



Bell's New Bronze Age

In a departure from his previous work, sculptor Larry Bell has taken up the traditional medium of bronze—sometimes executed on a monumental scale—to produce a series of calligraphic figures based on computer-derived sketches.

BY ELEANOR HEARTNEY



Above and opposite, views of Larry Bell's Stickman #1 from the "Sumer" series, 1996, forged bronze, 36 by 24 by 26 feet; installed in the sculpture garden of Art et Industrie, New York. Photo Dennis Cowley.

In the work for which he is best known, shimmering glass boxes whose iridescent planes seem to enclose a mysterious light, Larry Bell took advantage of an advanced technology originally developed by the U.S. Air Force. By contrast, his current body of work, presented in a pair of recent shows at Art et Industrie in New York, looks to the distant past rather than the technological future. It employs the ancient medium of bronze to create a series of figures inspired by recently deciphered texts of the Sumerian civilization which emerged in the fourth millennium B.C.

However, the disparity is not as great as it first appears. Both the boxes and the figures manifest Bell's fondness for incongruity. Just as the boxes transcend Minimalism's reductivism and materialism, employing high-tech materials to express an almost mystical sensibility, the figural works put bronze at the service of gesture, creating forms which resemble three-dimensional calligraphy.

Most of the bronze figures in Bell's new series, titled "Sumer," are scaled for gallery display. They dance, twist and thrust into the air atop white pedestals. However, two of these figures have been cast in monumental proportions, so that their nervous, wavering lines grow to the size

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of tree branches and the expansive gaps between their limbs provide viewers with generous walk-through spaces.

Ten more monumental figures are planned. The large figures came into being thanks to the patronage of a Cleveland-based auto-insurance executive named Peter Lewis. Lewis originally commissioned Bell to create these works to punctuate the grounds of a Frank Gehry house he was planning to build on his property. Although the Gehry project eventually fell through, Lewis decided that lack of a house was no reason to forgo the sculptures. Following the exhibition of the completed pair of large-scale figures as part of Bell's retrospective now on view at the Albuquerque Museum, they will be installed in Cleveland on the premises of Lewis's company, Progressive Insurance.

The fabricating of these giant sculptures is a saga in itself. Of the two completed figures, one was cast in the traditional way from a plaster form; the sculpture's bronze shell is $\frac{1}{2}$ to $\frac{3}{4}$ of an inch thick, and is self supporting. The piece weighs six tons. The other, which features forms cantilevered alarmingly into space, was forged, not cast: 9-by-14-inch sheets of bronze were shaped, then welded and hammered into place. The bronze skin is thinner than in the cast work—about $\frac{1}{4}$ inch thick—so that the figure requires a skeleton of stainless steel pipe anchored to the ground. The piece weighs eight tons. The cast figure has a smooth, sinuous surface, while the forged sculpture is rougher and more textured. At this writing, no decision has been made as to the fabrication process for the remaining figures, the costs for the two approaches being about the same.

Each of the two exhibitions at Art et Industrie presented one of the monumental bronzes, along with a selection of small-scale figures and related paintings. The paintings and the sculptures, large and small, are all based on a set of computer-generated stick-figure drawings. With the exception of two larger paintings in the second show, in which the lines that define the figure begin to dissolve into disconnected calligraphic marks amid large, monochromatic fields of color, these mechanical doodles are rather flat and lifeless when transferred to canvas.

The images are far more successful when translated into three dimensions. The small sculptures offer lithe, elastic rods of bronze which evoke dramatically posed single figures and groups. One, reflecting Sumerian rules about the punishment of shirkers, presents a figure with an elongated arm dragging a second character by the head. Another, making reference to Sumerian myths about a pair of boys who tried to run the circumference of the earth, offers a figure with the cocked elbows and flexed knees of a long distance runner. Other works suggest pugilistic posturing, confrontations or, in one case, a figure jumping for joy. The bronze forms have the jittery, uneven quality of drawn lines, thickening at junctions and ends of appendages as would an ink stroke. Meanwhile, their dimensionality allows them, when viewed from various angles, a high degree of



Stickman #12 from the "Sumer" series, 1996, cast bronze, 23 by 34 by 36 feet; installed at Art et Industrie, New York. Photo Dennis Coulely.

abstraction. At times the figural image disappears altogether, to leave only a set of swelling and contracting lines that enclose eccentric spaces.

This abstraction is particularly evident in the large figures which were placed in the gallery's walled outdoor sculpture garden. The first show featured *Stickman #12*, an enormous seated figure who leans forward, arms resting on flexed knees. Viewed frontally, it filled the entire enclosure and exuded an uneasy tension, as if poised to break out of its confinement. But the viewer who walked through or under the sculpture got a very different vision. Now the arms outlined a triangular space of sky overhead, and the long legs extended into the distance in a comically exaggerated fashion.

The second piece, *Stickman #1*, occupied the space very differently. Its two feet rested on rusted, ribbed stands while its torso and arms thrust upward, as if the figure were captured in the act of springing forward. On the whole, the effect was rather threatening. Again, the view was quite different inside the sculpture, where the work loomed overhead like a large gate or archway and once again drew the eye upward to the patch of sky above.

It's hard to imagine that either of these figures could ever be more effectively sited than they were here, where their enormous scale played against the tight enclosure of the walled court. Placed unencumbered in a natural setting, they may turn out to be less confrontational.

Despite the elevated literary and historic sources of this series, detailed at length in an accompanying catalogue, these works are anything but pedantic. In fact, the sculptures exude a cartoonish humor, evoking as great a kinship with contemporary graffiti as with Eastern calligraphy or Sumerian myth. They suggest that Bell has found a source material and theme which have allowed him to set off in a completely new and promising direction. Thanks to the kind of patronage that is increasingly rare these days, he has embarked on a project which knits together past and present—his own and those of his subject—in a form that is surprisingly satisfying. □

"Sumer Part I" was on view at Art et Industrie, New York, Sept. 6-Oct. 5, 1996. "Sumer Part II" appeared there Nov. 23-Dec. 21, 1996. "Zones of Experience: The Art of Larry Bell," curated by Ellen J. Landis, opened Feb. 16 at the Albuquerque Museum and remains on view through May 18.

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Examples of the computer-generated stick figures on which the "Sumer" series is based.

