

Gutter Snipes I The Sculpture of Cal Lane

grunt

By Robin Peck



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Cal Lane has been defined by her past critics as a female sculptor-welder, a woman using a male-gendered contemporary working-class technology to make her art. This a-historical critique overlooks both the history of welded sculpture and the fact that Lane's steel sculpture is not welded.

Critical theorist Michael Rattray ignores the century-long history of welded steel sculpture when he describes Lane's (supposed) use of welding as a contemporary "non-art practice."¹ Curator Kay Hartenstein Saatchi² also describe Cal Lane's work as "welding." Trace the history of welding in art through noted exemplars, from Julio Gonzalez to Pablo Picasso, then to David Smith and Anthony Caro. This history significantly excludes Brancusi, who rejected a proposal for a large welded steel version of *Endless Column*, as well as Minimalist Carl Andre and Richard Serra, who dismissed welding as "knitting."³ It is a history that also excludes Cal Lane.

Critical theorists, curators, and museum directors may have a limited knowledge of sculpture technology compared to that of sculpture historians or sculptors themselves; however, the imprecise use of the term "welding" is more than a minor catachresis. Cal Lane's sculpture production is the very opposite of welding: a cutting process rather than a joining process. To clarify, welding is the joining of two parent metals by melting them both while adding a similar intermediate metal, a process that produces a homogeneous piece of metal.⁴ Lane pierces thick steel with an oxyacetylene cutting torch and cuts thin steel with a plasma cutter, and although there may be an impressive display of sparks, this is not welding and Cal Lane's sculpture practice is not a feminist parody of the film *Flashdance*.⁵

"...the biggest change in sculpture (is) the presence of women in great and increasing numbers....I'm fascinated by how the technological changes like tools encourage women...Its marvelous to see them using pneumatic tools, plasma cutters, etc. ...[T]he greatest public sculpture today is being done by women." –Albert Elsen.⁶

Even with advances in technology, contemporary women's sculpture can seem anachronistic within the context of the "nothing is new" platitude that limits the history of (men's) sculpture. This is because women now come to sculpture relatively free of the prejudices that have formed sculpture over the last century. They pursue sculpture with a vengeance tempered by historically denied access, re-exploring numerous nearly abandoned techniques, such as the use of the pedestal, mold making, metal casting, welding and carving.

Cal Lane draws repetitive shapes on found steel objects and cuts them out to produce stencil-like patterns. The positive forms are removed and stored.⁷ This process is repeated again and again until the surface is covered with perforations. The steel is lightened, with just enough of the original structure remaining to retain the form of the found object. In a gendered history of labor, this constantly repeated touch can be understood as characteristic of traditional women's work like weaving, yet *taille direct* sculpture is also repetitive work.

"A sculptor's toil is slow and solitary" –Brancusi⁸

"Labor is most definitely a part of my work; it is in the making that my ideas come, and it is the repetitive process of cutting that I crave (in order) to keep a mental focus or calm. I see the cutting process as between drawing and carving."–Cal Lane⁹

Over the last century, when *taille direct* was developed within an ideology of reductivism, it was almost as if direct carving was an atavistic sublimation of Neolithic tool making, and traditional men's work. Compare the sharp edge of a tool, a knife or chisel, to the

extreme surface of an object by Brancusi. Then consider Lane's own sculpted tools, the shovels and wheelbarrows, their function emasculated by pierced lace work, bare steel skeletons of this sculpture past.

Canadian sculptor David Rabinowitch, a protégé of Donald Judd, claimed¹⁰ that he made his sculpture from slabs of steel because steel was a neutral material, a consequence of its ubiquity in the production of 20th century sculpture, and therefore an appropriate material to use in the production of abstract art. Rabinowitch understood steel as a sign for abstraction itself, unclad by the gross historic poetics of its materiality. As an ideologue, the ideology of his sculptural age of steel was invisible to him. Lane understands sculpture differently: clothed in a flickering historical shadow, a veiled play of contrasts alternately concealed and revealed. One cannot imagine Cal Lane working like Rabinowitch with a brand new steel plate, fresh from the mill, nothing as abstract as that. Instead, the size and form of her sculptures are tied to an objective industrial history of steel. Lane uses the steel ready-made as her material on an escalating scale: a shovel, a wheelbarrow, an oil drum, an automobile, a sewer pipe, a shipping container.

Cal Lane's *Doilies*, 2000, are circular steel plates cut out in lace patterns. The contradictions are obvious: industrial vs. domestic, strong vs. delicate, masculine vs. feminine, functional vs. ornamental, etc. Like Wilson A. Bentley's famous snowflake photomicrographs,¹¹ apparently no two are the same. The *Doilies* recall the ornamental tracery of Medieval Gothic and Islamic architecture (with their skeuomorphic sources in weaving and wattle) and its rebirth in the structural steel and glass of the Victorian neo-Gothic *Crystal Palace* of Joseph Paxton. The lace doily, a knitted ornamental mat, derives from these same sources.

Cal Lane's sculpture is steel fretwork. Historically, fretwork is most often an interlaced geometric pattern, a grid or lattice cut out of wood, metal or soft stone with a saw, used to decorate furniture and musical instruments, windows and doors. In Indian Islamic architecture, a *jali* is the term for a fretwork wall, an ornamental pattern constructed through calligraphy and geometry. It provides shade, breeze, concealment, and confinement. As architecture is clothing and clothing a form of architecture, so the fretwork *jali* conceals as it reveals, and functions similarly to the veiled *burka*, the over-garment of Islamic culture.

"...where the garment gapes...it is intermittence, as psychoanalysis has so rightly stated, which is erotic: the intermittence of skin flashing between two articles of clothing, between two edges: it is the flash itself which seduces..." Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*¹²

"The metaphor of lace...intrigued me by its associations of hiding and exposing at the same time, like a veil to cover, or lingerie to reveal." –Cal Lane, *Lace in Translation*¹³

Cal Lane's *5 Shovels*, plasma-cut steel spades, 2005, have non-functional blades lace-cut like the *Doilies*. As assisted ready-mades they acknowledge Marcel Duchamp's own shovel work, *In Advance of a Broken Arm*, 1915. *5 Shovels* have the approximate size and shape of faces, recalling veils, masks, the pierced visors of medieval steel helmets, Gothic arches. However, they also look like cuneiform lace lingerie, priapically inverted, and are the most obviously erotic of Cal Lane's work. In clothing, lace can function as a cultural surrogate for hair, whether worn as a facial veil (imitating the concealing and revealing of face and neck by hair or lace lingerie (imitating the concealing and revealing of the vulva by the patterned hair of the mons pubis.) There are various cultural strictures against revealing a woman's hair.

Cal Lane's *Gutter Snipes I*¹⁴ at grunt gallery is a 20-ft. section of the original 40-ft. long sculpture, a half pipe of industrial aluminized steel corrugated sewer pipe, 6 ft. in diameter, placed between wall and floor. It is cut into a narrative of creatures in a city-like landscape of buildings and bombs, their shadows projected stencil-like against the wall, steel become an historical film.

Cal Lane's drawings deserve study but do not encourage it. The relatively small repeated images merge into a very nearly hallucinogenic or polymorphous perverse surface, an ironically reproduced *horror vacui* that is more texture than image. The overall size of the ready-made object produces an historical viewing distance from which Lane's sculpture appears both vegetal and crystalline, recalling garden arbors twined with vines, gray and brown. The overall gray and brown coloration of Cal Lane's sculpture recalls both the securely ordinary¹⁵ and the numinous. Gray is the color of steel. Brown is the color of history.¹⁶ Lane's brown-ness is rust, the patina of ferrous metal, a common enough finish for modernist welded steel sculpture, but in Lane's sculpture the steel seems victim to its own chemistry, rusting right through into a stencil pattern, a natural simulacrum of dappled light, inevitably veiled by historical twilight but opening up, enlarging, encompassing, with the potential for constant and literal growth.

Cal Lane's work thrives in the shadow of history. Refusing to work under Rodin, Brancusi declared that "Nothing grows in the shade of large trees."¹⁷ Yet early modernist sculptors like Brancusi, Gaudier-Brzeska, Duchamp-Villon and Boccioni all worked in the shadow of Rodin, reproducing his themes in order to refute him. In his turn, Minimalist Carl Andre cunningly chose to work in the shade of Brancusi, generating a self-fulfilling provenance for his own work.¹⁸ Cal Lane's *Gutter Snipes I* recalls Andre's recent steel plate and shadow sculpture, *Rise*, exhibited at ACE, Los Angeles in 2011.

In the early 1970s, I saw an Anthony Caro exhibition¹⁹ of steel sculpture welded from partially completed steel sculpture by David Smith (1906–1965). The exhibition was an unashamed two-for-one sale of sculpture that sculpturally represented the influence of Smith on the younger Caro (b. 1924). I imagine that Anthony Caro obtained these Smith parts through his friend, the pre-eminent modernist critic Clement Greenberg, who was the executor of the David Smith estate,²⁰ and I imagine future Cal Lane sculptures that will use abandoned Carl Andre or Richard Serra steel sculpture as raw material.

Notes

- 1 Rattray writes, "What does it mean for the ready-made object to be literally ... welded?" and "The work of Lane is ... activated through the use of a non-art practice: welding." "Displaced Objects/Ontological Landscaping", *Sweet Crude CAL LANE*, Editions Art Mur, Montreal, 2009 p. 57, p. 60)
- 2 Saatchi writes, "Cal flame-cuts her own work through painstaking and time consuming welding." "Delicate Monumentality", *Sweet Crude CAL LANE*, Editions Art Mur, Montreal, 2009 p. 20
- 3 Richard Serra Sculpture 1985-1998, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 1999, p. 192
- 4 In this it differs from other metal joining techniques such as brazing or soldering.
- 5 Flashdance, a 1983 film, is the Cinderella story of a 19-year-old woman with two jobs: as a welder and as an exotic dancer who wants to get into ballet school. A major box office success, the popular film critic Roger Ebert placed it on his list of Most Hated Films.
- 6 Suzanne Ramljak, "Interview Albert Elsen", *Sculpture*, (January–February 1995), pp. 10–13
- 7 "I have kept a majority of the bits/droppings but haven't really done much with them yet." –Cal Lane, note to the writer, 2012.
- 8 Geist, Brancusi, 1968, p. 166
- 9 Note to the writer, 2012.
- 10 In conversation with the writer, NYC, 1976
- 11 Bentley, Wilson A.; Humphreys, William J. *Snow Crystals* New York: McGraw-Hill, 1931)
- 12 Roland Barthes (transl. Richard Miller), *The Pleasure of the Text*, Hill and Wang, New York 1975, pp. 9-10
- 13 *Lace in Translation*, The Design Center at Philadelphia University, 2010, p.83
- 14 "Guttersnipe" is another term for a street urchin, a child of low social class in the streets of a slum.
- 15 ... a smell of must and solid brownness that was most secure." T.H. White, *The Once and Future King*. London: Collins, 1958. p.28
- 16 Spengler on patina and the historicity of brown-ness. Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, Vol. 1: Form and Actuality, 1918 (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1928. Oxford, 1991) p.134
- 17 "Rien ne pousse à l'ombre des grands arbres"
- 18 If Cal Lane has chosen to work in the shadow of anyone, it is that of a mentor, the American-Canadian conceptual artist Gerald Ferguson (1937-2009).
- 19 André Emmerich Gallery, 41 East 57th Street, New York City.
- 20 This was around same time that Rosalind Krauss exposed Greenberg for altering the work of David Smith: Greenberg's controversial paint-stripping of Smith's welded steel polychrome sculptures. Rosalind Krauss, "Changing the Work of David Smith", *Art in America* 62, no. 5 (Sept. – Oct. 1974)