



THREE MUSICIANS AT THE HARLEQUIN'S CARNIVAL: PETER REGINATO'S NEW SCULPTURE

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**As we contemplate Peter Reginato's sculptures, we are made to think of our humanity.
That is no small accomplishment for abstract welded sculpture.**

Look at from five to ten slides of work by each of over six hundred artists for a sculpture competition as I did recently. A visual feast? Hardly. While there are exceptions, what one generally finds are established artists drearily repeating themselves and hundreds of others copying them. Most discouraging are what seem like countless formalist exercises in steel that organize geometric configurations in unlimited but ultimately boring variation. Much contemporary sculpture, particularly the larger, more public variety, is like a stale marriage in which the participants, despite an occasional poignant moment, are content to go through the motions. Bland and safe, no doubt, but where is the freshness, the possibility for renewal, the excitement? Although one infrequently meets with these qualities, they may be found in abundance in the risky, exhilarating sculpture that Peter Reginato is now making.

Reginato's abstract welded sculpture is upbeat, off-beat, and frequently humorous. Forms intersect and climb over one another in a vertical profusion of shape and color. Flat planes, curved planes, angled planes and punched-out planes, defined by a variety of straight and organic contours interspersed with wrought metal bars, wriggle in space as if animated by the rhythms of a jouncy Latin dance. These pieces, despite occasional botanical connotations, are essentially anthropomorphic. Their lurching movements, lumbering gaits, and quirky gestures give them an idiosyncratic appearance and air of accessibility that is disarmingly empathetic. It is this sense of vitality and personality that makes Reginato's work absolutely original in the arena of contemporary sculpture. His new pieces certainly will not appeal to everyone, least of all the proponents of welded sculpture who have prevailed for the last two decades, but there are ample rewards, aesthetic as well as in plain good fun, for those who can get into the spirit of the work.

Fun? Yes, fun, and what's wrong with a little fun? It has a long and honorable tradition in the visual arts, although at the moment we are emerging from a period of dead seriousness. The recent past emphasis on self-referential abstraction and the cerebral served to suppress playfulness in art. Lest we forget, a number of modern masters, including Duchamp, Chagall, Klee, Miró, Calder, Picasso at times, and more recently Oldenburg, have demonstrated that humor and whimsy can be as significant as solemnity. Then there is the phenomenon known as Funk Art which had its genesis in the San Francisco-Bay Area during Reginato's formative years as an art student in the mid-'60s. While some of the work associated with this manifestation is bizarre bordering on the ugly, much of it is humor-

ously absurd or downright funny. Among Reginato's teachers at the San Francisco Art Institute were two artists identified with Bay Area Funk, William Geis and Robert Hudson. Indeed, Reginato's new sculpture, although entirely different in character, may seem to have a passing relationship with Hudson's vertically piled Surrealist- and Pop Art-inspired conglomerations of highly polychromed metal. However, Reginato's work has had a relatively long and complicated development far removed from any art made in San Francisco twenty years ago.

For a couple of years after he moved to New York in 1966 Reginato made polychromed plywood sculpture composed of a number of disparate geometric elements. After turning to fiberglass in 1968 he continued to use color, experimenting with loose, brushy surfaces which after a long hiatus now have reappeared. However, by 1969 the fiberglass pieces had become monochromatic, and paint was completely abandoned when in that year he began to make welded steel sculpture. No longer subject to the immediacy of California colorism, Reginato's new restraint probably had a lot to do with Clement Greenberg's authoritative ideas on modernist purity that proved so persuasive on the East Coast. Over the next few years, his large, horizontal, dome-like constructions of discontinuous, interlocking steel plates maintained an essentially formal presence in keeping with the general practice of the time. However, the incorporation of curved planes, scalloped and zigzag contours, and an occasional kidney shape, while held in check by the hemispherical structure of these pieces, heralds the appearance of a personal vocabulary that marks all of Reginato's subsequent sculpture.

Although he enjoyed considerable success with the domical pieces, in the mid-'70s Reginato allowed his work to evolve in another direction, as has been his tendency. His sculpture began to assume a vertical orientation, and it became more open and linear. A number of these pieces were given a monochromatic glaze of paint to create the effect of a light patina, but for aesthetic and technical reasons this experimentation was short-lived. Gradually, standing upright on legs, the work took on the appearance of personages in a rather droll manner reminiscent of Julio González's figures. By 1978-80, complex clusters of geometric and organically shaped steel plates, which form the basis of the current work, were being elevated on tripod-like supports, giving a new weight and density to Reginato's sculpture. These pieces give the impression of some abstract variation on a top-heavy creature, all angles, humps, and masses above three spindly legs. Reginato had separated himself from the crowd by pur-

