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An Inadvertent Vanguard

FIRST, DISCLAIMERS. This is not a theoretical discussion, but a series of empirical observations about some artists whose work, I believe, is linked by common threads. They are not the only painters and sculptors working today who interest me nor the only ones addressing the issues I believe they do. Nor, despite my conviction that their work suggests shared concerns, do they constitute a group in the usual sense of the word. What else? I generally mistrust categories. As an art historian I obviously find them useful, but as a critic, I'm more interested in individual artists than in movements or "isms."

This "non-group" includes six sculptors—Vincent Barré, Willard Boepple, Shaun Cassidy, John Gibbons, Jilaine Jones, and William Noland—three painters—Jonathan Forrest, Jill Nathanson, and Terry O'Flanagan—and one sculptor, Clay Ellis, who may be a closet painter. Together they comprise four nationalities, two genders, and three sexual preferences (as one must specify, these days). Some of these ten artists are young enough to have assimilated post-modernist notions, yet all are primarily modernists who see themselves the heirs to a long tradition of adventurous (and traditional) art that goes back much further than Duchamp; whatever the intellectual underpinnings of their work, it is free of post-modernist cynicism, irony, and nihilism. All ten are committed to abstraction—none of them is interested in depicting the seen in any literal way—but they exclude nothing, and I've come to think that as a result they are enlarging and revitalizing the tradition of modernist abstraction in provocative and original ways. Their work, at its best, makes us think about how the limits of abstraction can be extended, of how much resonance good abstract art can have.

How did I start thinking about this? In the past few years, I've worked on exhibitions of four sculptors on the list, Barré, Boepple, Gibbons, and Noland. We've known each other for decades, since I was a rookie curator and they were at the beginning of their careers. I've learned a lot from spending time in their studios, talking with them about their work, and I think I've sometimes helped them to clarify what they were doing by providing a fresh response. The four are all about the same age—in that "mid-career" category of late forties to early fifties—but with very different backgrounds and very different formations as artists. Boepple and Noland are American; Gibbons is Irish living in England; and Barré is French. Boepple and Noland combined college and art

school educations with a kind of studio apprenticeship, while Gibbons studied at London's St. Martin's School of Art in the glory years of its sculpture department. Barré, who started out as an architect, was trained, rather schizophrenically, at the Ecole Nationale in Paris and in Louis Kahn's celebrated design studio at the University of Pennsylvania. The four sculptors know each other and have shared certain experiences, such as participation at various times in the Triangle Artists' Workshop, a remarkable event best described as an annual two-week pressure cooker art-making session for international painters and sculptors, but they don't see one another often. Yet as I sought to order my ideas about their work, in preparing the catalogue essays for their shows, it seemed to me that, despite their considerable differences and their geographic diversity, they shared certain fundamental convictions about the nature of sculpture.

All four matured as sculptors at a time when abstraction was firmly entrenched in the canons of Western modernism and—what is more important—when collage-derived abstract construction in metal was an established tradition within the history of modern art. So it's not surprising that when each of the four began making serious sculpture, he employed a vocabulary of abstract construction with disparate parts, each in his own way. Yet the recent work I was seeing in their studios made it clear that while each of them continued to honor this tradition from the point of view of formal language, they were all increasingly interested in a new kind of allusiveness and complexity of associations. The common theme seemed to me to be the body, not in terms of what the body looked like, but in terms of scale, qualities of form, and spatial relationships that insistently made me think about things the body used or places the body could inhabit—that is to say, about the possibility of human presence. Yet that presence was somehow implied by absence. And, it seemed to me, that in part because they were allowing these considerations to become more visible, all four were making the most arresting and ambiguous sculpture of their careers.

In his recent work, Boepple has taken as his point of departure familiar domestic accoutrements: ladders (slender or chunky), shelves (packed with incident or empty), and even entire schematic rooms, sometimes at enterable scale. He makes us acutely aware of the relationship of our own bodies to his constructions. The ladders remind us that the proportions of their functional prototypes are generated by human proportions; the shelves evoke the sensation of grasping and placing objects scaled to the hand; the skeletal rooms at once suggest shelter and the difference between being indoors and out.

But the ladders can also conjure up Cubist still lifes or the pylons of Egyptian temples; the empty shelves can ask to be read incrementally, as a series of geometric units, like the façade of a Greek temple, while the loaded ones can turn into cliff faces or tossing waves, like armloads of raw nature made portable, stored neatly and mounted on the wall. The associations of the economically drawn rooms can shift away from domesticity, turning them into cerebral, geometric constructions that

evoke Mondrian in three dimensions. Boepple's recent sculptures play on our tactile and physical experience of the everyday world, yet they read not simply as reinvented equivalents for what he calls "things the body uses," but instead become abstract metaphors for what it feels like to function as a sentient being, one preternaturally aware of the myriad qualities of things we normally overlook.

Barré's reputation in France was established by frontal constructions in thick steel, either upright or reclining, that were at once abstract and vaguely figurative. The body was clearly present in these sculptures, even though they didn't specifically refer to torsos or limbs. In the mid-1990s, however, after several years dedicated to large works in this mode, often associated with architecture or the landscape, Barré abruptly turned his attention to the modest products of human effort—in his words, "more or less domestic objects that can be held in the hand"—modeling voluptuous forms for casting in bronze.

The sculptures of this ongoing series share the intimate scale and many of the characteristics of such functional things as utensils, devotional objects, tools, and even armor, but their swelling volumes also suggest forms from nature. Ultimately, ambiguity and a sense of all-encompassing but non-specified usefulness prevail. The surfaces of the bronzes, marked by the artist's deliberate touch, remind us that they belong to the realm of the man-made and the willed, not to the organic. Barré's recent large cast-iron or steel sculptures, placed horizontally on the ground or poised against the wall, are more abstract and severe than the small "vessels," but they are similarly conceived as enclosed volumes that provoke speculation about the relationship of interior to exterior. As in the small bronzes, the body is neither depicted nor abstracted from, yet it is powerfully invoked.

Noland's recent sculptures are like recollections of inhabited places. For many years, he has worked with lumber cannibalized from sources ranging from derelict furniture to abandoned houses, employing a language of building and joining that echoes the previous history of his materials. Lately, he has added steel and plastic to his palette, at once strengthening the associations with building and enriching his range of colors and textures. Noland's complex structures can seem improvised, cobbled together; narrow strips or fragile planes are ganged into dense masses that can seem temporary or casual. Fragmented "walls," schematic "windows," collapsed "railings," and blocked "entrances" make his sculptures seem domestic and vernacular, like disintegrating rural outbuildings. But Noland's four-square planar constructions soon begin to read not only as distillations of architecture, but also as reinventions of Cubist painting space in three dimensions. Although these ramshackle "places" are scaled to the human body, subtle distortions of expected proportions and placements further divorce them from the literal; "windowness" takes the place of "window," "the possibility of passage" replaces "entrance." The metaphorical replaces the specific, but overtones of human presence, both past and imminent, persist.

Gibbons' most compelling early sculptures were robust façades of steel whose bulges and niches, like Noland's warped architectural allusions, at once invited and forbade entry. Next, density gave way to linearity in attenuated sculptures with inaccessible catwalks, platforms, and doorways. More recently, Gibbons has used the slender bars and rods of these scaffold-like sculptures to describe self-contained volumes as assertive as any traditional monolith but completely transparent. Layers of open "caging" define fictive interiors and exteriors, creating unignorable, physically unenterable masses that can be penetrated by the eye—sculptures that are at once there and not there.

The constant in all of Gibbons' sculpture is its fusion of material presence and metaphor. Expressive in terms of articulation and mass, his work also strongly evokes other experience. His "façade" sculptures played on our associations with entry, shelter, and enclosure, but their mysterious hollows also suggested private zones of the body. Similarly, the rhythmic, repetitive cages of Gibbons' newest works connote the inanimate and the industrial, but they also uncannily suggest the corporeal, not by alluding directly to the figure, but by diagramming and capturing chunks of space scaled to human proportions.

Despite the common concerns I discerned in the work of these four sculptors from different places, I certainly didn't think I had stumbled on a movement dominating the turn of the twenty-first century. But as I thought about the qualities that linked the four and those that separated them, I realized that Boepple, Noland, Gibbons, and Barré were hardly alone in their preoccupations. Many of their contemporaries made similar references in their work—take Magdalena Abakanowicz's hollow figures, for example, Kiki Smith's victimized women, or Louise Bourgeois's gatherings of body parts and limbs. Yet all of these currently celebrated artists seemed to me to remain attached to fundamentally literal and traditional *images* of the body. Others, notably Eva Hesse and her disciples, proposed related ideas, less traditional but no less literal, by using soft materials and organic forms to suggest the qualities of flesh. Still others, such as Tony Cragg, Bill Woodrow, Mike Kelley, or Jessica Stockholder, signaled human presence by adopting a lexicon of banal products to "signify" daily life in contemporary culture, at various times incorporating in their work shattered plastic housewares, domestic appliances, astonishingly ugly afghans, crocheted toys, and other detritus of lower-middle-class consumer society. The image of the body is absent from the work of artists like Woodrow or Kelley, but the reference is no less direct. The plastic debris and discarded appliances are unambiguous surrogates for the figure—real things, selected and wrenched from their normal contexts, but not significantly changed. It's possible to equate this choice of unlikely materials with Picasso and González's use of materials and methods devoid of art historical precedents—materials and methods used to make automobiles, in fact—when they began to make constructed metal sculpture together, in the late 1920s. Making an installation of

defunct washing machines or crocheted afghans might be the 1980s equivalent of welding a colander to a steel plate in Picasso and González's day. But where the meaning of a Woodrow or a Kelley depends on our recognizing the improbable nature of their materials, in Picasso and González's sculpture, the original identity of the found object is subsumed by its new context; the origin of the found object is less important than its new identity as part of a new, autonomous structure.

"My" four sculptors' ways of alluding obliquely to human presence were obviously different from those of their better-known colleagues, but I realized they had their own context in the work of a number of younger artists I had been following: the paintings of Jill Nathanson and the sculpture of Jilaine Jones and Sean Cassidy. (For the record, Nathanson and Jones are Americans, Cassidy, British living in the U.S.) Like Boepple and his colleagues, these younger practitioners were unrepentant modernists, committed to abstraction. Like Boepple and his colleagues, too, they were exploring many things that might have seemed questionable to abstract artists a generation earlier: illusions, allusions, and a host of associations. Nathanson, Jones, and Cassidy appeared to be simultaneously asserting their connection to a tradition and challenging its legacy of pictorial languages and forms—non-ironically and wholeheartedly.

Nathanson's recent paintings depended on head-on collisions between grids of different sizes, densities, and angles, rendered with varying degrees of crispness. Each grid had its own subtly differentiated touch and individual hue, as did the warped rectangles created by the grid's intersections. The compression of the grids, together with their shifting scales, created urgent perspectival illusions that were immediately cancelled by richly inflected surfaces and complex relationships of unexpected colors.

Like Gibbons' transparent monoliths, Nathanson's paintings were willfully contradictory—both convincingly three-dimensional and uncompromisingly flat—as though she were orchestrating a decisive confrontation between Western painting's traditional codes for depicting space and modernism's emphasis on surface and the fact of materials. As we watched, the shorthand references to architecture and the built environment, and by extension, to our experience of urban life, that initially seemed to dominate quickly turned into meditations on the emotional resonance of the raw materials of painting: color relationships, the drama of edges and how things touch, a range of gestural languages and surfaces. Like the four sculptors I'd been thinking about, Nathanson was venturing into an unmapped country where the non-referential and the associative not only coexisted, but happily intermarried.

The sculpture of Jones and Cassidy, like Noland's, seemed to be about places that the body inhabits. Jones's space-greedy constructions, assembled from wood, steel, plaster, string, and most recently, concrete,

can strangely evoke remembered rooms, the studio, or sometimes populated landscapes, distorted by the passage of time and reinvented in an intensely physical material palette. Jones's forms and drawing are ultimately based on perception, disciplined by a sense of geometric order that occasionally gives way to smooth curves and rough bulges. The spaces between things seen can be diagrammed by loose scaffoldings of bars and rods or can be turned into solid forms, widely separated but tensely related; rather than remaining passive voids, the intervals between these masses read as highly charged chunks of space, as though they bore the imprint of earlier presences.

Yet Jones's inventive structures look like nothing but themselves: tough-minded assemblies of unremarkable materials detached from their commonplace uses. The sense of habitation, once again, seems a function of scale and proportions, and of relationships of line and plane that recall, in wholly abstract terms, the properties of "places the body uses." The implications of these sculptures are made explicit by an ongoing series of abstract, geometric "figures," at various scales, no more literal than the large, multi-part sculptures, but like them, so associative in their massing and proportions that they seem haunted by recollections of a no-longer-present model—without, it must be stressed, reading as cleverly disguised naturalistic nudes.

Cassidy's work refers directly and indirectly to the furnishings of our everyday surroundings, spanning, perhaps, the distance between Boepple and Woodrow. Yet no matter how faithfully or how freely he treats his nominal subjects, Cassidy manages simultaneously to exploit and subvert their associations by confounding our expectations of relationships, sizes, colors, and levels. A slanted plane of overlapping pieces of steel, like a schematic, oversized roof of Mediterranean tiles, for example, springs out of the ground, provoking inevitable associations with the architecture of the South of France (where the piece was built) and, at the same time, emphasizing both the precariousness and the artifice of stacking pieces of steel at an angle. Parodic upholstered chairs become amorphous solids of saturated color. Scale shifts; lemons become gigantic and enormous dandelion seed heads thrust through an elevated ground plane. Obviously, there are echoes of Oldenburg's improvisations on the quotidian in these sculptures, but Cassidy's source images are never merely enlarged or distorted. Like Picasso and González's found objects, they are made to take their places in complex, rigorously conceived, essentially abstract structures. The fragments of actuality make witty reference to modern existence, but that reference remains a subtext. Unpredictable formal relationships dominate, which divorces Cassidy's sculpture from the literal and gives it considerable authority.

I was preoccupied by these connections when, the summer before last, I was asked to be critic in residence at a workshop, the ancestor of Triangle, in Northern Saskatchewan. The invitation came from an abstract painter I've known for decades; and since I respect his work

and his acute critical intelligence immensely, I accepted, despite some trepidation about the effort of getting there and the possibility of encountering some of the Canadian prairies' more militant formalists, proponents of a rigidly fundamentalist version of Greenbergian abstraction. Happily, no one of that persuasion participated. About half were inventive artists whose studios I'd been visiting for years and with whom I'd been at other workshops, in various places around the world. The rest were young artists, new to me, recruited by the abstract painter who organized the event. As I spent time in their studios, I became increasingly aware of common threads that linked some of the Western Canadians not only to each other, but also to the other artists I had begun to think of as a "group."

This was probably most evident in the work of Clay Ellis, an old friend whose sculpture I had followed through dramatic changes. Ellis first became known for massive, aggressively physical steel sculptures whose swollen forms, suave transitions, and undisguised sensuality made them read as abstract equivalents of classical Indian figure sculpture or temple architecture. The stupa and the Apsara informed these sculptures equally. During a year's residence in Europe in 1995, Ellis' obsession with volumetric mass yielded to a fascination with the illusionism of Renaissance painting, and he set himself the task of interpreting fictive space in sculptural terms. He abandoned construction in steel for a complex process of making "skins" of resin, which he manipulates, hangs on the wall, or drapes over steel frameworks. (He refers to them, expediently, as "tents" and "purses.") The "skins" exploit a palette of saturated primaries, tempered by black "drawing," shading to grey, integral to their making. As Ellis builds up the layers of resin, he marks them with dragged striations and dotted grids whose offset intervals create inevitable three-dimensional illusions, the way that the compressed grids of Nathanson's paintings do. His subsequent warping of the surface of the skins either intensifies or negates these illusions, making it difficult to decide if we are looking at real projections and hollows or purely optical ones.

It's difficult to decide, too, whether the resulting structures are acutely inflected paintings or polychrome sculptures. Either way, they are compelling objects that, like Gibbons' transparent monoliths, assert a potent physicality, a sense of robust mass, that literally isn't there. But despite their apparent fragility, Ellis' "tents" and "purses" invoke the body as strongly as the most forthright of his steel sculptures—the body "disembodied," reinvented in ways that defy conventional categories, that simultaneously play on our emotions and make us question our perceptions.

If Ellis' mysterious polychrome "skin" sculptures seemed to resonate with Gibbons' transparent, monolithic evocations of the corporeal, the work of two younger painters at the workshop, Jonathan Forrest and Terry O'Flanagan, seemed to probe broad notions of place and habitation related to those posited by Nathanson's paintings and by

Noland's and Jones's sculpture. Forrest, like Nathanson, plays on associations with the man-made environment at the same time that he dissects the conventions of postwar abstract painting. A recent series rang changes on a thickly painted rectangle that all but obscured the rectangle of the canvas. Escapes of contrasting color around the edges and shifts in surface inflection underscored the difference between the various zones, while small warpings of right angles created fleeting perspectival illusions; the implacable expanses of paint momentarily became doorways into unenterable spaces, before turning back into sheets of paint.

In Forrest's newest works, the single rectangle has become a "wall" of brick-like blocks of dense paint in a range of offbeat pastels sparked with unexpected duller, darker colors. These modulations of hue, along with variations in the size and proportion of the blocks, create an enlivening spatial pulse. Like his "doorway" pictures, Forrest's new works are impenetrable barriers that force us back, at the same time that they invite us to engage closely with their nuances of color and paint density, a contradiction that parallels their dual existence as emphatically present objects and as equivalents for the modern environment. They are also deadpan reminders that painting can be a meditative, repetitive, incremental process, albeit one with room for endless variation, so that by extension, these pictures become emblems of endeavor.

O'Flanagan, the youngest of the group, is more tuned into post-modernist ideas than most of his colleagues, but he is as involved with the inherent expressiveness of his materials as he is with the intellectual basis for their selection or their eventual meaning within his pictures. Raised in rural Saskatchewan, O'Flanagan is a connoisseur of the eroding relics of the region's disappearing farming communities. His most ambitious paintings, to date, have been robust collages that included materials scavenged from abandoned farmhouses: wallpaper, linoleum, paneling, the occasional feed company sign. The wallpaper and linoleum motifs are almost always plants that do not grow in the rigorous climate of the Canadian prairies. Embedded in expanses of paint that schematically suggest the big divisions of flat plains and overarching sky of Saskatchewan, these dislocated images of dislocated flora cease to function as artifacts of the recent past and become, instead, the ambiguous components of aggressively textured abstractions with landscape overtones.

O'Flanagan sees this as recycling, a way of honoring a rapidly vanishing past by giving new meaning to its fragmented remains. His work obviously benefits from this deeply felt conceptual basis, but none of it would matter if his exuberant paintings weren't convincing as *paintings*. Even if we don't know the origins of O'Flanagan's inclusions, a powerful nostalgia for place resonates in these pictures. Lately, however, he has rejected the large size and fluctuating space of the collage-paintings. The once freewheeling fragments of linoleum and

wallpaper are ordered in intimately scaled constructions that play the slightly uncanny, incipient illusionism of the readymade images against a severely geometric structure—fictive landscapes domesticated, disciplined, made uncompromisingly frontal, and scaled to the hand. I'm eager to see where this will lead him.

Collectively, the paintings and sculptures of these ten very disparate artists propose overlapping ideas about how the body may be powerfully implied without compromising abstractness. The point of departure is not the human figure, but the figure at one remove: the human environment and the things human beings make. Matisse's work perhaps offers a parallel. He frequently included his own sculptures in his paintings, along with casts from classical statues and images of his own paintings, using them as surrogates for the figure, so that the source of the eventual image was not direct observation of the model but rather, the model already transformed into art. For Matisse, this dialogue between painting and sculpture had practical motivations, as a way of discovering unexpected contours and refining familiar conceptions. But it's also possible that this master of the figure found using the body at a distance, already translated into another medium, liberating after the self-imposed discipline of attempting to be faithful—however inventively—to his perceptions. For the artists I have been speaking of—for Boepple, Barré, Gibbons, Noland, Nathanson, Jones, Cassidy, Ellis, Forrest, and O'Flanagan—there's no doubt about it. For them, shifting their attention from the body (or even from an idea about the body) to the body's environment and to the things the body uses has opened a wide path that leads into uncolonized and, it seems, fertile territory.