

BRYAN HUNT

Monuments and Wonders, 1974–79

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Essay By Constance Lewallen



Monuments and Wonders

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Bryan Hunt came of age as a sculptor in the heady days of Process, Earth and Conceptual art. The reigning style of the mid-1960s, Minimalism was defined by symmetrical, geometric form and strict abstraction--reducing art, particularly sculpture, to its basic forms. But already by the late 1960s Post-minimalist sculptors, while adhering to certain Minimalist innovations, such as placing their work directly on the floor rather than on a pedestal, eschewed the restrictive nature of Minimalist practice. Instead, they privileged process over product and explored new materials such as fiberglass, felt, neon, and even the body itself. Earth artists chose to move out of the gallery altogether in order to work on an expansive scale. New Image artists, mostly painters, took the primary form of Minimalism as a point of departure but added figural references, seeking the tension and ambiguity created by the interface of the two.

Hunt was fully cognizant of all of these developments by the time he began making sculpture in Los Angeles in 1974. While it's true that all artists are products of their time in an art historical and cultural sense, each also develops out of their own experience. For Hunt, who grew up near Cape Canaveral, Florida, space exploration became a defining fascination. He came to believe that sculptors must address new concepts of space in their work. One of his first translations of modern spatial concepts into sculptural form was *Empire State with Hindenburg* (1974), in which a facsimile of the ill-fated zeppelin is tethered to an eight-foot-high replica of the Empire State Building. Both the Hindenburg and the Empire State Building were engineering marvels of their time, but the odd juxtaposition of the two signaled Hunt's innovative approach to sculpture. Like the "airships" Hunt made subsequently (which are invisibly affixed the wall high above eye level) the Hindenburg appears to float weightlessly in a volume of horizontal air, referring not only to spacecraft but to ideas of vast space and scale being addressed at the same time by leading Earth artists Robert Smithson, Michael Heizer, and others. Although Hunt wasn't interested in pursuing an early and brief involvement with Earthworks, he wanted to include the concept of monumental scale in his work, "using a more classical, compact kind of sculptural form." In what became typical in his practice, Hunt had found a unique way to bring the landscape into his work on a human scale. He would continue in this manner with plaster and bronze pieces in the shape of lakes, quarries, and waterfalls that isolate and give permanence to fluid fragments of nature.

Hunt's studio, Venice, California, 1974



Hunt's "airships" are among his most distinctive works. Made of the lightest, most ephemeral of sculptural materials--balsa wood and silk paper--these elegant metaphors for flight, with their light reflective metal leaf surfaces, seem to defy gravity as they hover above the viewer. The elongated elliptical shapes of *First Ship* (1974) and *King Crest* (1976) give way to more aggressive examples like *Tigress*, *Lure II*, and *Airship* --AIRSHIP IS NOT REAL TITLE -- TO COME FROM BRYAN, all 1979, in which the undersides have been cut away to create sharply pointed ends. Hunt's "airships," like his subsequent landscape-related sculptures, are abstract volumes first and recognizable objects second, reversing the modernist artist's movement from representation to abstraction. By tying them to nature or culture, Hunt adds layers of allusions that enhance the overall experience.

Monuments of the ancient world, real or imagined, form another early series. The wood *Gate of Ishtar* and *Golden Gate II* (both 1976) cast plaster *Tower of Babel* (1974), and *Odeon* (1976) reflect Hunt's wide-ranging interests of the time--Biblical references to the entry gate to Babylon and the story of Babel in *Genesis*, Giotto's Golden Gate depicted in the Arena Chapel, Padua, as well as Borges's story *The Library of Babel*. Hunt also cites Bruce Nauman's spiral neon *The True Artist Helps the World by Revealing Mystic Truths*, as a source for *Tower of Babel*. The limestone *Odeon*, in the shape of an antique amphitheater, sits on rough wood block. In the use of a distinctive platform, Hunt is looking back to Brancusi's handcrafted pedestals that are integral to the object they support. Brancusi, in fact, has been an important inspiration to Hunt. His *Bird in Space*, for example, is an obvious antecedent to Hunt's "airships."

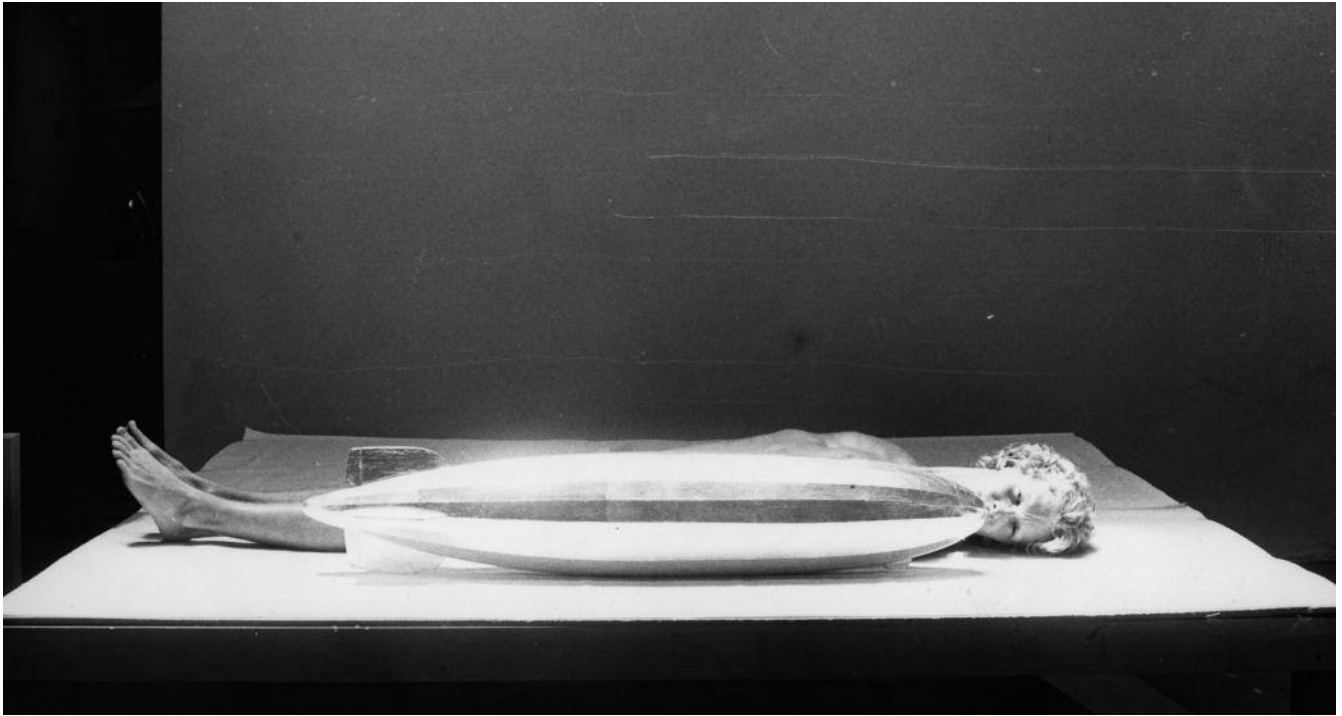
Means Two, 1976
 silk paper, lacquer, and wood
 40 x 5 x 5 inches
 Courtesy of the Seattle Art Museum
 Gift of Patterson Sims and Katy Homans



Hunt learned how to cast bronze for *Nankow Pass (Wall of China)* (1974), a sinuous, wall-mounted linear sculpture whose shape is derived from the terrain of a section of the real wall. Minimal sculptors avoided the use of bronze because of its association with the type of traditional monumental sculpture they were rejecting. Hunt refused to be intimidated by bronze's negative connotations--in fact he welcomed its classical reference--and found the material to be extremely expressive in its interaction with light. Moreover, he learned from such Post-minimalists as Nauman that artists should be free to choose whatever material is suitable to the specific idea. Bronze seemed a logical choice for *Nankow Pass* since, for one thing, much of traditional Chinese sculpture was bronze. Hunt said this work "was not only a statement about the way the Chinese integrated landscape and culture and made boundaries, it was a metaphor. It was a symbol of their being able to overcome everything."

Hunt's solid bronze "lakes" date from 1976-1977 and, again, refer to massive Earthworks, although their actual length is usually only two to three feet. Characteristically, Hunt found a way to bring the experience of monumentality in nature into the gallery. Although by this time he had moved to New York, while in California he spent a good deal of time hiking in the Sierras where he derived many of the shapes and names of the "lakes." Placed directly on the floor, each of these irregularly shaped volumes is an image of what a lake would look like if one could see it in its entirety. Their surfaces are flat and often highly polished but scored with lines so that they catch the light. In his related but somewhat larger water-filled "quarries" that follow, Hunt again successfully balances representation and abstraction, while also reversing positive and negative space.

Means Four, 1977
silk paper, lacquer, and wood
41 1/2 x 5 x 5 inches
Private Collection



Hunt with *Hindenburg*, 1974

Hunt began his majestic bronze "waterfalls" toward the end of the 1970s. Like the airships, the tall, slender sculptures are mysteriously balanced on the floor without stabilizing bases, defying gravitational expectations. They also suggest the process of their creation during which molten metal solidifies as it cools. *First Falls 1* (1977) is a simple vertical column. In *Step Falls* (1977) Hunt adds a step, in *Big Twist* (1978), a twist. These works, with their richly modeled surfaces recall Giacometti's attenuated figures and also De Kooning's late bronze sculptures. Hunt likes that his "waterfalls," drawn from nature also have figural references, especially to antique caryatids.

Hunt created the first "falls" with a steel rebar armature, then poured plaster. When the plaster dried he chipped at the surface. He realized he was "making expressionistic sculpture that has a very definite presence of what it is." It will have become clear by now that Hunt's sculptures have a painterly aspect, and so it is no surprise that he makes exquisite, gestural drawings that stand apart from his sculpture. An early example, *Williams Bay Telescope* (1974), is an accurate graphite-on-vellum rendering of the object. *Black Falls II* (1978) and *White Line Drawing V* (1979) both graphite and linseed oil on vellum, are more painterly and relate directly to the "waterfalls." Hunt appreciates the immediacy of drawing and enjoys the solitude of their making. He says of his drawings, "They are all about line. I love to draw a line. I love the idea that you can make a variation on a line that has the emotion of itself, or that you can put two lines together and the juxtaposition creates another tone."



James Lee Byars with Hunt's *Phobos*, 1975



Allan McCollum, Tom Wudl, and Laddie Dill with Hunt's *Hoover Dam*

In the early years of his career, Hunt established himself as an artist of intelligence and technical mastery. He absorbed the lessons of the past but created an entirely original series of sculptural works that engaged both the mind and the hand and offered intriguing objects of contemplation and sensual enjoyment.

1. White, Robin, "Interview with Bryan Hunt," *View*, Crown Point Press (Oakland, CA), 1980, 8.
2. Scott, Sue. *Bryan Hunt: Early Work*, Orlando Museum of Art (FL), 1992, 9,10.
3. Tuchman, Phyllis. "Bryan Hunt's Balancing Act," *Art News*, October, 1985, 70.
4. Scott, 14.
5. White, 21.

Constance Lewallen is Adjunct Curator at the University of California Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive. As Senior Curator at the BAM from 1998 to June of this year, she curated many major exhibitions. From 1980-1987 Lewallen was the curator of the BAM's acclaimed MATRIX contemporary art series, which included a 1986 exhibition of Bryan Hunt's "airships."