

**Walter May**

November 15 to December 15, 1990

Mercer Union



Interview by John Chalke

## Interview with Walter May by John Chalke

J.C. There was a precedent for the Mercer Union show. I'm referring to the 1989 performance in which you moved into your new studio space here in Calgary and transformed it into a more efficient area by the removal of an awkward central truss support system. You managed to achieve this (with the help of two other sculptors) in a business-like manner that had continuous mild mixtures of apprehension, dignity and ceremony – in front of a curious and (nice touch, this) paying audience. This was your celebration, and better understanding, of new space.<sup>1</sup>

**W.M.** The new space became more efficient, or purified. One of the things that made the idea of the performance interesting for me was the notion of being able to accomplish something at the same time, some kind of useful task. It seems to me that sometimes the act of a performance may be transitory in the sense that there's no physical evidence of anything having taken place. As well as the ability of accomplishing the pragmatic task of removing the truss system, there was also the opportunity for performance and the certain kinds of learning that had to do with the preparation for performance – the details. It was a rare event for me to engage in a performance – I think I would enter into performance again, but perhaps in a more cautious or less naive way.

J.C. Do you sense there's a sculptor's way of approaching performance as opposed to a more two-dimensional person's approach? Do you get a sense of sculpture entering into this [performance] in a conscious manner?

**W.M.** I don't think space or flatness is the driving element in performance. I think it's something else that has to do with activity.

J.C. Do the sculptors you know have a space consciousness?

**W.M.** I think that sculptors have a space consciousness, yes, I think that's essential. However, I might make a distinction between installation and sculpture – there might be a more extended space with installation. People who would define themselves as installation artists may be more concerned with the whole space of an area, the space of a room or the space of an environment more so than perhaps traditional sculptors who are interested more in the space that an object occupies physically – and also with its presence.

J.C. Do you see yourself as a crossover person dealing with things like sound and vision, say someone like Michael Snow – that kind of person?

**W.M.** No, I think I'm more interested in learning more about sculpture, about widening those kinds of experiences. But for me there's a link with installation, or a different sensibility that's come about as the result of installation art, and as the result of post-modernist sculpture generally.

J.C. The tables and the chairs, of course, are clearly components for an installation. I see the table as a sort of mother figure, and maybe the chairs around it in some sort of attendance.

**W.M.** It's very much an installation. I think that the genesis of the piece had to do with the thinking about all of those chairs and that table together as one thing in one space. I don't think I'd like to see the table shown without the chairs, or the chairs shown without the table – there's an important relationship between those two sets of objects.

J.C. But when you worked on those objects, though, you must have appraised

them as single objects, surely – you couldn't have had the table *always* in mind – and yet ultimately they had to relate back to the table.

**W.M.** I think they relate back to the table by the context of what they are and where they are. There's an association of table/chair: the table is a workplace, the studio is a workplace, and those kinds of chairs – very functional metal stools – are the kind you find in a studio, shop, some sort of industrial setting. The connection there is about making, about a place where things are made, and that's what the performance was about, too.

**J.C.** Can we talk about the connective possibilities of drawing in your sculptural work? These recent works clearly contain certain references to the drawing process, it would seem to me. I'm referring to the smudging, darkening and blurring of existing images – tonal stuff – with something that looks like, or works like, graphite; a treatment reminiscent of early drawings of yours. Are you conscious of connecting with drawing as such when you work?

**W.M.** You've mentioned this before, and I thought that was a remarkable observation. For the longest time my sculpture has dealt with the idea of drawing in a way that many people were easily able to recognize, because of



certain linear or gestural qualities. I think that over the last couple of years I consciously moved away from things that had to do with drawing, so that the sculpture was freestanding, it dealt with volume, dealt with mass and dealt more with surface – well, not more with surface, maybe, but it continued to deal with surface. I felt that perhaps the work was more sculptural than the previous work and had less to do with drawing. And the surprising thing is that you've recognized that parts of the existing work still have to do with drawing.

J.C. Well, that's how it seems to me at this point...

W.M. Well, it's curious, because people came to me with observations about the last body of work and made reference specifically about the age of the material, how old things looked and the qualities of the material they associated with age. The drawing reference was not an issue.

J.C. But your present works don't really age. They go to one side of age, as an idea expressed through, say, conventional weathering. They go back almost to a fantasy world, or perhaps even a romance about a certain past.

W.M. As you begin to look at this body of work you recognize qualities that you



initially associate with the past, and that may be where the "romantic" idea you suggest comes from. As you spend some time with it you realize that it is not very old. The contemporary evidence is there – in terms of welding, say, or grinding, or the ceramic shell casing. These things are not antiques.

J.C. But they definitely go back somewhere. They represent mystery and fantasy, but in spite of strong suggestion, they don't necessarily go back to 1940 or 30, 20, 10.

W.M. They have to do with more of a local history that's not particularly ancient, that might be associated with the area – the prairies, agricultural based, western Canada, evidence of a certain kind of unique quality. In terms of mystery, it is not only the mystery of function or mystery of purpose that some of the objects have that make them so attractive. But there's also a sense that not knowing their function allows for much more speculation. For instance, there are a number of vessels here that are used for pouring. They're very evocative shapes for me because most of them are handmade shapes, and in terms of their construction there seems to be evidence that they were made for very particular purposes. There are vessels without handles in some cases, there are thick vessels made of heavy steel. It's difficult to imagine what might have been poured out of these. I'm not sure if these particular things should be called jugs. Are they called cans? Pitchers? Pitchers with spouts? In terms of trying to define or even understand these things you may be more tempted to look for other meanings that are perhaps more symbolic or metaphorical or whatever.

J.C. You said pouring. Your pieces all share this quality, perhaps. They probably share other things, too. But I remember as a kid having to pour from this large enamel jug, pouring it out awkwardly, and so happy after halfway when the counterweight took over and it became a real pleasurable experience. But when it was heavy first of all, it wasn't. Only when it started to become controllable I think now how sculptural that was, the air mass coming in proportionate to the water mass leaving. Control and the release. Does that volumetric idea of pouring come into your notions?

W.M. Not really. I used "pouring" to describe what those vessels were for. But that is the kind of observation that interests me.

J.C. These things, do you think they have something connected with a work ethic for you, to do with being a kind of tool or something, making unknown work, a past energy?

W.M. I like the idea of it being a kind of tool, or it being associated with some kind of work. The vessels come across as feminine tools for masculine work. It seems those things were made by men for a specific work, but somehow there are other qualities that are much more gentle. The basins and bowls have similar kinds of connections for me.

A relevant thing to mention here is that for a long time I was quite reluctant to deal with small object sculpture, and particularly pedestals. There's a kind of preciousness about the space on top of a pedestal that I want to avoid. I think I tried to work more consciously with those issues of a pedestal and small object sculpture in this particular piece.

By using something that is studio equipment, that relates to a workplace, as a support for an object, I hoped to avoid some of those negative readings of an object on a pedestal. And I think the proliferation of a large amount of objects gives you a chance to make more of the relationships between them. So that the process that you go through when you're looking at the work deals with a kind of thinking that allows for a comparison and grouping – ways of engaging your

**attention. Perhaps in a different fashion than having your attention engaged by a singular object on a pedestal.**

J.C. Tell me about the table. You spent days, maybe weeks on it. I remember saying some time ago I thought you were even being dominated by it. Do you recall how much different it looks now than it did then? After all, you spent so much time on it; has it changed a lot?

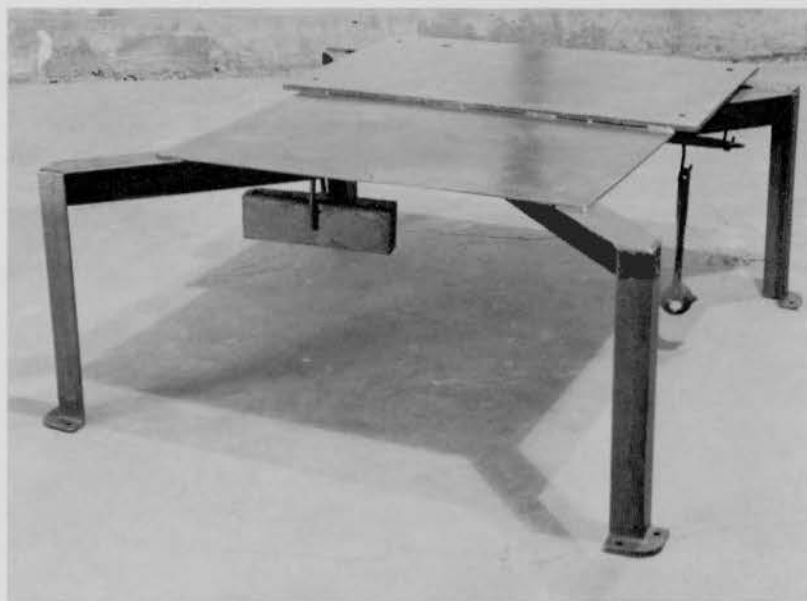
**W.M. If I were to describe the process that I went through on the actual table itself (there are also three objects hung below the table) the process for me was very much one of restoration. So a restorative process took place – a process of cleaning – there was rust, paint, resin, all kinds of previous activities had left their mark.**

J.C. And that was, what, offensive to you?

**W.M. When I recognized that I wanted to use the table, to make something of it, I felt that I had to cleanse it, sort of purify it. So, yes, the table, in fact, was a real time-consuming piece but I felt that there was a lot of change, a significant change in terms of how the article appears. I went through a similar sort of cleansing with the stools. They were fired in the gas kiln for a certain period of time, which created in turn a new surface on them. Again, that's a specific surface that you related to as being aged. It's interesting. The firing process can totally remove paint or even chrome – it takes on a new surface, the opposite of the old surface. I'm able to see the value of the structure better. There's something about that purifying, for lack of a better word, which is important to me.**

J.C. Sculptural exorcism. So the chairs work in harmony or obeisance to this central, table figure. If they don't work in that sense, then what is their job? How would you describe how they work between each other and against the table? Is it just visual stuff going on here, or what?

**W.M. I think that the table and the objects beneath it are a metaphor for the studio, and a metaphor for artistic practice, in that the objects below the table**



are a bit mysterious again in terms of function – some of them are not functional objects, in fact. There's the ladle with the hole in it, for instance, or the box without a bottom.

J.C. That's appropriate – a metaphor for artistic practice.

W.M. The fact that the top of the table is clear allows you to see it as a workplace, a place to lay out whatever has to be laid out, and it's the place that this activity takes place.

J.C. The studio, too, the performance, was also a metaphor for artistic practice?

W.M. It was a performance to allow that activity to happen. The chairs here make another kind of reference. They're nonfunctional in terms of the table, they don't make a direct association with the table, other than the fact that chairs and tables go together. They're too high, in fact, for that low table. But they allow a presentation of this series of objects or ideas. They act like the web of words in Alan Dunning's installation at Stride; the words covered the gallery walls, you made associations that allowed a certain kind of personal experience.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps these small sculptural objects will allow you to make again these kinds of connections. I think that the number – there's going to be 30 or 40 of these chairs in a given space – will allow for that kind of richness of association.

For a long time I was working with ideas in opposition – that's a common way to understand things. Perhaps one of the things I was trying to do by increasing the number of elements was to move beyond that simple opposition so that the association doesn't get to be one of this against that – you know, round and square, curved and straight, or heavy and light. You may be still inclined to look for those kinds of opposites, but you'd be much more inclined to make associations in terms of groupings of three or more objects, or to see shapes repeated in different kinds of configurations, seeing a shape that maybe – I don't know how exactly to describe it. Hmm. For example, you might see two similar cones, one being upside down and one being right side up, and make that sort of association, then turn around and see a third object that may be similar to the upright cone except it's made of a rather dense material, say bronze. You are given a choice, either to include that object as being part of that family of cones, or you may include it as being part of the family of bronze.

J.C. So a combination of a sort of spatial lyricism, enjoying the physical placing of things and looking, but also operating on other multi-associative levels.

#### Footnotes

1. "Cutting down on Overhead," *Media Blitz*, The New Gallery, 1989: with Gordon Ferguson and Blake Senini.

2. "Mother," the Stride Gallery, Calgary, 1990.

Walter May is a sculptor who resides in Calgary. He also teaches at the Alberta College of Art.

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