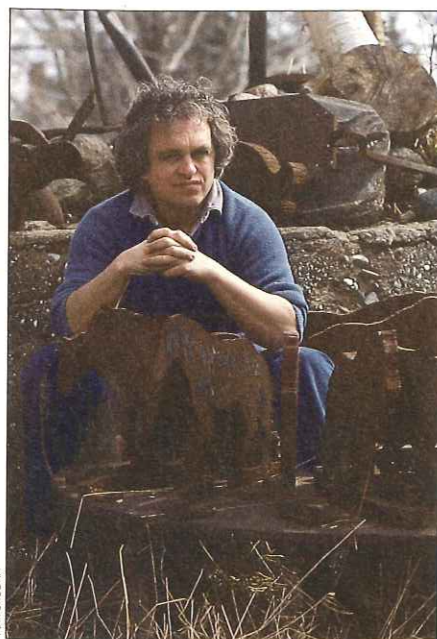


JOHN McEWEN

In the filing system of taste, his austere sculpture is the New Figuration writ large and hard



TOM SKUDHA

Given the basically conservative way in which objects define and use up space, it has always seemed to me that the sculptor, as a visionary, has his work cut out for him. The painter, working with the rapid and weightless stuff of illusion, is almost always a sort of dandy of the will; his merest whim can be spread over his two-dimensional surfaces as directly as his handwriting can fill up a page. The sculptor, on the other hand, remakes the world in actuality, wielding his material with the determination of a Sisyphus. Because a sculptor's choices are more intractable than a painter's (you can turn your back on them much less easily), so, too, are his methods, modes, images and symbols fiercer and more demanding. Given that people are objects as well, sculpture is quite naturally deemed competitive: spatially aggressive and, as an

extension, intellectually and metaphysically abrasive. Good sculpture operates, that is to say, at the high roller level in the economy of aesthetic risk. Given, finally, the consequent public tendency to try to keep sculpture under control (the methods range from outright rejection of the good to the glutinous approval afforded the giant trinkets that clutter up the portals of public buildings), it is remarkable that good sculptors get to make anything much at all, never mind anything ambitious that comes with a public benediction.

How remarkable, then, and how fine, that John McEwen—who is a very good sculptor indeed, arguably Canada's best—is currently launched upon three major commissions: a piece called *Stelco's Cabin* being constructed at the Banff School of Fine Arts, a work called *Boat Sight* just now coming to completion in Taché Park at Hull, Quebec, and, most impressive of three impressive works, the sculptor's first sculpture-building, *Place of Tribute*, McEwen's RCAF memorial to be built as part of the National Aviation Museum in Ottawa. McEwen has been making sculpture now for more than 20 years. These three new commissioned works will, in accumulation, summarize his career so far—the first two (Banff and Hull) flanking the third (the RCAF memorial) like the wings of an altar-piece.

McEwen established himself as an artist with a work called *Marconi*, first shown in 1979 as part of the exhibition *Confrontations* at the Vancouver Art Gallery. The work consisted principally of a full-size German shepherd dog cut out of a slab of steel 6.35 centimetres thick. The dog sat silently and threateningly *outside* a large ellipse of steel cable that appeared to delimit and proscribe the dog's "yard" area, its area of potential movement. So eerily convincing was this heavy silhouette of a dog that its paradoxical

inability to move never for a moment seemed to cancel or even question the need for the albeit superfluous steel cable.

After *Marconi* came an even cleaner and more radical use of the cut-out steel animal: a work shown at the Eye Level Gallery in Halifax in 1980 called *The Distinctive Line Between One Subject and Another*. In this lean and affecting sculpture, two identical steel dogs stood facing each other from opposite ends of the otherwise bare gallery, their heads lowered in that characteristic stance dogs take when they begin to pay strict attention to each other but haven't yet decided on a course of action. The two dogs, symmetrical like book-ends, polarized like the ends of a long invisible magnet, created such a vivid line of spark-gap stasis that it became quite impossible to pass between them. Here were two dogs, dog-ideas, in a mutual contemplation so rapt and intense that their own meditative fervour appeared to have tempered them into the steel of which they were clearly made. Here—if one felt it important to assign McEwen's enchanted, provocative animals a place in the filing system of taste—was the New Figuration writ large and hard. What was not so much noticed as felt, however, was that McEwen's dogs were scarcely about style at all compared to the way they were about symbol and psychology. Indeed, it was partly McEwen's fervid re-examination of the dog beneath the skin, of the energy that welded together the metal and the mental, that lent his dogs their immediate and profound importance. Somehow McEwen had managed to end-run the linguistic daintiness of much postmodern sculpture and make something so central to the structure of the imagination that however spare the work seemed, it mattered utterly as sculpture—sculpture as immediate and un-sentimental as a child's toy.



During 1981-82, McEwen produced two major sculptures that are instructive to examine together. His huge *Western Channel*, a \$50,000 commission for the roof terrace of the University of Lethbridge's new Performing Arts Centre, consisted of 24 metres of steel wall cut along the top to echo the shape of the coulee beneath the centre itself (and over which architect Arthur Erickson had slung his building like a multimillion-dollar footbridge over a hollow). McEwen sliced a doorway into the middle of the wall and placed, at certain piquant distances from it, a steel wolf and a steel dog, both animals facing the opening. On another terrace, not visible from the wall, another steel wolf stands isolated and aloof, its blank metallic non-gaze aimed at the endless rolling foothills of Alberta. McEwen has referred to the piece as "a model of the confrontation between ecology and culture."

While none of McEwen's works are unlockable with a skeleton key of quick analysis, it is at least possible to suggest that the door in the wall is a passageway from one state of being to another, from outside to inside, from nature to culture, from wolf to dog.

Although both animals contemplate this doorway, each of them is prevented from acting by the power of the contemplative triangulation that structures the work. The third animal is a sort of coda to the drama being enacted down on the main terrace, a wild aloof animal whose eccentric positioning suggests a formal withholding—nature seeing to itself in its great good time. This third animal is the only one of the three that inhabits a site that gives directly onto the real landscape, beyond the building. "The animals," McEwen has pointed out, "stand for life outside of oneself."

In acute spatial contrast to *Western Channel*, but standing as a miniaturization of some of the ideas bundled up in it, was a work called *Buck*, shown during the summer of 1982 at the Ydessa Gallery in Toronto. *Buck*, like *The Distinctive Line Between One Subject and Another*, was a marvel of clarity and reduction. Like *Western Channel*, it was a work about relation, about confrontation. It took the form of a tiny closet drama within which a small steel deer, cut from a slab of steel five centimetres thick, existed only (as with the rest of McEwen's animals) as a

Boat Sight, detail (1985). Corten steel, 3.9 x 12.8 x 48.7 m (13' x 42' x 16'). Commissioned by the National Capital Commission, Government of Canada. Courtesy: The Ydessa Gallery.

The hull of McEwen's *Boat Sight* is a steel drawing in space, a derelict icon of culture as a container. When the work is completed, two steel animals will be placed near to it, on the shore.

chunky silhouette (except for a surprisingly realistic set of antlers extruded from the steel body of the deer, pulled up from inside the animal in a touching re-enactment of the way real antlers grow). The deer stands on a steel table from which it gazes impassively down the length of the gallery where, 7.6 metres away, it confronts another steel table, this one with the word BUCK gouged into it. There is a minuscule hole (a bullet hole?) in the deer, just at the animal's chest, above its front leg. Buck is a trophy, a sacrifice, an icon and a model. (McEwen has said that what makes a model "is the quality that is consistent through enlargement or compression"). It is also a study of the means by which two nodal points (Buck and its name-table) of a sculpture are able to effect a formal relationship so poised and intense that the one

Sculpture operates at the high-roller level in the economy of aesthetic risk.

evokes the other (animal and name, in this case) in an endless and energetic dialogue of thrust and reversal. *Buck* finally bestows upon the word "evocative" some authenticity as a sculptural description.

Much of McEwen's work deals with the interaction of nature and artificiality (in a sense, Buck the deer can scarcely be said to have any relationship at all to "Buck" the name). Within this emotionally resonant interaction there is an anguish that comes from our sense that there is a centrelessness stretching between these polarities, a totality of disorder that stretches from one knowable moment in McEwen's sculpture to another. Lately the lucid two-ness of McEwen's works has been replaced by a more episodic kind of structure, an open syntax that can be profoundly disturbing. Fundamental to this somewhat theatrical openness is the haunting mixture of memory and desire rolled up in McEwen's sculptural presentation of the meaning of time.

In a complex and troubling piece called *Moving Towards Eden* (shown first at London, England's Institute of Contemporary Arts in July and August of 1983 and then, in considerably altered form, at the Ydessa Gallery in March 1984, and finally this summer to be shown in a third version installed outside the Agnes Etherington Art Centre at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario), a huge steel silhouette of a man makes his way down a length of track towards the horned skull of an animal. The animal's head is made of steel, its body just a chalk outline like the diagram of the corpse in whodunits. Watching this crude and hulking man's unpleasant and inexorable progress are two of McEwen's familiar steel dogs. The man is all the more upsetting because he holds a dagger-like instrument in one hand and a severed head (it looks exactly like his own head) in the other. Behind him there is a handcar on the tracks. It appears to be following him. On it, there is

Western Channel, detail (1981), flame-cut Corten steel, 2.4 x 24.3 m (8' x 80'). Collection: University of Lethbridge, Alberta. Courtesy: The Ydessa Gallery.

McEwen has referred to *Western Channel*, at the University of Lethbridge, as a "model of the confrontation between ecology and culture." Here, the door in the wall is a passageway from nature to culture, from wolf to dog.



ROBERT KEZIERE



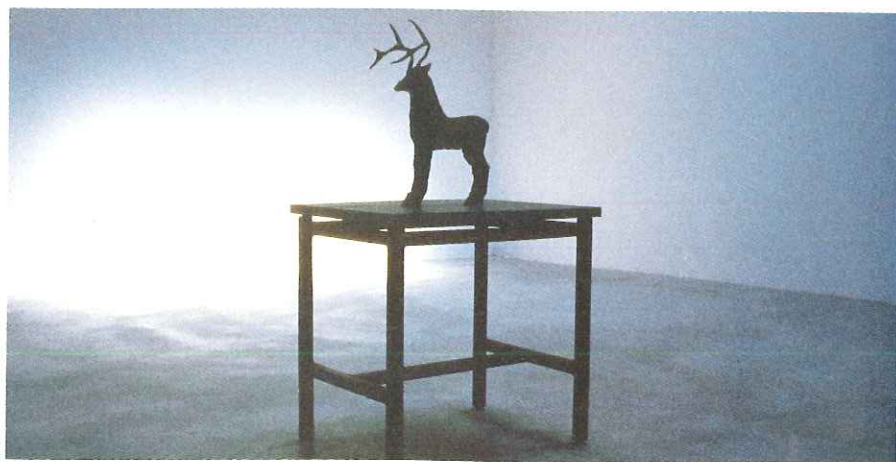
JOHN MCEWEN

a large, keenly forged needle-like object—like the needle of a gigantic compass. The needle (which is free to turn on its base) is insistently readable as an objective correlative for the moral sense, a sort of needle-shaped super-ego, a portable conscience. Because the work is so still (this is a kind of opera frozen in steel), it is suffused with a sense of dread.

The artifice of the violent human death and the naturalness of the animal death (the animal head is like a skull found in the desert) together set up a disquieting time-consciousness. One death is social, proscribed, imperative: the other a mere dying-down like the end of a flowering. The two kinds of time rub and burn together. Natural time, we might say, understands itself. Artificially curtailed, imperative time does not. "For an animal," writes John Berger in his recent *And our faces, my heart, brief as photos*, "its natural environment and habitat are a given; for man—despite the faith of the empiricists—reality is not a given: it has to be continually sought out, held—I am tempted to say *salvaged*."

All of the animals in McEwen's sculpture demonstrate a sort of territoriality, an attack-space of dignity and containment. His human beings (and the artifacts that represent

them), on the other hand, are either themselves striving, in strained and violent movement, or are (in the case of his objects) derelict, unfinished, precarious. The great sad gap between the two states (a substantial advance in emotional complexity over the two-ness of *Buck* and *The Distinctive Line*) is the gap between the genuinely spontaneous moment (nature) and the complex mechanisms of rationalization. Indeed, McEwen's sculpture is almost the only contemporary sculpture I can think of that actually tinkers with the spatial equivalents to emotions like guilt.



YDESSA HENDELES

Moving Towards Eden, detail (1984), flame-cut steel, 192 x 589 x 71 cm (75 1/2" x 232" x 28"). Collection of the artist. Courtesy: The Ydessa Gallery.

The inexorable progress of man is observed by two distantly-positioned steel dogs in *Moving Towards Eden*.

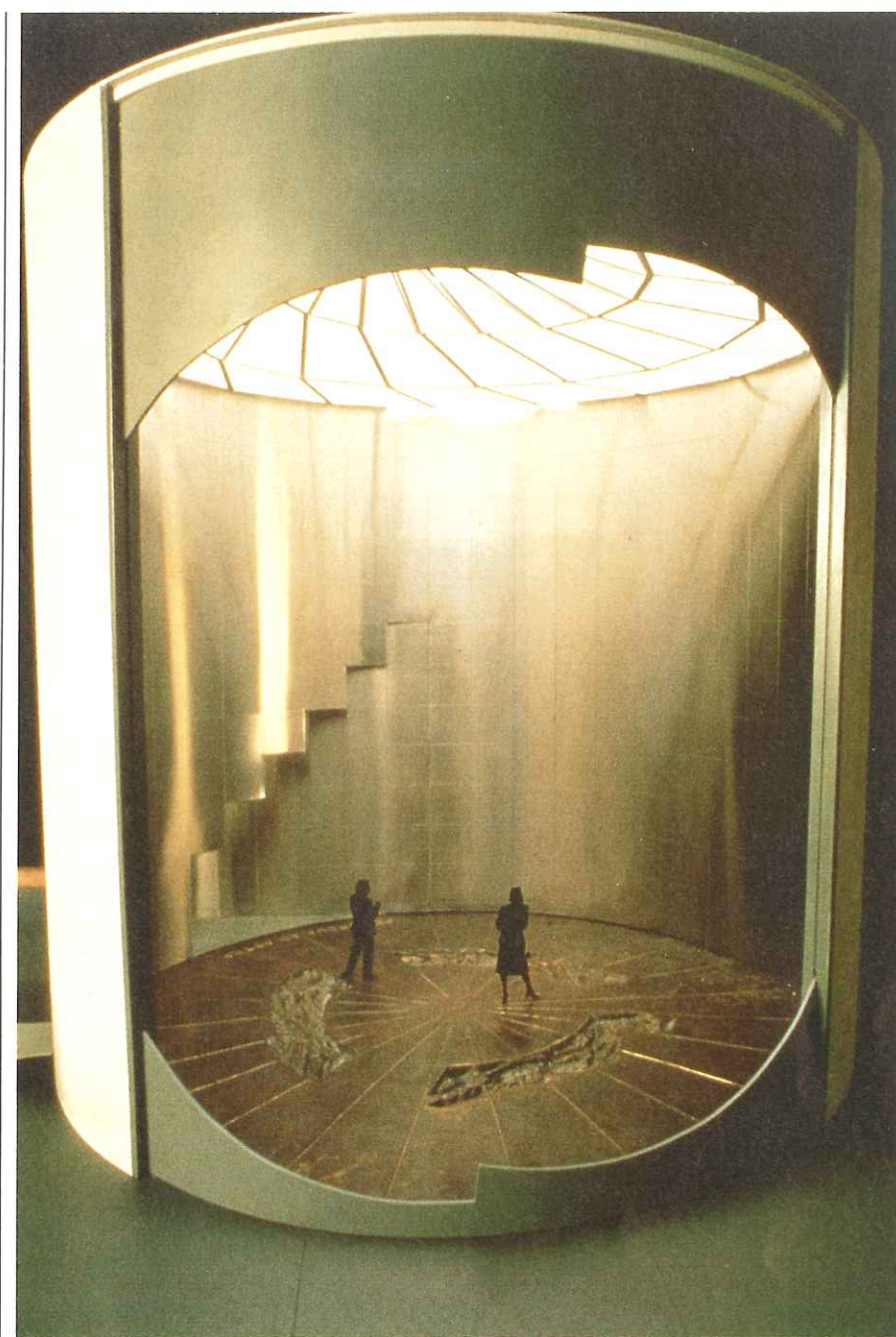
Buck, detail (1979-1982), flame-cut steel, hand forced antlers, 112 x 46 x 61 cm (44" x 18" x 24"). Collection: Ydessa Hendeles. Courtesy: The Ydessa Gallery.

In *Buck*, the sculpted steel deer is engaged in an endless and energetic dialogue with its own name.

McEwen has managed to end-run the linguistic daintiness of most postmodern sculpture.

One of McEwen's current commissions, the one now being completed at Banff, is a case in point. The work is called *Stelco's Cabin* (Stelco is both the name of a friend's dog and a Canadian steel company) and consists (so far) of a structure made of strips of steel like the phantom outline of a forest ranger's lookout, a kind of cabin in the sky, built up the mountain slope out behind the main administration building of the Banff School of Fine Arts. The structure is sited so that it looks out over a great hollow valley of trees, its position abruptly dividing the general clutter around the school from the scoop of crystalline space that is the valley beyond. On the floor of the cabin (Adam's house in Paradise?) McEwen has placed one of his steel wolves, this one with its head down, sniffing the ground. These animals of McEwen's are pretty convincing: McEwen says the last time he visited the site, a woman, thinking it was a real wolf up there on the structure, threw a length of pipe at it before she discovered her mistake. Clearly, the animal is busy finding out who's been there, whether it's safe to hang around. McEwen says the animal is just sort of passing through. "What comes with the piece," he points out, "is a sort of animal-rights dimension"—by which I assume he means, as John Berger would have it, the radical contrast between a habitat as a *given* (to the animal) and a habitat to be *salvaged* (wrenched back from nature by people like us). Between the two of them lies the hallucinated middle ground that supports the war between order and entropy, between—as in *Western Channel*—nature and ecology, nature and artifice, creature and culture.

In *Stelco's Cabin* the animal confronts a structure that, though possibly abandoned, at least exists in the present. In *Boat Sight* (the La Chaudière Project at Taché Park)—the second of the three commissions—the animal confronts, in a spirit closer to the overwrought opera of time and guilt that is embodied in *Moving Towards Eden*, a derelict, a used-up, abandoned artifact. For this highly poetic work, McEwen built the frame of a boat, cut from 2.6 centimetre steel strips that had been welded together. This outline of a hull is about 13 metres long and 4 metres high at the bow. It



is, I suppose, to real boats what *Stelco's Cabin* is to a real cabin. Both are outlines, drawings in space. This steel hull is pulled up on a shore that was also constructed for McEwen, a shore consisting of a massive bedrock ground of limestone in a sort of semicircular configuration, the individual rocks separated by rivers of crushed red granite gravel. The steel animal, a wolf, moves from the mainland down towards the shore—as if to meet and confront the boat. There may eventually be, McEwen says, another animal located farther up from the shore, placed so as to observe the first animal's meeting with the boat. As McEwen put it in his presentation to the National Capital Commission (whose competition McEwen had won) "an animal moves to the site, an animal moves down to the water; a boat

Model for *Place of Tribute* (1984-1986), cast bronze, stainless steel and acrylic, 11 x 11 m (36' x 36'). Commissioned by the R.C.A.F. Memorial Fund. Courtesy: The Ydessa Gallery. Model fabrication with the assistance of David Hunt and Gord Peteran.

McEwen's RCAF memorial will have a camera-iris/gun-sight dome and a convex bronze floor ridged with mountains, "like the top of the world."

moves ashore. One stands then between two very different objects, between the container and the animal, between the container of culture and the life of the animal." McEwen says he wanted a clean structure like the one at Banff, an "architectural structure that takes up a lot of room without occupying it."

The location of the piece within the park in Hull is important to the piece's overall

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effect, but difficult to discuss in brief; basically the shoreline that sustains the sculpture faces the Chaudière Falls that once, it appears, generated more power and supplied more power needs than they do today. The falls themselves—and the dam—can also therefore be looked upon as a kind of derelict formation. McEwen seems to have become highly engaged in speculation about the “de-watering” of the falls, about making his site a site that would “mimic the dam-form, but which would be dry.” The Dry Salvages. Given the fact of the falls’ former natural glory and the fact that McEwen’s corner of Taché Park is built on land reclaimed from E.B. Eddy Forest Products, the work is suffused with the fragrance of old time and lost meanings. Paradoxically, the steel wolves, familiar icons now within McEwen’s store of images, are—though fixed and rigid—the only moments of vivacity within the piece. The rest of the work is lost in a strange romantic superimposed time-layering, a deep resonant silence of things themselves adding their superimposed bite to the understructure of the passing years that run beneath everything like an underground river.

The *memento mori* quality of much of McEwen’s recent work has now come to a logical fulfilment in his third current commission, *Place of Tribute*, the artist’s memorial sculpture/building for the RCAF to be integrated within the National Aviation Museum. The work is to be ready for October 1986, to align its opening with a commemoration of the Battle of Britain.

The piece will be a masterwork. Basically a gleaming metal cylinder you can walk into, *Place of Tribute* is an initially simple but ultimately highly complex structure that attempts a meditation simultaneously upon the sublunary and the transcendental, time and memory, power and the distance we already are from that power (what McEwen calls “the isolated power of killing”). Perhaps the work’s most startling feature—after its cylindricality—is its glass dome roof, designed to suggest a camera iris or bomber’s gunsight. This glass dome will not only flood the memorial with natural light, it will also serve as a huge archetypal device for a focusing on death and transfiguration and a gigantic conduit to the wild blue yonder. Beneath the dome, as a bedrock supporting the entire monument, will be a “floor of history”, a wide convex floor made of bronze (“like the top of the world,” McEwen says) over which will be superimposed a system of gridding that will echo the geometric precision of the glass dome, matching its iris-focusing with a parallel suggestion of mapping and height and distance. Gouged into the bronze floor will be

three areas of organic shapes that will read as landforms, islands perhaps, at a great distance below, a brilliantly conceived shorthand for both the act of bombing and—bringing the RCAF into more enlightened times—the useful business of the surveying and mapping of Canada. Around one curve of the floor off to one side are the words *Per Ardua ad Astra* (Through Adversity to the Stars).

It is immediately noticeable that, unlike all of his other works, *Place of Tribute* does not employ any of McEwen’s symbolically serviceable steel animals. “To approach monumentality, you have to begin with modernism,” McEwen told me. “For big generalized ideas you start with big generalized planes and volumes. Because *Place of Tribute* is a public work, you’re always trying to mediate the client’s needs, the public’s needs, the accumulated history of the idea of a memorial... The National Aviation Museum displays the emblems of 168 RCAF squadrons. Obviously, the memorial could not be an exactly emblematic work. “What you do,” McEwen said, “is to go back to that empty stage of modernism.” Animals have for McEwen what he refers to as an “ethical edge”. Animals possess within their outlines so much accumulated specificity, they so insistently suggest such matters as freedom and curtailment that they bend in centripetally towards themselves (and McEwen as a sculptor) too many of the generalized meanings a memorial has to encompass.

“I had to provide images of power and distance at the same time,” McEwen says. “That’s why I wanted to use what is essentially a shrinking landscape, as the memorial’s floor.” An animal both brings meanings to ground (formally speaking) and, at the same time, opens meanings into the too-vast abstractions of freedom and otherness. For *Place of Tribute*, McEwen went back to the ideal of the empty room—an empty room that visitors could employ for their own purposes, could fill up with the boom of their own private silences. Here again, as with *The Distinctive Line* and *Buck and Western Channel* and even with *Moving Towards Eden*, two polarities are set up in confrontation (floor and dome, earth and sky, darkness and light, death and resurrection), but here too, even more than with the syntactical loss of the epic centre of a piece like *Eden*, the spatial emptiness in this piece’s centre is a formally sacrificed silence, a meditative gift to the visitor, given freely by the sculptor as a model of the other’s ultimate unknowability. CA

Gary Michael Dault is a Toronto painter and critic.

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