

George Wallace, from a conversation with Bryce Kanbara in Victoria, B.C., June 8,9, 2000, in connection with the upcoming exhibition for the Art Gallery of Hamilton

There are two monotypes that I would like to see at the entry as an introduction to the show. There is a self-portrait in striped pyjamas that holds out a hand as if to warn you not to go in, and a self-portrait with social security card and magical potency belt. I think if you mock all these respectable businessmen, you better be able to mock yourself.

Life size figures

In 1960 the Waddington Gallery in Montreal sold a welded sculpture that I had made in Ireland for \$120. I was able to buy a gas welding torch, regulator and hoses. And I began welding again. The first Lazarus image (the McMenemy sculpture) was done in 1961. We lived in a sub-division near Bronte, Ontario. We hadn't yet bought our first \$100 car and we often walked along the railway track where lots of scrap metal was brought in open wagons to Stelco and Dofasco. One day I found in the ditch part of a bale of strapping which had fallen and unrolled. Lazarus had risen! My mother died in '59 and my father died in '65 and the Lazarus comes after my mother's death and the Hanging Thief after that. The figures on cots relate to my father's death. Lazarus appears again in the red version (1983). No welded sculpture has been made since the Noah figure (1985). It's in the garden of the Cappadocia house off Aberdeen Avenue in Hamilton, bolted to a deck at the back of the house. The City declared it illegal, so they said it wasn't a deck, it was the base for a sculpture.

There were Lazarus paintings before the Lazarus sculpture, made in England. I think I was interested in the strange, ambivalent situation Lazarus finds himself in. Does he really want to come back? These later welded images, as I said, have something to do with the deaths of my mother and my father. Outbursts of sculpture-making occurred after each of their deaths as some way of mourning, I suppose. I never saw the body of my father because he died when I was correcting grade 13 exams in Toronto and he was encased before I arrived. I remember looking at my mother in her coffin. She had been a tall, large and vigorous woman, and here was this very small shrivelled figure whom I hadn't seen for about 18 months since we had been in Canada.

The man on the broken cot is a technological failure. The front legs of the cot have collapsed and he's dumped on the ground! One thinks of the society we live in as uppity and self-confident, but my characters certainly aren't a great success. Daedalus is a story that interested me for some time. He makes these wings. His son flies with them too close to the sun, and crashes and is killed. I thought of Geoffrey de Havilland, who I believed designed an aircraft in which his son flew as a test pilot and was killed. I thought of this as a contemporary Daedalus image. In fact, I learned long afterwards, it was one of several German test planes which were confiscated by the Allies and distributed to British and American designers to examine in technical terms -it was a very dangerous, advanced high-speed fighter.

Reg Butler was a conscientious objector during the Second World War, and he was allocated to do farm work and learned to weld farm machinery. At the end of the war he began to make figurative sculpture by welding pieces of machinery together. I don't know if he had seen Julio Gonzalez' work in the '20s and '30s, but many of things he made were quite similar. I became aware of these when I was teaching at Falmouth and went to the technical school at Falmouth in the evenings to learn gas welding. Butler's sculptures are like monsters in the landscape, threatening.

Naturalism is a different kettle of fish. You make a triangle of wire and weld it together and you lay wires across that and weld them in place. But you go on doing that until you've got a three-dimensional form. And you can cut to shrink it or cut it to expand it so that you can control the shape. In that sense, it's rather like modelling, but the only part that's liquid or malleable is the tiny bit that you're actually burning. You can do this quite quickly with mild wire, ordinary fence wire. Then you can leave the texture of those parallel rods showing, or weld it right out by fusing the whole altogether. And you can build up a form - you can build an eye, then build an eyelid over that eye. In memory, one of the pleasures of welding is working in that garage shed in Dundas; getting up very early in the morning in the summer when it was quiet and still and sunny outside - and welding.

Heads

The bronze heads have been made over the last ten years -- all made since we moved into this wooden house in 1986 (hence, no welding). And it's only the past two years that I've had them cast. They look like chessmen, someone said, rather heraldic. And I think that the red bases comes from this notion. I have a set of Chinese carved chessmen where one set is white and the other is red. It's only recently that I've begun to think of how they relate to each other. They seem to develop a relationship that's whimsical, humorous. The quality I enjoy in poetry is the quality of wit. I like the poetry of late 17th, 18th century because it's so concise and inventive. And I think wit is the great charm of all works of art - the major quality of being able to turn a phrase humorously or maliciously. The drawings of Rowlandson or Gillray, for example...and it's the essence of Goya to be concise, and witty, even elegant - which you don't often find in art at the moment. it's a great artistic virtue. Ten Characters from a Spanish Comedy. It's nonsense, of course. It simply gives you a framework for a performance of some kind. They're related to one another in some way, goodness knows in what way. They're watching, responding to one another. The woman with the expensive hat is pleased with herself. The others are in various ways, angry or cantankerous or worried. The boss man in the centre is arrogantly powerful. The sizes of them are a measure of their own self-importance and like medieval pictures, their sizes indicate their social importance.

Etchings and Monotypes

I was in university; I had never seen Luce's Picture Post and Life magazines before. He made his reputation by taking horrible pictures of grim subject matter - people being dragged out of airplane crashes, etc. I remember quite late in the war, when the islands in the South Pacific were being recaptured by the Allies, there was a photograph of a collection of American soldiers displaying the head of a Japanese soldier which had been burned by a flame thrower. It was cut off and stuck on a tank... the horrible objectification of people in war, to treat humans in this way. The deep etching of the man in the helmet was done in 1956 and predates all the welded sculpture and relates to them in texture.

The first monotypes were made before I had ever seen actual monotypes. I had only seen some bad reproductions of Degas monotypes. They were made almost entirely experimentally and were made possible because the Falmouth School of Art owned a fine old 19th-century etching press. I used it as a teaching aid because it's a very good way of getting inhibited students to draw. I went back to monotyping when I was making the sculpture heads in the late 1980s. They do relate to this extraordinary culture of photographs that occur in the business section of the Globe & Mail. Astonishing how people allow themselves to be portrayed this way. Subsequently the monotypes are extended to general social comment.

There is some kind of gap between the imitation mug shot and the real mug shot. I'm drawing it, and it

grows in a sense as I draw it. It's also happening as the ink is pushed across the plate, smeared...as any work of art develops physically. There is a caricature aspect to them in various degrees, but there needs to be a balance so it doesn't become malicious; that wouldn't work. There's the balance of wit. All those wonderful drawings of Tiepolo which George Knox discovered - they show groupings of people in Venice playing cards, going to parties. There's one where two women and a dandified man are playing cards and they're confronted by a fat priest with an enormous potbelly and there's a character with a cloak held over his face. I don't know what's going on, but they're gorgeous ink-drawings with a wash on them and absolutely effortless. That is wit. An effortless performance that gets it just right. Bang on. And that's the most enviable quality of art.

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