

| DRAWING OUT THE FORM

| LYNDA GAMMON

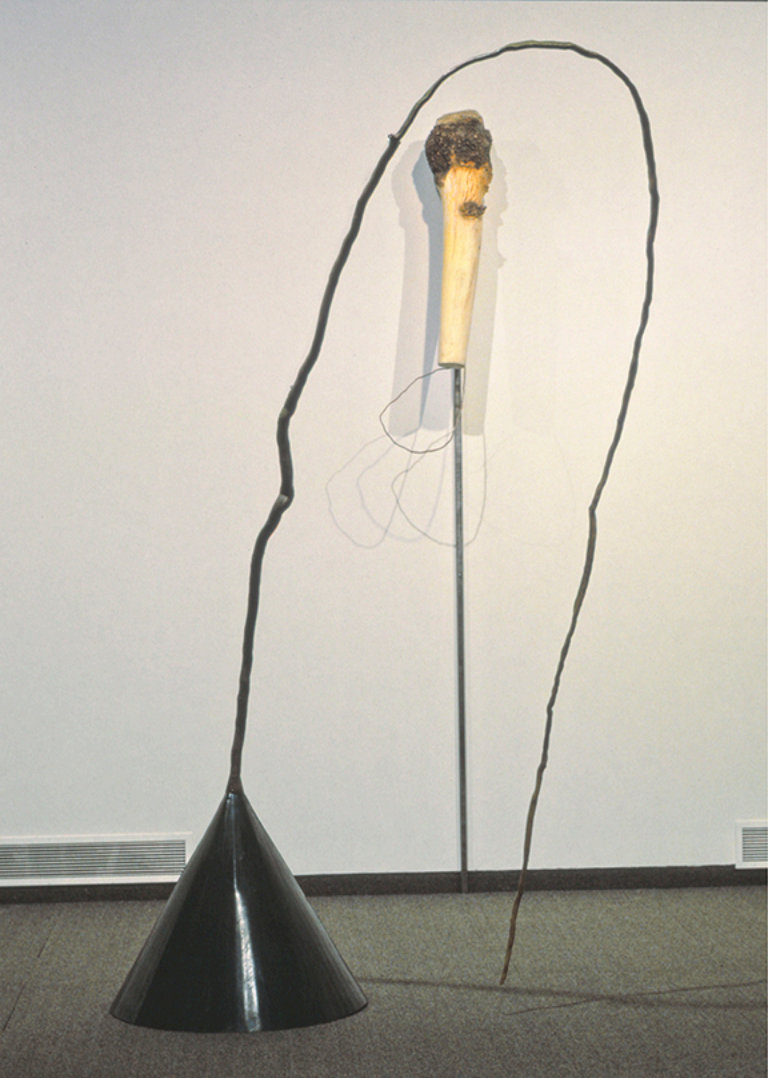
| WALTER MAY

| LOUISE NOGUCHI

| EDWARD POITRAS







Drawing Out The Form brings together the work of four Canadians whose artistic practice fosters a pluralistic sensibility. The art of Lynda Gammon (Victoria), Walter May (Calgary), Louise Noguchi (Toronto), and Edward Poitras (Regina) is representative of the diversity and inventiveness that three-dimensional work has assumed in our time. In 1968 Jack Burnham stated that *20th Century sculpture, future retro-spection will show, was a highly transitional process, a brief labyrinth of changes. Already as a means of description the term "sculpture" has lost its identity; it has become a misnomer for an art once concerned with carving and modelling for the purpose of simulating biological appearances, but which generically designates all three-dimensional art construction.*¹ Burnham's assertion of twenty years ago was indeed accurate, for while we continue to use the term "sculpture," it has broadened in definition along with fixed interpretations of various methods of art production, such as painting, drawing, photography and film. The boundaries between disciplines are blurring and ever expanding; a pluralism of approach typifies the field of contemporary art. Current art practice engages a deliberate exchange among formerly independent media and this phenomenon has resulted in the conscious search for innovative means for the presentation of art forms and examination of their thematic intentions. The abundant use of traditional and non-traditional materials is commonplace, particularly the appropriation of found objects and images retrieved from the acquisitive culture in which we live.

The work of the artists selected to participate in this exhibition developed and matured in response to these evolving conditions. Lynda Gammon, Walter May, Louise Noguchi and Edward Poitras are hunters and collectors, their search rooted within the urban and rural landscapes of western culture. They have all explored and continue to investigate avenues other than sculpture in their creative endeavours. Their multi-disciplinary inclination in the production of their sculptural work definitely speaks to our time and each share a comparable methodology. Charting their lives through memory and experience, they draw on the discarded surplus of a consumer culture together with detritus from the organic world to generate art that elucidates the human condition. Their work begins with the gathering and scrutiny of an assortment of concepts, parts or units; incongruous fragments that are assembled on-site in the exhibition space. Found, industrial items are purposefully employed with those that are innately natural. These parts and/or materials vividly pronounce their origins, thereby conferring historic evidence to the work that amplifies its definition. Concurrently, the initial meanings of independent remnants are vastly altered through a recycling with others in an art context. A transformation of matter through considered juxtaposition establishes a fresh articulation - illusion reveals within substantive form and perplexing recollections intrude upon a reconstructed present.

These artists possess an expansive perspective that enables their work to move beyond the physical boundaries of sculptural form into a conceptual realm of myth and metaphor that strikes the human conscience. They accept the notion of transformation as essential to the making and potential comprehension of their art. This sensibility

manifests itself in dissimilar modes and to various ends in each of the artist's work, but in every case their sculpture contains an intensely animated presence. There is a personal amalgamation of sources, materials and beliefs set against a field characterized by diversity. *Synthesis is a primary concern of contemporary art and is expressed in many ways: relating and connecting one's life with artistic processes, combining unique materials in relevant ways, and juxtaposing traditional concerns with present day perceptions.*²

DRAWING OUT THE FORM

Forsaking the conventional idea of sculpture as static and monumental, Gammon, May, Noguchi and Poitras use materials and processes that undermine volumetric stereotypes. They present a language of associations that draw into their three-dimensional work traces of other media. Gammon and May attentively infuse their predominantly abstract sculpture with an intense contest of spatial propositions. Planar components and gestural, linear elements are collaged with those that are overtly massive and gravity-bound. Both artists use the surface of the gallery wall as a support or point of departure, much as one would begin a drawing on a blank page.

May favours materials that are inherently linear: thin and burnished lengths of metal conduit, secured in bulk quantities from hardware suppliers, are willfully contorted into open, activated shapes; stripped and sanded limbs of tree branches and their knotty roots worn bare from erosion by wind, earth and water, are culled from a dry lake bed. The wall functions as a theatrical backdrop upon which are situated sculptural parts. In calculated combinations they flowingly extend from, are solidly attached to, or are carefully

placed before, its neutral surface, creating the impression of a tableau. His work is based upon the contradictory relationships between two and three-dimensions and the unexpected illusions that are revealed to the viewer by way of this juxtaposition. Prefabricated plywood sheets are cut into the shapes of living tree trunks and appear substantial when seen from a frontal perspective, but disclose their true, paper-thin nature when observed from another, side view. Frail roots or lank copper pipes are topped with dense, knobby lumps of rock and wood, precariously supporting seemingly impossible weights. May's work indicates a precise, trompe l'oeil reconciliation of opposing materials and conditions that exist in the natural world - gravity and resistance, solid and liquid, static and active, massive and light, fabricated and organic, growth and decay. His sagacious application of these contrasting elements lends a harmonious, alchemical spirit to his sculpture.

Gammon's use of diametric spatial devices conveys distinctive sensations; her work embodies tensions that denote adverse states - entrapment and liberation. The artist replicates the plane of the gallery wall with one of her own making, attaching it slightly askew to the original surface. This mimetic wedge becomes a support for a central core of assembled urban discard, and, like relief sculpture, a frontal viewing is imposed. The cluster of bruised materials - garden gates, vacuum hoses, chairs and tables scavenged from home demolition sites - contains a potency for gesture; however, any burst of movement is stifled, tautly held within a nebulous space between wall and viewer. Gammon instills in her work occasions of chaos and control, results of a diligent grappling with combined methods of drawing and sculpture and their discordant physical traits.

The plywood support that bolsters the cumbersome mass of fractured utensils is intentionally camouflaged by the artist to fuse with the gallery wall. It appears less a sustaining feature, but rather, a flimsy page violated by a penetrating invasion of mechanical appendages trowelling across, and through its vulnerable surface. This dense nucleus of detritus expands aggressively outwards, becoming splintered and linear as it sheds mass. Paradoxically, the forceful dematerialization causes a recurrence of absolute entrapment. Substantive form rejects its weighty burden to attain the spontaneous, fluid expression of drawing, only to be seized within the confines of a barren page. A futile vacillation between dimensions and matter is enacted.

Louise Noguchi and Edward Poitras value the activity of drawing as a symbolic indicator of human presence. Figuration characterizes their stylistic approach, and while they do employ drawing methods to alter the intrinsic nature of sculpture, they are not specifically intent on exerting a precise engagement of spatial relationships as are Gammon and May. Instead, graphic representations and volumetric forms co-exist within their installations, functioning as narrative connectors between cerebral and corporeal impulse, mapping the processes of thought and gesture that generate and form their art.

Noguchi stations drawings on paper, or those executed directly on the gallery walls, in association with modelled and constructed objects. Confronting a solitary sculpture arouses an instinctive perception of physical displacement and bodily awareness. Conversely, drawings are more remote and stimulate cerebrational responses. Noguchi uses the two forms in partnership to captivate the viewer's

intellectual and intuitive consciousness simultaneously. In *Hunters They Can Kill*, a disembodied shoulder is situated on the floor before a wall-mounted drawing. The stump sustains an extended arm; the hand strains toward a crude sketch of a wild cat (splayed and dripping blood, as if freshly slaughtered). The signal of the hand suggests it has momentarily halted in the act of accomplishing this primitive rendering - tentatively marking a period at the end of the phrase, "Hunters They Can Kill." While this is clearly implausible, the gesture itself invokes the familiar. It echoes one that anybody who takes pencil to page has repeated many times over, summoning a recollection; *déjà vu*. Consequently, this frozen sign and its perceived connection to the wall drawing and written statement, assumes an urgency, a truth; it embodies the original, perceptual and conceptual processes of the drawing, provoking memories of actions and experiences past, and transposes them into the present situation. A dismembered human appendage reaches forth to illuminate the capacity that humans and animals possess to selectively maim and kill, with their bodies, and also their minds. Noguchi realizes that long held beliefs are often fixed, even as whole societies appear to evolve and change. Her installations elucidate what it is to be human at an elemental level - pursuing nourishment and dreams with body and soul as an instinctive condition of survival.

Edward Poitras traverses a sculptural territory akin to that explored by the other artists in *Drawing Out The Form*. He readily adopts meaningful uses for castoff items such as microscopic transistors, rusted bed springs, laboratory test tubes and daily newspapers, as does Lynda Gammon. Like Walter May, he integrates man-made goods with those of organic composition - wax, sand, horse hair, feathers and animal

bones - seeking harmonious interplay. He shares with Louise Noguchi a preference for human/animal hybrids whose physical attributes and gestures register a concentrated preoccupation with the natural world, and also accepts that drawn markings, and spoken and chronicled legends (images and words), are influential signifiers of concepts that condition human behavior and inform a universal perspective.

Bearing witness to Poitras' work gains one access to secluded rites of passage; metaphysical sites of reverie, revelation and rejuvenation, enacted through bodily encounters with the primordial forces of the earth. His repertoire of symbols encompasses a breadth of cultural experiences that mirror his private search for identification with his native ancestry. The artist, an urban-born and raised Metis of Catholic background, probed his Plains Indian heritage as a young adult, intent upon grasping and reclaiming his origins, and initiating a reconciliation of the past with a Western perspective. This "rebirth" for Poitras generated an enriched state of awareness that relocates itself continuously within his work. His installations are rituals of transformation; arrested performances where androgynous figures are stationed in contemplative posture (*Horse Dream*), troubled indecision (*Siege*), or physical constraint (*Bound*). The body is at once a burden and a path to expanded knowledge of the world. While its constant sustenance dominates and possibly hinders the capacity to transcend physical being for the spiritual realm, the body's intricate sensory system is the only way we can know the environment; our instinctive guide for survival. Poitras' work reveals that only through corporeal endurance can one become attentive to the soul. Whether his symbols are of native or religious origin (*Big Iron Sky* refers to the practical and visionary prominence (a life-giving force)

of the horse in Plains Indian culture, and to the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse (spectres of the king, war, famine and death) from the Book of Revelations), his work presents oppositional boundaries that exist within the fundamental laws of nature - north and south, east and west, light and dark, floating and sinking, bound and released. These conditions are not upheld as choices; rather, the challenge offered is to circulate within their limits, thereby gaining understanding and respect for an intrinsic balance that is vital to humankind's continuance, in both flesh and psyche.

MATERIALS AS METAPHOR

Materialism is the common declaration and experience of western culture. The artists in this exhibition address the circumstance of the individual within this setting, illuminating the relationship of humankind to the prevalent and excessive production and consumption of matter. In this century we have placidly assumed roles within a demolition derby, wastefully ejecting useful tools for living, only to procure more within a repetitious cycle of acquisition and abandonment. What are the consequences of being so divorced from the elemental forces of the earth, or from our bodies, direct connectors to the natural environment? The overt emphasis placed on material objects, needs and considerations, history has shown, ultimately induces a disinterest in or rejection of spiritual values. Gammon, May, Noguchi and Poitras acknowledge our increasing separateness from nature and loss of belief in the power of myth by choosing to make art with the accessible and abundant utensils of the time. Our complacency is shaken; by their recuperation of elements from the natural world and their insistence upon narrative as an essential

ingredient within the art process, a metaphorical hybrid is engendered. Prefabricated and organic materials converse in multiple voices, imparting a transformative potential that reestablishes our desire for alchemy and legend.

Walter May utilizes his materials in spare arrangements, deliberately emphasizing their unique characteristics. He occasions a perceptively orchestrated interplay between the mechanical and organic. A flawless length of copper pipe, placed alongside an equally smooth, but sinuous tree root, effortlessly mimics the twisting curves of the root, camouflaging its metallic form by conjuring a natural semblance. An awareness of the functions of the tube and root (both are capable of transferring water, a liquid imperative to the maintenance of the ecosystem), serves to reinforce this captivating illusion. However, the conduit is part of an automated system that carries water to fabricated structures, and the root is an element of a biological network that sustains the life of a tree. May contrives a paradox; the industrial pipe contains the flexibility and durability that renders it adaptable to any environment. Conversely, the unearthed root, disjoined from the tree's carcass, ceases to be a nourishing source. May acknowledges that the technological advances of humankind mirror nature, but cautions that within a reckless exchange, one system could simply replace the other; or could it? Perhaps the invincibility of the conduit is falsely presumed, for if there were no water to flow through its hollow case-ment, like the tree root, it would become barren. In a world where plywood sheeting will be mistaken for a tree trunk and metal pipes can be instilled with life, May endeavours to speculate upon why we are so easily fooled into believing that the synthetic is natural.

The industrial objects that Lynda Gammon salvages from home demolition sites are displaced from their intended uses within the domestic realm when integrated into sculptural formats. Camouflaged in dense clusters, worn sections of carpet and a crumpled garden gate attain an elegant appeal that disguises their previous utilitarian functions. In spite of a veneer of inclusive aestheticism, these materials hold customary identities. A nostalgia attends this recognition calling to mind occasions, perhaps as a child, when discoveries of abandoned objects instilled solemn fascination - earthy yard tools piled in a shed; familial articles hoarded in an attic or basement; the random clutter of a garage sale or flea market. Curious yet reassuring, they trace the human impulse that determined their existence and uses within a ritual of ordered living. Inanimate objects become associated with a zone of security, albeit an idealized, domestic arena that valued appliances as purposeful helpmates with an aim toward comfort and peace of mind. Currently, in a more cynical world, the notion of household bliss has been revealed to be increasingly unattainable. The decade of the eighties has presented a sobering paradox; while an effluence of novel commodities floods the marketplace to be voraciously absorbed and then ejected with equal rapidity, we face burgeoning environmental crises, poverty, homelessness. Gammon's damaged and forsaken objects are testimony to the destructive nature of a culture that devours indiscriminately as it moves forward, disparaging the past. Her recycling of deserted appliances of the traditional home could indicate a desire for critical reassessment; a return to a functional affirmation of the object, whatever its physical state, that carries rejuvenating potential.

Louise Noguchi summons primal instincts of basic experience in work that traces the fluctuating interdependence of physical and psychological conditions. Haunting corporeal forms suggest an emptiness awaiting filling. Barren cornucopias, vacuous bowls, severed limbs and skeletal remains, human and animal alike, are elements of compelling vignettes that illustrate habitual functions of the body: hunting, eating, sleeping, dreaming. Coarsely modelled and resilient materials - fibreglass, polyurethane, plaster, clay - are transformed into vulnerable skins with liquid applications of linseed oil and animal blood. Yellow oil and rusted blood when congealed retain a viscous state and create the impression that living substances, human fat or damp sweat, coat the sculpture surfaces. These materials, combined with scratchy texts that echo thoughts of a mind engaged in recollection, form tableaux of momentous urgency located in the here and now. *Three Dreams of Blood* is an immense, earthy bowl; empty. A look into its yawning core reveals a blood-smeared vortex. Its companion drawing, *Hemorrhaging Dream*, offers a handwritten disclosure; the memory of a self-inflicted, fleshly wound and attendant agitated responses: pain, fear, panic, sweat. The bowl is the palpable embodiment of this mental image; its presence a metaphor for a churning body that is filled and sustained by an exchange of carnal and intuitive secretions. Noguchi coaxes the intellect into contemplative suspension as it confronts the certainty of corporeal vulnerability.

The scenarios of Edward Poitras key into human experience through archetypes that dwell within the subconscious. He cultivates psychological sites wherein mechanical artifacts of western society interface with natural substances to shape fetishistic icons (*Iron Bow*). Encompassing

animal and human characteristics, they signify the duality of existence; instinct and rationality. These hybrid sculptures function as surrogates of the artist while simultaneously mirroring the body of the spectator. They become screens upon which the viewer, as searching anthropologist, may project subjective meditations. Evocations of ancient cultures and ceremonies live in the materials (wrapped antlers, hair, feathers), and patterned markings (brilliantly painted lines and dots, pressed wax). The spoils of contemporary technology (test tubes, electrical wires, transistors), attest to containers of energy that hold immeasurable potential for universal communication. Ritualistic actions are apprehended in gestures that initiate a narrative comprehension. Concerned with a deepening of mortal wisdom, Poitras recognizes that memory may be invoked precisely as it circulates within the flow of time, filtering momentarily to the fore of the conscious mind. Despite its ephemerality, memory lends sentiment and a sense of truth to one's material awareness of self. In this regard his sculptures exemplify notions of time and transition as they inhabit the present, also manifest in the work of May, Gammon and Noguchi. Perceiving and harnessing the potent transformative and rejuvenating qualities of materials and images, these artists proffer a humanistic breadth of view. They probe a schizophrenic terrain that roots the struggling and questioning body (that of artist and viewer), in an earthly reality, provoking a vital union of heart and mind.

Donna McAlear

1. Jack Burnham, *Beyond Modern Sculpture* (New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1968), p. 5.
2. Howard Smagula, *Currents, contemporary directions in the visual arts* (Inglewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1983), p. 2.

| LYNDA GAMMON

|

| WALTER MAY

|

| LOUISE NOGUCHI

|

| EDWARD POITRAS

The following articles about the individual artists, their work, and ideas were researched and written by Mary-Beth Laviolette. All quotations were gathered during interviews conducted in March 1987 and have been published with the permission of the artists.

Walter May's idiosyncratic sculptures strive for what is often difficult to describe in art — the sense of presence or entity. This is a quality found not only in representational work but in more abstract forms as well. May's art resides in this latter category, yet his sculptures manage to evoke or suggest a living presence despite their abstract nature. This is quite obvious in the witty trio of *King, Queen and Throne* [1987].

Topped off with a lava rock, the lean and vertical forms of the King and Queen are strongly figurative.

But leaning towards the figure is not the only way in which May's sculptures strive for a sense of presence. They can also allude to a state of mind or even a situation. In *Archangel* [1987] and *Archenemy* [1987], the composition, which is less oriented towards the figure, is still suggestive of something animate — protective [as in *Archangel*], and threatening [as in *Archenemy*]. Whatever the source, however, the content of his art is dependent more on the viewer's intuition than on a cognitive process of knowing exactly what the work is about. *The kind of response I would like the viewer to have is not so much a straightforward recognition of a specific content. Instead, I would like the viewer to feel a relationship with the object, as if you sense this thing is looking at you or represents something.*

May's attempt to construct evocative sculpture arises, first and foremost, from the materials. In his oeuvre, materials are always a special feature; prized not only for their formal qualities but also for their metaphorical potential. Quirky, curious, playful and rich, May's materials are

generally of the 'found' variety like conduit, wire, sheet metal and wood used in every imaginable state possible. *Materials that strike me as being worth taking back to the studio seem to contain particular kinds of meaning and information. When I'm gathering my materials their interest for me may not be immediately apparent, but as I work with them in the studio it becomes obvious to me that they have particular qualities that I can exploit.*

In the process of assembling his sculpture, the artist chooses materials whose connotations can be either quite straightforward, like a piece of coiled wire and its allusion to energy and movement, while other materials are more involved with the notion of opposites. May is fascinated with the aspect of double meanings as it pertains to the functional and non-functional. And he continues to see the potential for double meanings especially in materials derived from the humble tree. For example, the milled board in *Behind That Tree: Wicket* [1987] is functional [in the sense that it has been planed for man's use as a manufactured product], while its rough, uneven edges echo back to its natural state.

This playing around with opposites is also reflected in a tendency to juxtapose naturalistic forms with manufactured forms. Thus, the tangle of tree roots that seem to intertwine quite naturally with the metal conduit in *Behind That Tree: Meander* [1987]. *A lot of the decisions I make have to do with trying to recognize something that is exotic about an object that is really commonplace. One of the ways I try to bring that to people's attention is by playing a tree branch, for instance, off another thing which is similar, like a piece of pipe, but is also diametrically opposed in another sense.*

A keen eye for economy is also a part of the compositional equation. In light of the materials' metaphorical content and the abundance of juxtaposition, May believes *having that sparseness gives the work a kind of clarity*. As well, it accounts for the characteristically lean and linear appearance of his sculpture. This quality is a trademark of May's and is related to his past interest in drawing. The artist contends, however, that he is not trying to create a kind of drawing in 3-D. *I don't particularly want the pieces to be read as drawings. I don't think of them as drawings when I make them but I also don't think of them totally as sculpture either.*

There was a period, a number of years ago, when May consciously made sculpture like big drawings on a wall, representing an attempt to coalesce sculptural and drawing concerns. But today, the process is different. *I just make decisions about where something goes. The fact that my work can be analysed in terms of drawing is just one way of looking at it.*

Another aspect of 'looking' at May's sculpture is discovering its mischievous relationship with space — the idea of not quite knowing what is two-dimensional and what is three-dimensional. His work is committed to neither dimension — especially the conventional notion of sculpture in-the-round. Instead, freely juxtaposing two and three-dimensional shapes together, May makes ample use of both dimensions, preferring to see his work exist ambiguously between the two. This ambiguity is connected to a longstanding interest in illusion, especially as it applies to space. Derived from the earlier influences of drawing and its ability to describe reality two-dimensionally, the illusion of space or *where things sit, how far back something is situated, how close things are together* is always a factor in his art.

In more recent efforts such as *Behind That Tree: Weetigo* [1987], the spatial effect becomes almost theatrical, much like a layered stage set where the viewer is able to comprehend the piece from the front or at a bit of an angle, but never laterally.

Aside from the theatrical, *Behind That Tree: Weetigo* also makes a direct reference to native art. With its large nose-like cone and eyes, the work alludes to a Cree spirit figure which inhabits the forest. May enjoys visiting the ethnology section of Calgary's Glenbow Museum and attributes the more subtle earth colours in his recent work to his observation of native artifacts. Colour, in general, operates as an expressive element and tends to reflect the artist's interest in certain subjects. For instance, the bright, military-like colours of a few years ago were inspired by the gaudy uniforms of the Napoleonic period.

There are, then, many kinds of materials and meanings feeding into May's content where the parts are as significant as the whole. Ready to be mined for multiple metaphors and concerns, this most recent sculpture is part of a fertile phase which first surfaced in 1984. Evoking a sense of animate presence, this body of work is distinctly resonant.

WALTER MAY

Archangel

1987

steel, root, branch, pigment

H 289.56 cm, W 157.48 cm, D 218.44 cm

Collection of the artist

Behind That Tree: Meander

1987

wood, conduit, sheet metal, copper, aluminum,
roots, pigment

H 269.24 cm, W 553.72 cm, D 139.7 cm

Collection of the artist

Behind That Tree: Weetigo

1987

wood, roots, sheet metal, lava rock, conduit,
pigment

H 304.8 cm, W 353.06 cm, D 127 cm

Collection of the artist

Behind That Tree: Wicket

1987

wood, steel, copper, roots, pigment

H 259.08 cm, W 210.82 cm, D 129.54 cm

Collection of the artist

Archenemy

1987

conduit, branch, copper, lava rock, pigment

H 264.16 cm, W 91.44 cm, D 109.22 cm

Collection of the artist

King, Queen and Throne

1987

aluminum, copper, steel, wood, lava rock, root,
pigment

H 274.32 cm, W 195.58 cm, D 38.1 cm

Collection of the artist

COLOPHON

Curator: Donna McAlear

Design: Nelson Vigneault

Photography - art works: John Dean

Photography - artists' portraits: Douglas Curran

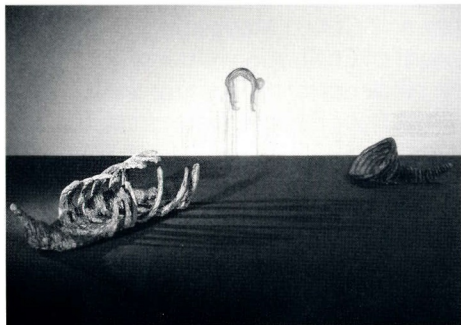
Typography: Paperwords

Typeface: ITC Novarese

Colour Separations: Colour Four

Paper: Quintessence Dull

Printing: Paperworks Press Limited



Cover: *The Catch*, (detail), Louise Noguchi, plaster, wire mesh, graphite, paint, linseed oil, wall surface, 1981-84, wall drawing component done for Nickle Arts Museum exhibition, February, 1987, courtesy: Carmen Lamanna Gallery, Toronto.

Production of this catalogue was made possible through the financial assistance of The Canada Council.

© The Nickle Arts Museum, 1988

The University of Calgary,
2500 University Drive, N.W.,
Calgary, Alberta,
T2N 1N4 Canada



All rights reserved - no portion of this catalogue may be reproduced without the written permission of the publisher.

Edition of 1000

Printed in Canada.

ISBN: 0-88953-088-2