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Sculpture.
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sculpture



FORMAL INVENTION Richard Rezac

BY VICTOR M. CASSIDY

Richard Rezac casts and constructs small sculptures in nickel-plated bronze, steel, aluminum, hydrostone (gypsum cement), painted wood, and other materials. Because drawing is central to his creative process, he often shows two- and three-dimensional works together. His recent exhibition at the College of Du Page in Glen Ellyn, Illinois, which featured 10 sculptures and five drawings dating from 2003 to 2008, offered considerable variety and gave a sense of this unique artist at work. Rezac has a recognizable style, but he does not work in the usual format of families or series. Much of his work hovers between two dimensions and three: parts seem to be missing from some sculptures, and some can appear deliberately awkward.

In many ways though, Rezac is a traditional sculptor. He casts his work or constructs it with tools, employing echoes, identical forms in opposition, and contrasting materials. His influences include Cycladic, Greek, and Roman sculpture, Brancusi, and Donald Judd, although there's too much variety and accident in Rezac's work to count him as a Minimalist. Rezac is distinctive in his determination to make fresh formal inventions with every sculpture. "Invention—finding something I haven't seen before—is important to me and is at the heart of what I do," he says. He does much more experimentation—and makes much more truly new work—than many sculptors. He challenges us to keep up with him.

Opposite: *Untitled (corner 08-05)*, 2008.
Painted cherry and aluminum, 37 x 24.75
x 13.5 in. This page: *Kompundai*, 1987.
Cast bronze, 10.75 x 3.5 x 9 in.

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p.2

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Web, 1996. Cast bronze, 11.5 x 10.5 x 1 in.

started to build. Nowadays his wooden constructions are so complex that he does preliminary sketches, goes directly into form, and feels his way from there.

The expressive strategies that Rezac developed in the 1980s still influence his work. For instance, he created identical paired forms such as cylinders and L shapes and stacked them at 90-degree angles, using simple elements to create complexity. Sometimes he combined similar forms in reversed presentations recalling left and right hands. He made slab-like castings or wooden constructions and cut shapes into them. Later he made cast forms, but with the shapes reversed out.

During the 1990s, Rezac visited Italy several times and fell under the spell of the Baroque architect Francesco Borromini (1599–1667). Baroque architecture became important for him because "it offers a good example of a principle that can release multiple possibilities." Borromini and others could "spin out an entire structure from a single motif." In the studio, Rezac followed their example, investigating "form, the dynamics of the form," and "the ways in which an oval, for example, can be realized differently from other times I've done it." He says his goal "is always to individualize and create some separation between sculptures as I make them. If an artwork has five

Rezac made his earliest sculptures soon after graduating from Portland's Pacific Northwest College of Art in 1974. At first, he produced flat metal cutouts, but finding these too dry, he sought ways to make his work more personal. Over time, he created a sculptural language influenced by the details of architecture. During the 1980s, he traveled twice to Japan, where he spent a total of 12 weeks absorbing the art and architecture—and making his first mature sculptures. *Kompundai* (1987), a bronze casting that juts diagonally out of the wall, recalls a Japanese temple roofline. Just over 10 inches high, with a dark matte surface, *Kompundai* has an Eastern spirit; its simplicity and bonnet-shaped profile also connect it to Shaker design. Instead of trying to overwhelm, Rezac makes quiet statements and lets the viewer come to him.

The 1980s sculptures mostly consist of iron, bronze, or concrete castings with unfinished surfaces. These works, he says, are "compressed and small," feeling somewhat like ceramics: "Often, they can be

held in your hand. They seem full." His painted wood constructions from this time are unitary shapes. Rezac built wooden forms for his castings and paid a foundry to pour the metal. He perfected his carpentry skills slowly, designing early pieces on paper and making prototypes before he



Thorax, 1995. Cast bronze, 2 x 30.5 x 10.75 in.

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p.3

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*Untitled (08-01), 2008. Cast hydrostone, wood,
and aluminum, 23 x 10.5 x 8.75 in.*

components, for example, an artist working in a strict series may shift one of those components, retaining the other four for continuity. I prefer to change three or four if that's possible so there's more re-examination of...the greater structure, the implications, the content, and the orientation.”

Web (1996), which consists of two sticks of differing width, length, and thickness crossed off-center, exemplifies Rezac's creative method. The cast bronze X-shape—a form that appears in many of his sculptures—suggests stone vaulting. Each stick has rounded ends and two circular protrusions along its length. Installed in a corner at eye level, it becomes somewhat confrontational. Rezac had already used the X in an untitled 1992 wooden wall piece consisting of two flat white diamond shapes, unequal in size, mounted above each other on the wall with one point touching and a diagonally mounted flat green square at their right. This X-form is also off-center, but its presentation and color make it inviting. The same motif appears in *Davie's Grove* (1998) as a low, horizontal black steel platform that supports a contrasting element. Unlike the other two examples, *Davie's Grove* appears vulnerable as viewers look down at it. Just in these three sculptures—and there are many others that incorporate the X-motif—Rezac creates a three-dimensional form that functions as a wall drawing, recalls ecclesiastical architecture, and supports a structure on the floor. Each version is made from a different material and has its own color, orientation, and emotional temperature.

Starting in the 1990s, Rezac also developed fresh expressive strategies as he experimented with form, material, and installation. He began to make linear compositions and achieved a variety of effects by manipulating (sometimes jarringly) the orientation of simple forms in space. Four tightly packed ovals seem to burst out of the wall in an untitled 1996 bronze. This sculpture, in its apparent fecundity, recalls a plant; the ovals could come from a Baroque church. In *Thorax* (1995), 10 flattened and partially ridged cylinders



resemble the roof supports inside a cathedral. Rezac arranges these forms on the floor in a complex grid to create a tiny landscape. Later, he constructed off-kilter sculptural frameworks from wood and metal and mounted or suspended them well above eye level. Gazing up at these sculptures, the disoriented viewer is tempted to tidy them up.

While exploring metal, Rezac also continued his painted wood sculptures. An untitled piece from 1993 suggests flattened

Cape Cod rooftops assembled at right angles; each surface is painted white or apple green. Rezac gives much thought to color, using lighter hues to reveal volume and darker hues to express the silhouette. While these bright, cheerful colors always reinforce the form, he never seeks a flawless surface: an industrial finish “loses some indication of process and the maker’s involvement and also undercuts the material.”

Rezac says that the best thing about being a sculptor is making the work.

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p.4

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"Otherwise why spend your life at it?" he asks. "I've always understood art as an involvement in learning and self-examination." Working alone (he has no assistants), he begins with a pencil drawing—a few straight lines, a circle, a smooth curve, or even a set of points on a plane—that develops into a design for a sculpture. Sometimes the drawing remains formal and abstract, but it may also take on "a certain representation, an association that's perhaps metaphoric, perhaps symbolic, and stays within this abstract language. In my mind, it takes on some content, some representation." He associates this kind of representation with 20th-century abstract painting. All-white or all-black paintings may suggest nothing to most viewers, but the artists themselves "think of them in somewhat representational terms," he says. "It might be utopian and far-fetched for some people, but it is there. It's not only a simple or a balanced design. It contains something that I would call humanistic."

As a piece develops on paper, Rezac draws un-scaled plan and elevation views to clarify proportion and details. He solves most formal problems at this stage: "In a sculpture, I want to achieve my simple understanding of what's pictured in the drawing. Several things follow that—the orientation, the sense of weight, surface coloration or reflectivity of material, the size...Once those things are at least loosely understood in my head, then material and process follow naturally." He employs up to five or six materials on a rotating basis, possibly revisiting a material once a year. But there's "nothing systematic or planned" about this, "it all begins with the drawing."

Rezac chooses work for an exhibition to represent his range as an artist, not to present several similar pieces: "That's better for me and the viewer." The College of Du Page exhibition included work from the past five years, a time when the structures and details of service sector architecture—hand rails, banisters, decorative wall trim,

Untitled (05-07), 2005. Cast bronze and steel cable, 7 x 9.5 x 8.5 in.

and the like—were a major influence. Some pieces suggest industrial products, but they have no apparent function. With their sunny colors, the painted sculptures are quite tactile.

Lancaster (2004) is a wood, steel, and aluminum construction that resembles the temporary street barricades used for crowd control. Made of tapered dowels with a smooth, egg-shaped top rail and a short, separate gate-like frame behind, it is bolted to the wall and cannot stand up without support. Parts seem to be missing from the baby blue and salmon pink assembly. The title could refer to a thousand things, but in purely formal terms, *Lancaster* is a rhythmic, almost musical study in line and volume. It controls and divides the space that it occupies. Basically a sculptural drawing, it would mean nothing without the wall behind it. Rezac's

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p.5

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Lancaster, 2004. Painted wood, steel, and aluminum, 31.25 x 95 x 26.25 in.

colors intensify these effects and distance *Lancaster* from function.

Of the 15 works in Rezac's recent show, only six have titles. *Lucia* (2003) is a digital print affixed to the wall with two small egg-shaped bronze castings attached to its center and joined by a small metal bar. The title refers to the early Christian martyr who had her eyes gouged out rather than lose her virginity in marriage to a pagan. Paintings show St. Lucy holding her eyes on a plate. Formally, *Lucia* is an exercise in combining two dimensions and three. A light-burst pattern of Rezac's own invention appears on the wall. He likes this design because "the negative areas replicate the positive areas: as you look at it, the circles pop and re-create each other." This light frames the egg shapes, which also seem both positive and negative, transforming the story of St. Lucy into a striking visual conceit.

Glisan (2006), a horizontal wall piece made from painted wood and aluminum, refers to Rezac's residence on Portland's Glisan Street during college. The work

consists of an aluminum frame, apparently turned on its side, that suggests a building seen in plan. Placed diagonally on top is a yellow wooden structure whose form recalls lapped residential siding. Here again, the narrative information helps, but it is not decisive. *Glisan* is a puzzle in which nothing seems quite

right. Because of this, we examine it much more closely than ordinary sculptures. Rezac has made us look and has taught us to see. That's what artists are supposed to do, isn't it?

Victor M. Cassidy is a writer living in Chicago.



Glisan, 2006. Painted wood and aluminum, 17.75 x 26.75 x 15.75 in.