

Creative Living

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Wesner embraces 'human condition'



photos by JERRY ZOLYNSKY/staff photographer

Joseph Wesner sits on the base of Pherein XIII on the grounds of Cranbrook Academy of Art Museum. This work, it has been said, recalls the posture of Rodin's Balzac.



The base of Wesner's Pherein VIII is rubber, the upper part is welded steel. It, like the others in the series, exemplifies his continued interest in the paradox of support and permanence or stability co-existing with extension and continuity or movement.

By Corinne Abatt
staff writer

JOSEPH WESNER puts more into his sculpture than steel and wood, rubber and stone. More than talent, muscle, sweat and concept. He puts his feelings about time, mankind, civilization, the Renaissance masters and himself into each work.

Now that's a lot of content, no matter how you add it up. Wesner's Pherein Series, 13 large welded steel sculptures, is on display at Cranbrook Academy of Art Museum through October.

"All of this work," he said as he walked around the gallery, "is an examination of the history of sculpture." And, at the same time, he said it is an examination of the human condition. The word pherein, he said, means to carry, to bear, and also to continue and to extend — "eventually to summarize what it is to be a human being."

He sees himself as part of the process, part of the continuity of the development of human life. He pays homage to the past — to time itself — in many ways. A curve, a line, a posture may bring sculptures of the past to mind. It is said that Pherein XIII recalls the audacious stance of Rodin's Balzac. The finish on the steel, paint scrapped away, bits of stones and cement, plated, waxed and painted surfaces, all suggest the passage of time.

"I'm very interested in a sense of time in my work. Here, I'm trying to deal with actual time — archeological time. Time becomes a thing inferred or implied."

As for the influence of earlier artists, he stated proudly, "I've traveled so much, it has influenced me. I am greatly affected by the work of European Renaissance artists, and I'm not about to discount the beauty and power of that work."

BUT THESE works transcend reflections of things past. They stand as strong statements about life on earth, what we are about and why we are here. For instance, several of his latest pieces incorporate coal into other elements he uses. He said, calling coal "fossilized history," "the

work quite literally becomes a metaphor for everything I'm doing." His sculpture, "Pherein XX" in the show in the Michigan Outdoor Sculpture show in Southfield, is a combination of welded steel, bronze, concrete, coal and paint.

The bases, he said, "are a part of the work. They are totally contingent on each other. Bases hold them to the ground — which is what we share with them."

Wesner recognizes the physicality of his work — and certainly it is one of the most obvious and unforgettable things about his sculpture. All of them carry the impact of strength, force, tension and ultimately, of masterful control. And while great control has been exercised, it doesn't rob the material of its identity or its origins. If anything, Wesner has strengthened the identity. A sandstone base of one of the works hasn't been highly refined, it is still very much in its original state, yet it functions well as part of the whole work of art. If, Wesner said, is reminiscent of the tradition of carving. In a wood base, the pieces are arranged to show the beauty of the medium.

FOR HIS PIECES OF COAL, small, ordinary ones wouldn't do. He goes down in the mines in Kentucky to pick out what he wants. "Coal is a poignant, very precious fuel. It is the energy of the future from energy of the past." He said the people around the mines are delighted to meet someone who can see the metaphor in the material.

Wesner, quite familiar with athletics and sports, said there is the same feeling of elation in the creative process as is found in sports. "You get to the mental aspect through dealing with the physical aspects."

For the past year, Wesner has been acting head of sculpture at Cranbrook Academy of Art. He teaches at Center for Creative Studies and has lectured in Denmark and Sweden. He thrives on the interchange of ideas with artists from foreign countries, saying, "It's terrific, I always get as much as I give."

Cranbrook Academy of Art Museum is open 1-5 Tuesday-Sunday, 500 Lone Pine, Bloomfield Hills.

Barr's approach incorporates art, culture

By Helen Zucker
special writer

Sculptor David Barr is remarkable for the consistency and steady growth of his work.

Perhaps the secret lies in the steadiness of Barr's life. A native of Detroit, Barr, unlike most of his unaged generation, seems to have stayed where his roots are. He earned his bachelor of fine arts and master of fine arts degrees at Wayne. He has been an art professor at Macomb Community College since 1965 and lives in Novi.

Yet his works can be found in the Detroit Institute of Arts, Canada, New York, Chicago, Ohio and California. Barr is anything but provincial, despite the fact that he apparently likes to stay put.

AS A MEMBER of Barr's generation, I find this remarkable. Most of the artists I know are either going to or coming from Big Sur, Soho, Banff or Wyoming. They are anywhere but home.

I'm not knocking the peregrinations of artists in search of inspiration; if they can find it in Prague and Tokyo instead of West 12th Street or the Detroit Riverfront, fine.

What's clear though, is that Barr, living quietly in Michigan, has had time to cogitate. Barr reads Yeats and Sophocles. Barr reads about vanishing cultures, scientific breakthroughs, ancient rituals, the constellations and art theory. And this soaking up of literature and knowledge makes its way into his works.

THE NINE METICULOUSLY crafted works currently on view at the Donald Morris Gallery attest to Barr's ability to synthesize ideas from many sources.

Though it's obvious that he is a structuralist, it's also obvious that Barr is not virtually semiotic. Many artists in this era of too much information, don't know much about periods other than the ones they're working in.)

Barr understands that mystery is the wellspring of art. He knows that art and culture are inextricably bound together, that they have always been, that the forms of a given time spring from the surrounding culture.

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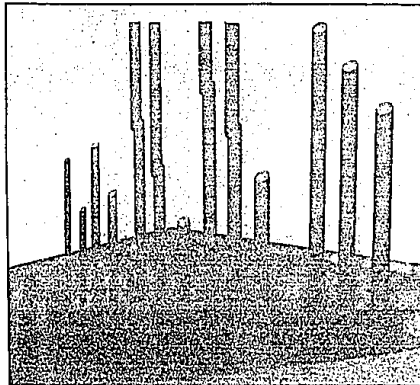
Barr likes to juxtapose different ages, and he makes use of materials as old as stone and wood and as new as steel and acrylics to maximize this idea.

"TEMPLE," ONE of the most interesting pieces in the show, is made of painted steel and jasper. "Temple" should be looked at from all sides from the black base and red floor to the winged roof cracked in front as though time had smashed all the Greek temples on Earth.

The rock, wedged between pillars, is streaked with amethyst like a rock from the Georgian Bay area of Canada. Four columns, pale blue, deep sea color at the bottom and in mid-column, hold the structure together.

The placing of the sea-colored "breaker" is irrational, yet the logic of the work holds. The ages seem to blow through the columns. Whether lighting or a meteor or man's destructive impulses ripped this temple roof apart is left up to the viewer — either way, the mystery and power of religion remain intact.

"Avenue," made of painted steel, consists of perfectly split, rounded cylinders that march in steady progression. The cylinders are black outside and brilliant, French blue in-



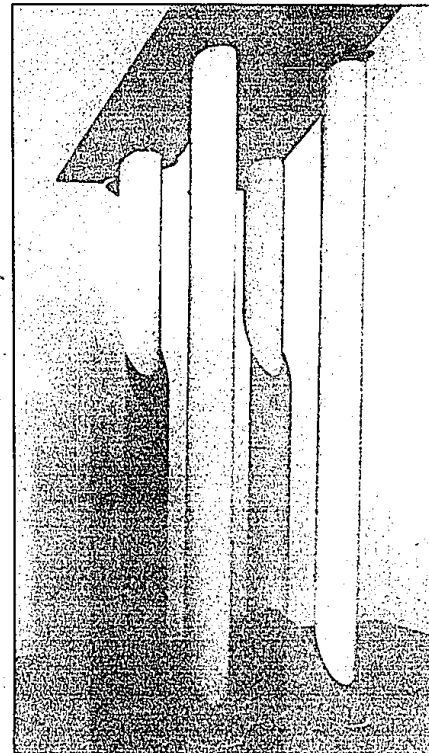
"Shift" by David Barr is slightly reminiscent of his large outdoor work at the entrance of the new Michigan Library and Historical Center in Lansing.

side. The rough base gives way to smooth "sidewalk layers" of black. The precision of the work makes it appear larger than it is, and the march of rounded structures breathes the mystery of growth, of new places rising where perhaps boulevards once stood.

"Knossos I" is a smaller version of "Knossos II." The larger work stands on the grounds of Barr's residence. Both works consist of a single long, blue, steel cylinder split precisely down the center. A dark lacquered red coats the inside of the cylinder and again, as in "Temple," a jasper stone lies wedged on the base.

Knossos was the metropolis of Minoan civilization, an advanced Bronze Age culture. Once again, Barr is working with the theme of meteors or man splitting civilization apart. Yet Barr believes that growth continues, no matter what. And his faith in his fellow creatures shines in his work.

THERE IS much more color in



Photos by JERRY ZOLYNSKY/staff photographer

"Temple" (at left) is made of painted steel and jasper. The roof (at the back of the picture), which has been ripped apart, adds an element of mystery to this piece and puts it in a timeless framework.