law was brought into the streets, a citizen, as Marvin, a mortal, disturbed and weakened by his rigidity, and easily, so easily, subjected to -- Betsy.

Berryman tell that Betsy was to “mess with” Marvin. To unsmug him. He carved, from clear pine, an erotic double flower which opened from Marvin’s center, but along the opposite axis. He describes Betsy as being in control of a reality that is completely inaccessible to Marvin as he is: “Marvin has gender and is political, Betsy has sex and has guile.” And Betsy “wears her brashness radiantly but gaudily, like her careless scarf,” but has an “agenda,” is “pious but dangerous,” and thus capable of “correcting” the Law.

Berryman goes on to describe the state of consciousness that makes this sort of fiction effective within his work:

“Success can depend on not looking; being purposefully unaware at just the right times. . . . By naming that transcendently shaped stone, I made possible and preferable what previously, in order for it to exist, it was necessary to guard against -- breakage. Its essence moved from wholeness to rupture and change; what I could never do purposefully because of being psychologically unprepared -- I could never *deliberately* ruin the symbol of my own skill by taking a sledge to the stone -- I did accidentally.

“Moving him, all ten feet of brittle stone, like glass, I placed my voice with tenderness, far away in the clouds. The clouds seemed to float in a sky that was underneath, and were very far away; very far. The clouds were in the land of true purpose, where there are no such things as mistakes. The voice said, ‘Pick Marvin up this way and he will spin around his axis and fall to the ground.’ I obeyed.

“The picture of Michelangelo’s broken Pieta, the one which was completed with his death, will not leave. Each time I turn around it’s in my mind, with its detached arm, or turning up in a stack of papers.

“This piece has changed me, but please don’t ask me how. This way of changing is my life; I much prefer it to plans.”

In this way Berryman describes how he sets up an almost alchemical-like situation involving matter and thought, which make possible the shifting of himself interiorly. Deeply inspiring, thoughtful and demanding of attention, the sculptures representing this “phase” of the artist’s journey are unnervingly representative of how we can exist on many often contradictory levels, and the astonishing beauty that rises at every turn, even from ashes.

It is interesting to note, as mentioned earlier, that Berryman's sphere of influence includes neither popular media or exposure to urban or even suburban environments, but still he is tinged by the raw nerve of our times. Living in Mesa Grande, on the edge of an Indian reservation, he has taught himself, and passed on to his children, what he deems important. "I lately have come to exceedingly enjoy the patches and ribbons of afterglow in the sage and grasses and rivers of sycamore and blankets of oak as color each evening takes its last breath before night," he writes. His 18 year old son softly repeats this lust for the experience of simple beauties: "I like to drive across the mesa under a full moon without the lights on."

Ted Berryman, after moving from his native coastal Southern California, lived for a while in Oregon, where he sculpted, worked in a lumber mill, and taught art at the local college. He has shown at galleries in Oregon, California, and Hawaii. He chose the Santa Ysabel Art Gallery for this show because "it felt right." Only a few miles from his studio, he feels that it's important that the environment and people who played such a part in the creation of these pieces also play a part in their showing.

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