DIRECTIONS

SAINT CLAIR CEMIN

OCTOBER 17, 1991– JANUARY 19, 1992

Amour, 1989. Travertine, bronze, redwood; 48 x 30 x 30 in. Collection Mr. and Mrs. Gerald Fineberg, Boston. Photo: Douglas M. Parker Studios.
SAINT CLAIR CEMIN EXPRESSES HIS attitude toward the creative process through aphorisms—short statements that embody his aesthetic principles:

The world of art-objects, and that of common objects, forms a continuous field. The value system used to produce and evaluate art-objects, even the most rarified conceptual work, shares a common ground with the apparatus used to evaluate anything else in the world, such as people, social situations, or the weather.

The aphoristic form has been. . . the one in which I feel the most comfortable. Like my sculptures, it is fragmentary and disorganized; a form of random walk. . . which hints of a totality, itself left undisclosed. This openness of meaning has a rational explanation and does not derive from a will to mystify. An approach to the world is not a thing but only the abstract implication of visions, intuitions, thoughts, body postures and much more. To try to convey it directly would be as impossible as seeing one's own act of vision.1

Choosing a career in art rather than mathematics because he wanted "to make things," Cemin left his native Brazil in 1972 to study in France.2 There he received classical training in the arts, including etching, at the Cocoob Nationale Superieure des Beaux Arts in Paris. By 1978, however, his attitude toward how to make art that satisfied his intellectual demands had changed. Believing that Paris was not interested in contemporary art, Cemin decided to leave France. On his arrival in New York City in 1978, he abandoned the academic drawing techniques he had acquired in Paris. He even discarded his previous drawings, which he considered "notations too private to keep."3 In 1983 he turned from drawing to sculpture and in 1985 had his first exhibition of three-dimensional works.

Cemin invests his sculpture with a kind of magic that he achieves through a process of mental translation. He formulated his ideas in a press release for an exhibition: "The question of the Identity of the Mental Object translating itself again and again through the processing mind."4

Neither a realist nor an abstract artist, Cemin fuses identifiable forms of different materials to create objects that combine the familiar and the unfamiliar. A first glance at one of his sculptures leads to one set of assumptions, but closer examination results in another reading entirely. Thus, perceptions about what these objects "are" as well as what they "mean" change as component parts come into and go out of focus. Cemin favors forms that rely on the viewer's imagination and interpretation. In ideal situations, the viewer's creative effort equals that of the artist.

In the cast copper sculpture Untitled (Form with Reversed Jar), 1987, the artist has combined a recognizable object, a jar, with other forms to create the basic shape of a four-footed animal. This creature's body has signs of musculature roughly where one would expect, but the feet resemble furniture legs. The inverted jar serves incongruously as a head, its mouth forming lips and a nose, a flat pan creating a jowl. An isolated look at the tail, however, also suggests a head with mouth and nose. What initially looked like a head, the upside-down jar, becomes again a piece of pottery that could not stand upright because its footing is too small. The animal thus dissolves into its constituent parts or reappears as a single entity, depending on how and where you look.

Some of Cemin's sculptures seem incomprehensible at first. Left to the viewer's imagination, the forms eventually assume personalities, however strange. Sweet Nothing, 1988, is such a piece. It consists of a white pillar resting on a bronze shape encrusted with strange studs that could be pods or plant forms. Is it a pedestal triumphant, on top of the work of art it was meant to display, or a classical Greek column, with the capital at the bottom instead of the top? What seemed at first an irreconcilable pairing of forms becomes a humorous object. Many of Cemin's sculptures have such a capacity for extended visual dialogue and multiple interpretations.

Untitled (Collapsing Table), 1988—a wood table with a cloth bag (contents unknown) nailed to its surface and legs attached by bronze fixtures—seems to have been frozen into sculpture at the very moment of collapse. The back legs are still erect, but one front leg rests on the ground, about to be joined by the other. Generally, the composition calls to mind a camel lowering itself to the ground to be loaded or unloaded with cargo. In Untitled (Collapsing Table), a supposedly utilitarian object assumes aesthetic qualities. Cemin rejects simple beauty as too ordered and empty, preferring to combine forms that expand the limits of the familiar and the aesthetic, making the two resonate sympathetically.
Gallo, 1989 (fig. 1), has the generalized shape of a living thing. This fusion of sinuous form and sensuous surface could be a snail or hen. Yet the black marble glistens, animated by the reflections of objects in its environment and giving the work an unworldly air. Cemin chooses his materials carefully because he believes they add visual complexity to and enhance the viewer’s perceptions of his sculptural forms. “Temperature” is a factor also. He uses bronze because it looks and feels “warm,” or marble because it looks and feels “cold.”

In his work Cemin occasionally uses ideas expressed in the work of sculptors he admires, “even on the level of ‘looks’” generated by different textures. The materials and compositional elements of Amour, 1989 (cover), for example, reflect some of Constantin Brancusi’s sculptural ideas. On top of a redwood stand rests a large white travertine bowl with two small bronze pieces attached to the rim directly across from one another. Both bronze forms could be considered heads, and they are slightly different. One is composed completely of curves, while the other has a few hard edges and a flat top. A woman and a man, perhaps? The two large holes on either side of the bowl would make it an ineffective repository for objects smaller than the two bronze heads.

Planes in Relation, 1989 (fig. 2), at first has the conjured look of a magic trick. Two vertical sheets of white painted steel, one slightly smaller than the other, stand at right angles connected by a cast-bronze form that appears to float on another smaller, sheet of painted steel oriented horizontally. The two arms extend to each standing sheet of steel, attached to them with disks of bronze that look like suction cups. The whole construction is thus held in a stable, permanent configuration. The bronze form is reminiscent of a bird with both short legs firmly planted on the ground. It could also be a bird in the process of landing, with two strange rectangular wings outstretched. Like much of Cemin’s sculpture, insight into this work comes about only after discovering allusions that were not apparent at first.

The title of Propeller II, 1990 (fig. 3)—a tall, thin sculpture of mahogany—refers directly to the object that stimulated its creation. Carved into the surface are slight depressions that suggest currents of air flowing over the object, and, near the bottom, where the hub of the blade normally would be found, is a spiral design that alludes to the spinning movement of a propeller blade. Because this work is displayed vertically and carved of wood, Propeller II could also refer to the ceremonial figures or totems found in many non-Western cultures.

Saint Clair Cemin considers his sculptures experiments in a search for meaning in art and life. His sculptures are highly personal investigations of forms and compositions derived from a complex network of analogies that relate to instinct and past experience.

Frank Gettings
Curator of Prints and Drawings


Fig. 2. *Planes in Relation*, 1989. Bronze, painted steel; 8 1/2 x 43 x 38 in. Courtesy Robert Miller Gallery, New York.
Fig. 1. Propeller II, 1990. Mahogany; 10 ft. high. Collection Emily Fisher Landau, New York.
BIOGRAPHY

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS
1988 Daniel Newburg Gallery, Los Angeles; Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Chicago.
1989 Gian Enzo Sperone, Rome; Daniel Weinberg Gallery, Los Angeles, Saint Clair Cemin Recent Sculpture; Massimo Audiello Gallery, New York, Saint Clair Cemin Sculpture; Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Chicago.
1991 Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, Rotterdam.

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY
———. "Saint Clair Cemin." Arts Magazine 64 (September 1990): 98.