

Negotiation and Transformation: Curating the Macdonald Stewart Art Centre's Sculpture Park

by Judith Nasby

In 1983 the Macdonald Stewart Art Centre in Guelph, Ontario began developing a Sculpture Park on the 2.5 acre site surrounding the building. The Park now contains 16 permanent works and is recognized as a major Canadian cultural resource. The Art Centre through commissions and purchases has provided 9 emerging or established artists with their first opportunity to realize an outdoor work. The curatorial approach has been to select work through national competitions and commissions with the objective of creating a collection of works that relate and inform each other. To develop an outdoor exhibition of permanent works the curatorial role is to encourage artists to consider the relationship of their proposals to existing pieces, the landscape features, and the history of the site.

The Macdonald Stewart Art Centre is a public art gallery located north of the University of Guelph campus. It was established in 1978 under the sponsorship of the University of Guelph, the city, county and local school boards. The University is the major funder and provides its art collection on permanent loan. The Art Centre is housed in a renovated school that was built in 1904 with funding donated by Sir William Macdonald, the nonsmoking Canadian philanthropist who was the sole owner of the Macdonald Tobacco Company in Montreal. The school was known as Macdonald Consolidated School and was built as a model school for the Province of Ontario. This meant that area children no longer attended local one-room school houses but were bused by horse drawn vans to this modern facility that boasted indoor lavatories, science labs and a new agriculture curriculum. A practical aspect of this new scientific approach to studying agriculture was the requirement for each student to have their own garden plot to tend behind the school. These garden plots, the accompanying ice rink, a grove of trees and the children's playgrounds were developed into the Donald Forster Sculpture Park in 1983. The park was named after a President of the University of Guelph.

From the beginning the concept for the Sculpture Park was to develop a series of outdoor galleries that would feel like an extension of the building. The collection was to be developed as a curatorial project with the emphasis on the acquisitions rather than creating a set landscape plan that required a set number of works to complete the design. The collection in other words would develop as a curatorial project consistent with the Center's overall programming objective to present exhibitions, research and collect a dynamic collection of contemporary Canadian Art. This approach places the landscaping in a secondary position of enhancing the sculpture resulting in one of the few sculpture parks in North America that has *soft landscaping*. This may be defined as a naturalistic approach to landscape forms and plant materials, a minimum of hard surfaces and a perimeter informally defined with trees and scrubs. The emphasis is placed on low maintenance flowering trees that are natural to the area.

The installation of each sculpture is the result of a series of discussions between the curator and artist to finalize the proposal and select the siting. In the case of competitions and commissions the negotiation involves a series of stages from initial ideas to concept sketch, maquette and materials and engineering specifications. A landscape architect is consulted for the installation of a sculpture if required, to translate the artist's planting concept into the overall theme for the landscape design. As the park is used throughout the year, artists' proposals need to be conceived of as being equally effective in summer and winter, when the park could have up to 50 cm of snow.

To begin the transformation of a schoolyard to a sculpture garden, the Art Centre hired Landscape Architect, Walter Kehm to provide a concept plan that could be used for fundraising purposes and an initial construction plan. The initial construction in 1983 defined the perimeter with burms, trees and plant materials. A trellis court was built to link the building to the garden. At the same time the first purchase was *Passages* by Kosso Elloul. This large scale modernist steel and concrete sculpture serves as a gateway to the park by slicing into the hill at the leading edge of the park and at a major city intersection. The siting and selection of the following 15 works evolved in relation to each other and the compact nature of the Park always with the thought that an exhibition was being created.

The initial process for the selection of the work was to hold a national sculpture competition sponsored by du Maurier, whose largest cigarette manufacturing facility is located in Guelph. The competition held in 1985 attracted more than 250 submissions resulting in a substantial archive for the Art Centre on Canadian sculptors. The competition jury of five was chaired by the Art Centre Director and produced a tie between Robert Weins and Tony Urquhart. Du Maurier Arts generously and conveniently decided to sponsor both sculptures. This relationship continued through 1994 with du Maurier sponsoring four additional works by Evan Penny, Catherine Burgess, Brian Scott and Kim Adams. After the success of the first competition a second national competition was offered. The process then evolved to individual commissions offered as part of the regular curatorial acquisition process.

An overall objective for the permanent collection is to build a collection at the forefront of contemporary Canadian art that will include artists nationwide and place emphasis on regional artists who have achieved recognition beyond the immediate area. The acquisition objective for the sculpture park is to provide, when possible emerging or established artists with their first opportunity to realize an outdoor work. Of the 16 sculptures 9 artists are in this category: Kim Adams, Catherine Burgess, Jane Buyers, John Greer, Evan Penny, Brian Scott, Cynthia Short, Tony Urquhart and Robert Weins. The sculpture park is to include examples of historical works, if possible, such as the 1930's bronzes *The Harvester* by Florence Wyle and *Turkey*, a posthumous casting by Frances Loring. The Sculpture Park is part of a 4,000 work permanent collection covering 3 centuries of Canadian Art.

In 1996 the Art Centre hired Landscape Architect, Wendy Shearer to provide a plan for renovating the Park. The changes included the removal of the trellis court that had become too dominant a feature in the

compact garden and its replacement with a plaza which was designed as a site for John Greer's sculpture *Three Grains of Wheat*. The sculpture was set on limestone flagstones according to his specification. Since the first concept design for the Sculpture Park the outdoor collection has evolved to include site specific pieces by Kosso Eloul, Tony Urquhart and Brian Scott. Some pieces like the historical bronzes have been relocated to enhance the relationship among new and existing pieces.

In developing proposals for the site artists are encouraged to consider the relationship of their work to existing pieces, the garden feature and context of the site. Tony Urquhart chose to use an existing grove of maples and cedars into which he placed his 20 meter long Romanesque cathedral formation titled *Magic Wood*. The painted steel sculpture has a movable reliquary-like structure at the crossing of the transept and nave. Urquhart has incorporated into the work the camouflage screening of the leaves in summer and the stark contrast of the steel sculpture with tree branches in the winter. Responding to the growth and decay of the trees, Urquhart has decided to effect his own change by requesting that the Art Centre paint *Magic Wood* a putty colour in the spring.

While Urquhart's sculpture was the result of many visits to study the site, Edmonton artist Catherine Burgess arrived at her solution after a day's visit. Titled *Things as They Are: Guelph September 27, 1990*, her bench-like abstract work is one of her first to include symbolic figurative elements. In this case, a bowl form and elements suggestive of architecture and land elevations make reference to the campus and surrounding countryside. The artist selected two potential sites for this bronze sculpture. Its actual location is different from the original idea and was decided by moving the sculpture on the site. This fluid approach to siting sculptures is similar to how one would approach designing an exhibition of contemporary art for an interior gallery.

As more pieces are added to the collection, the compact size of the site and relationship to other works becomes increasingly complex. Evan Penny, winner of the second national competition, proposed a work that was conceived for a specific position on the ridge at the front of the Sculpture Park. This 2 meter high bronze *Mask* contains the face of a youth on the concave side. A stereoscopic effect is created for the viewer as one walks by the sculpture so that the image appears to be convex. By leaving the weld marks open between the individual castings, Penny adds a further illusion by suggesting the face is made of collapsing puzzle pieces. The sculpture appears like the head of Zeus fallen from the skies. On the back of the sculpture is a sleeping head modeled in a loose fashion. The location selected by Penny was arrived at by studying the path of the sun and prevailing wind direction and was installed exactly as planned.

Reinhard Reitzenstein worked with an existing landscape situation by choosing the edge of the park where the limestone fines path leads to the University's concert hall. His solution was to extend his current interest in arches into making an actual entrance archway for the Sculpture Park. His stainless steel work incorporates a bronze casting of a wasp nest near the apex of the double arch. A vine of wild grapes will be lush and ripe by next summer ensuring a changing interface between the hard metal surface and natural forms. The sculpture titled *Memory Cell* references the University of Guelph as Canada's leading agricultural research centre

and in particular its work in Apiculture and Ecnology.

The most recent commission *Agricultura* by Jane Buyers makes a similar contextual link to the site. This two part bronze work references the University's rich history of agricultural research dating from the 1870's and the introduction of the scientific approach to agriculture study experienced by generations of school children who attended Macdonald Consolidated School. The main element of the sculpture is a leaf-covered book that appears to grow out of actual cast branches. The 2 part sculpture has a second smaller book covered with leaf vines which is caught in the crux of a tree. Both pieces are installed like lecterns in the middle of the park. The idea for the sculpture, which was partly funded by the former chief librarian of the University, evolved from studying the history of the Macdonald Consolidated school and examining 19th century agriculture and veterinary tools and rare manuscripts in the University library.

Perhaps the most popular work in the Park is Brian Scott's *StrayPlow*. The work was originally conceived of as a temporary installation for the Toronto Sculpture Garden. In this setting its irony was based on its placement in a tight architectural setting in Central Toronto. The Art Centre location presented Scott with the opportunity to create wave patterns across the centre of the park as this commonplace Canadian Tire aluminum runabout is powered by its 1950's outboard towards what appears to be a Muskoka shoreline. The reflective polished steel plate inside the boat has further enhanced the precariousness of this vehicle for human transport. The Sculpture Park serves a broad public, tourists and the specialized interests of five University Fine Art programs which are within easy access of the Art Centre. Over the next decade it is anticipated that the Sculpture Park collection will expand to 25 pieces. A measure of curatorial success is perhaps whether the sculptures can be both a popular and critical success. For the community and visitors the proximity of the sculpture park to a public art gallery and the availability of information on individual pieces prepare viewers for a positive experience with public art.

With 16 pieces the Macdonald Stewart Art Centre's Donald Forster Sculpture Park is recognized as a major Canadian cultural resource. The future challenge for curator and artist alike will be the contextualization of new commissions within this dynamic collection of Canadian sculpture.

Universities Art Association of Canada
Annual Conference (Emily Carr College of Art, Vancouver) – November 8, 1997
Session: "Art for Whom? Public Art in Canada; Past and Present" (Chaired by Natalie Luckyj)