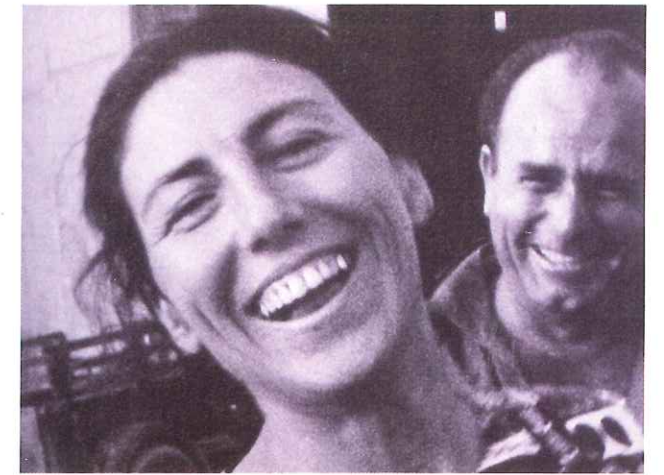


GAR SMITH'S EXPLORATIONS
INTO THE PERFORMANCE
OF SOUND AND LIGHT HAVE
GENERATED AN ADVANCED
ENCODING OF MYTH
AND METAPHOR

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ar Smith's career began 21 years ago with a silent fanfare and visual drum roll called *Noon, 1968*, a color photograph of the sky overhead, the camera held straight up on a sunny day. There is no figure in the photograph to stand against the ground of infinite, pearlescent blue, no bird or cloud or airplane, no tree branches nodding in from the frame to announce scale. And so the photograph has no scale, no understandable depth of field. What you see is uninflected space, the camera's seeing forever on this clear day.

In fact, there is something to see beyond infinite blueness and overhead endlessness. The photograph is also a plane of chemical actions, an enlarged swarm of bluish atoms of colored light assembled and fixed by the photo finisher. The viewer's vision is thus halted at a certain point of technical limitation, modifying the photograph's final effect so that it both is and is not a highway to heaven. And yet what the camera was pointed at and duly recorded was assuredly bright blue firmament and the darkness of deep space beyond. *Noon, 1968* is simulta-



TEXT BY GARY MICHAEL DAULT

ILLUMINATION DANCE

PORTRAIT PHOTOGRAPH BY TOM SKUDRA



Avenir (16mm film stills from a series) 1971-74
Courtesy: Canada Council Art Bank



neously an alignment with the expectations of the natural world and a lyrical fiction: an elegant manifestation of a famous waggish gloss on a line by poet Robert Browning — a man's reach must exceed his grasp or what's a metaphor?

Metaphors, writes Hannah Arendt in a famous preface to a collection of essays by Walter Benjamin, "are the means by which the oneness of the world is poetically brought about." That oneness, the curiously persistent objective of mystics, scientists, design visionaries, some poets and certain artists of cosmological ambition and culturally evolutionary predilections, has informed Gar Smith's art from the beginning. That and (paradoxically) a fascination with limits, boundaries, closures. The bridge between the two, between Smith's investigations into the nature of various modalities of curtailment and his abiding interest in the big freedoms of transcendence, is often fashioned from the mechanisms of metamorphosis — the very stuff of metaphor. A great deal of Smith's work involves this energetic conversion of confinement to release (praxis makes perfect) as it is embodied in the changes of meaning that come to light when both physical forms and their assigned meanings are simultaneously reframed — often by a quickening exploration of the creative fluidities of language.

Smith's work is galvanized into being by the push of words. *The Food of Love* (1981), for example, built around the casting of sets of cheap French Duralex dishes into brass bells, is generated from the fact that *vaisselle* (dish) appears to have reminded Smith of *vaisseau*, which means a large cooking implement, a large ship, or the nave of a church, above which is the bell tower, the "spire of inspiration," as Smith puts it, and the site of the ringing out of bells — music as the food of love, "the only arms possible in a

Above left: *Hairy World Trade* 1982
Photo chemicals on B&W photo paper
20 x 24 in.
Photo: Ken Elliott

Left: *Capital Teeth* 1978
Print from photogram negative
80 x 60 in.

war against war." Similarly, in the camera-less photography work Smith was doing during the '70s, there is a constantly reconceptualizing slippage of meanings whereby the silver-imbued chemical solutions of the photographic process ("black silver") give rise to linguistic musings upon the presence of silver-as-money ("argent") and therefore as commodity, as capital, as washed (laundered) assets, as oppression, as salts (savor) in suspension, as reflection (mirror), as fixity and as stasis (which helps to explain Smith's obsessive attempts to push the envelope of photographic orthodoxy and make photo works that would be as spontaneous and as free from the imperatives of photography's time-honored methods and purposes as possible).

The curtailed transcendence of *Noon, 1968*, where a literal view of endlessness had become, of necessity, a proof of the idea of endlessness merely, was followed by Smith's *Notes on Light, 1969-70*. Here, Smith foreswore the mythopoeic verticality of *Noon, 1968* to set out on a quest of epic horizontality, a photographic trek across Canada via the Trans-Canada Highway in lyrical pursuit of the nation's sunrises and sunsets. Smith divided the country into 30 sections, each one 265 kilometres wide. Smith would drive the 265 kilometres, then stop to take 40 color photographs, one every two minutes (20 facing east at sunrise and 20 facing west at sunset). All in all, 1,200 slides were projected along the gallery wall as a panorama, five images wide. The result was an encyclopedia of national light, a long, still, photographic gaze upon the polarities of light that bracket the country, the metaphorical yes and no of sunrise/sunset. The exhibition was shown at Toronto's Isaacs Gallery in 1970 and afterwards at the National Gallery, the Paris Biennale and the Vancouver Art Gallery.

In 1971, Smith drained the color-romanticism from the sunrise/sunset slides, exhibiting a selection of these pastoral views printed as large black and white photostats — the bleached-out bones of the previous show's fleshy Technicolor radiance. Big, grainy blowups of the slides, the photostats were more inspectable, more readable, than the glowing projections (photo-static as stillness), more muzzy and imprecise and molecu-

lar like *Noon, 1968* (photo-static meaning static as interference, as noise), and, because of the leeching of the color, somehow more documentary (photo-statistical) than the touristic gorgeousness of the slides (which were photo-ecstatic). A black and white sunrise or sunset isn't scenery any longer but rather news. *Notes on Light: Prints and Flags*, as this second exhibition was called, was loss and gain, was photo-transformative. The two exhibitions together became a kind of photosynthesis.

With *Notes on Light: Prints and Flags* behind him, Smith spent the next two years travelling through Europe and through Africa and Asia. Along the way, he kept a 16mm filmic diary, shooting passages of portraiture from which, after he returned to Canada, he selected the faces that appealed most to him and enlarged them into stills in a 35mm format, mounting them as a series of grainy studies of anthropological variousness and plenitude, a homage to the poor and the working classes of three continents. Exhibited at the Art Gallery of Ontario in 1973 as a waist-high ribbon of portraits, 275 of them, the work, titled *Avenir* ("the future"), was, as Smith wrote in his notes, "a search for the pure energy in human nature." Criticized at the time by a number of reviewers for what they saw as its sentimentality (Peter White, in the *The Globe and Mail*, called the portraits "sticky" and compared the work to Coca-Cola's then current brotherhood-of-man TV commercial), the exhibition was at least granted "innocence." Today the portraits in accumulation, which was, after all, the way they were presented, maintain the poignancy Smith originally found in them. Never intended as a mechanically intense socialist work, *Avenir* was more (as Smith put it) "social" — socialist only "as communication and interaction," as a "voyage of continually unfolding awareness." In total, the work posited the existence of an apolitical Eden of unity. Formally, it

The Food of Love (detail) 1981
65 suspended brass elements
8 x 20 ft.
Photo: Paul Campbell



bore a telling relationship, in its bracketing, in its cornucopic inclusiveness, to the *Notes on Light* of a few years before.

In the photographic works that followed *Avenir*, there was a withdrawal from a certain explicitness of content or, rather, the closing down of an immediately readable societal content in return for the production of a field of metaphorical transaction. This was in some measure a function of Smith's rejection of what he has always thought of as the procedural arrogance of photography's classic givens. It was in part a wryly undertaken flight from instructions about not opening film in the light under any circumstances and that sort of technical toeing of the line that led Smith to explore the possibilities of camera-less photography as a more direct, natural, spontaneous way of getting at issues that had come to occupy his attention. In an almost Oedipal defection from the high-art paternalism of photographic rectitude, Smith made monochromatic "paintings" on sheets of photo paper left out in the light. He fired a ruby laser down the length of his darkened studio at large sheets of photosensitive paper pinned up on the wall, resulting in time-delayed memories of calligraphy written upon the air like a child with a sparkler, a choreography of after-images (the *Long Hand Light Pencil* drawings). He made pin-hole photos using entire rooms as the camera. And he produced a brilliant series of photoelectric monotypes (*Still Moving Photo Video*) made by applying photosensitive paper to the screen of a TV monitor, thus trapping images photochemically in a manner more akin to surrealist *frottage* than to any other method of image-capture.

The major body of camera-less photo works Smith made during these years was exhibited in 1978 as the *Earth Stars, Futures Markets* series. The series began during a sojourn in Paris, the fruit of a scattering of baguette crumbs on the artist's tablecloth at breakfast, a compelling dispersal of organic stuff littering a neutral ground. Later the breadcrumbs scattered on a giant sheet of photo paper made a convincing equivalent to a drift of stars across the black void of the exposed paper, a Milky Way of breadcrumbs, the stars and planets as food and energy. "Futures markets," Smith wrote in his notes, "are speculation on the futures of com-

modities of society, of economics.... Lights of the future from lights of the past.... Are the stars our future destination or our place of origin?... Are stars white holes?"

Gradually, nets of interdependent symbols and conceptual shorthands strove and contested within the works. Smith made dark photo-galaxies sparked with stars made from tiny droplets of oil; he made star clusters from pieces of coal (*Fool's Cold*), grains of wheat, lentils, pennies (constellations of cold, hard cash). Once, he made a huge photogram of one stellar penny glowing on the black paper like a bright moon in a telescope. *Capital Teeth*, one of the most metaphorically expansive works in the series, consists of two white luminous discs with delicately shaded cones depending from them: a very large blowup (in negative) of two bullets standing on the paper, their shadows leaning away from the light. Their title is a compression of Smith's metaphoric discursiveness; capital means splendidly appropriate (a capital idea), bureaucratic (as in capital city), surplus value as oppression (capitalism) and as having to do with the head (capitulate, capital punishment), upper case. The bullets are, at the same time, teeth (as the ripping, tearing, business end of a gun), coercion, rapaciousness, economic as well as bodily brutality. A parallel photogram of 1,500 bullets standing flat side down on the paper was called *Materialist Dialectics* and looked like a shivery stargate to hyperspace, the receding universe of late-capitalist rationale, the end-stopped space of materialist imperatives.

Eventually Smith began to paint directly on black and white photosensitive paper (1979), using a brush and certain photochemicals as pigment. By staging limited chemical warfare between fix (acid) and developer (base), by manipulating whites (the fix dissolves the photo emulsion on the paper) and darks (the developer oxidizes the photo emulsion), he was able to simulate colors on his paper canvases. The mixtures of fix and developer ripened into odd, earthy hues — purples, browns, greenish-greys, creams, all the colors of chemical breathing, as the hydrogen of acidity strove with the oxygen of base to create an entire palette in the wake of their molecular friction. Like *Noon, 1968*, the photo-

paintings Smith was making provided an illusion of depth with (as Smith put it) "one micron of chemical thinness."

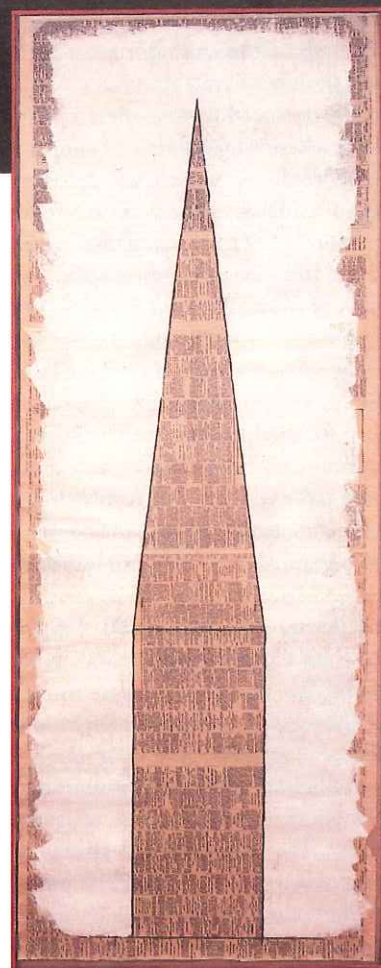
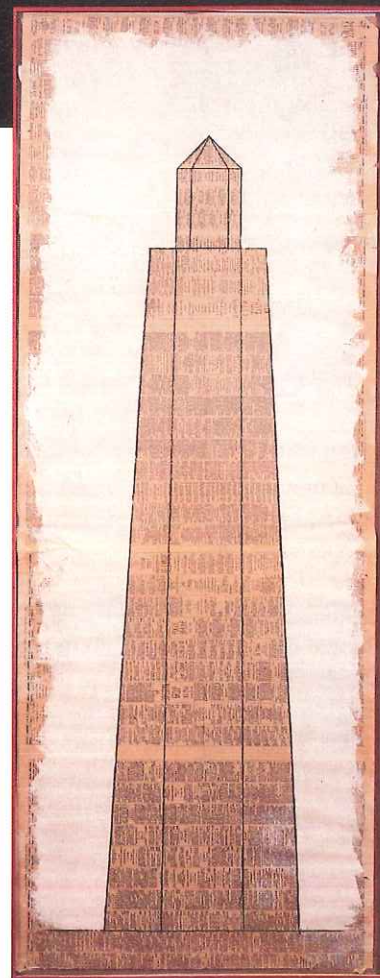
Smith's last photo-paintings were the works of his *Urban Nature Series* (1982), works made during a year in New York. Small *tour de force* of Smith's metaphoric concerns, these dense, rich pictures depict anthropomorphized buildings, fearsome Manhattan towers whose rows of windows have become demonic eyes and teeth, oppressive structures grimacing with the weight and pressure of their urban importance, perhaps going mad with it (his rich chocolatey World Trade Center towers are turning hairy and hysterical like werewolves under the moon). If these tortured buildings seem on the point of becoming articulate, to clamor, to speak in architectural tongues, it may well be that there was some crossover between this declarativeness and the sounding utterances of the sculptural pieces he was working on at the time — the tower bells that would eventually make up an exhibition at the Isaacs Gallery in Toronto called *I Give Bliss, I Give Warning* (1985). "When I was studying architecture at the University of Toronto," Smith told me once, "I wanted to design buildings you could strike like a gong or play like an organ." The tower bells get pretty close to that.

Smith's introduction to bells seems to have occurred during his travels in India where, living in ashrams, visiting temples, being summoned to *puja* (prayers), he was tumbled precipitously and frequently into the auditory space carved out of the day's ordinariness by their sound, summoned into the bell's sonic moment of brilliant duration "washed clean of the past and future" that poet Paul Valéry once referred to as a "diamond of time." The first bells Smith designed (gongs, really) were made in 1975 by casting chapati, the Indian bread, in bronze. Here, food ceased to be food and turned into a sound, a cry, a lament, an alarm, an admonition. The next bells, icons of fullness and plenty (in contrast to the chapati gongs) were the castings in brass that Smith made in Italy of the aforementioned French Duralux dishes. Like the bronze chapatis, the brass Duralux dishes (shown at the Winnipeg Art Gallery in 1981 as *The Food of Love* installation) were highly charged with irony

and transformative programming. "For me," Smith wrote, "one of the strongest images of brass is in its use as a material for bullets, bombs...thus the [artillery] shell is retrieved and transformed into a bowl...from a destructive function to a maintenance function and from there to a creative function, that of a bell...." Of course, to make a bowl into a bell, you have to drill a hole into it to hang it from. Which makes it useless any longer as a bowl. Metaphor giveth and taketh away.

I Give Bliss, I Give Warning (1985) presented a new series of bells, cast again in brass and taking the sociologically and historically provocative shapes of a cathedral spire, a grain elevator, a smokestack, a skyscraper, a lighthouse, a missile shell and a plinth shaped like Cleopatra's needle (a generalized bell of the past?). Together, these splendid and disturbing bells seemed to posit a rolling-up of history into a sonic broth of tragi-comic sameness in extension; when these brass emblems of the built environment are struck, their commingled soundings ring out an ambivalent message of worship and warning from a culture in which commerce and spirituality, aggression and haven, murdering and making, are submerged in a chorus of contradiction that is, for better or worse, the song of ourselves. The bell is a central symbol of creative power. It is also a weighty reminder of finality. This dialogue between what utopian architect Paolo Soleri (who also makes bells) would call the Alpha God and the Omega Seed is a kind of dance — like the generative and destructive and regenerative dance of Shiva. A dance of terror and of joy.

Since 1985, Smith has been making an ambitious kind of print — a print that recalls the transformation of the *Notes on Light* sunrise/sunset slides into the more sombre black and white blowups of the subsequent *Prints and Flags*: latex castings of portions of rock face, outcroppings of the Canadian Shield in Northern Ontario. Because these sculptural surfaces are cast from a liquid latex that Smith brushes onto the surface of the rock, and because these latex coatings harden into the molds from which he makes his castings, the molds are, in a sense, negatives from which the positives are made. The whole process therefore reprises Smith's earlier preoccupation



Top: *I Give Bliss, I Give Warning* 1982-85
Collection: Canada Council Art Bank

Bottom: Drawings for *I Give Bliss, I Give Warning*
Acrylic, oil stick on New York Times newspaper
Each 22 x 60 in.

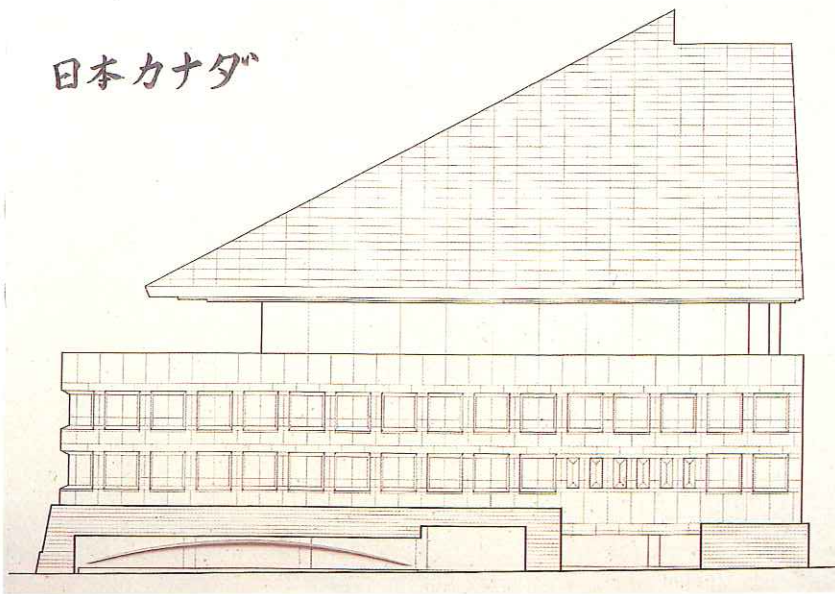
with photography. Here, too, is another kind of photograph (the rock faces are 3-D impressions as opposed to photography's 2-D impressions).

Some of the rock face casts are made into masks. Smith's agitation about the military and industrial disruption of the fragile ecology of the north has led him to see the rock faces as literal faces of the threatened, anthropomorphized life form that is the Canadian Shield itself. These faces are vulnerable, hurttable, mute but eloquent. The Shield he sees as a literal shield — protective but not strong enough to withstand military testing and industrial abuse. Smith has therefore drilled primitive eyeholes into some of the rock-face castings so that, as masks, they can look back at their oppressors, muster a long, intense gaze of accusation in the face of a largely heedless enemy. Nuclear waste drilled into holes in the rock, Smith mused recently, will look like smoking eye-holes in the enraged face of the sentient landscape. Some of the cast rock faces have been made into bells. They too ring out ambiguous messages of bliss and warning, the gaze of the rock-face masks being now transformed into a timeless, decaying sound.

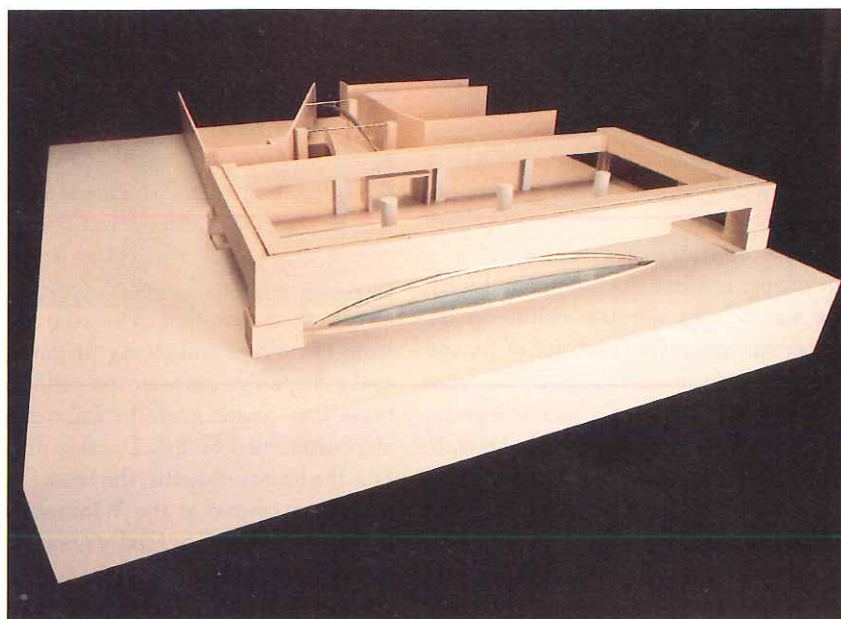
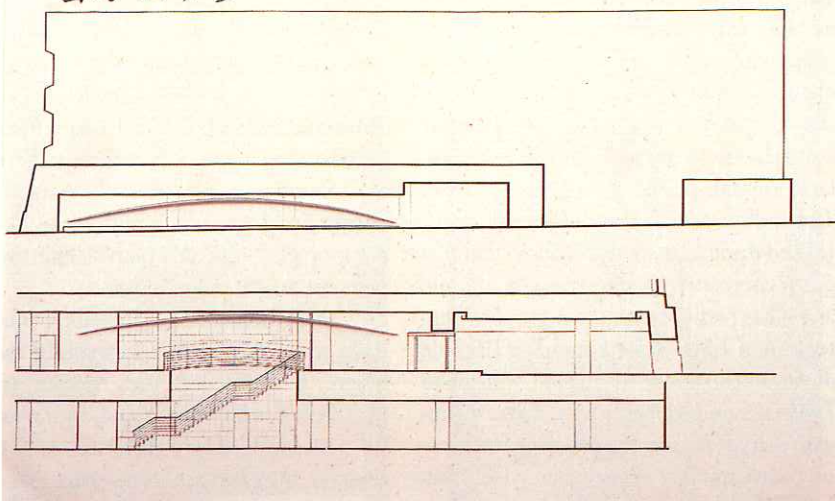
Smith's most recent project is a commission to provide two gigantic bells for the new Canadian embassy building in Tokyo. Designed by Toronto architect Raymond Moriyama in concert with the Shimizu Corporation of Tokyo, the building will be located on an eight-lane thoroughfare named Aoyamadori, in the high-profile Akasaka district at the centre of the city, across from the gardens of the Togugosho Imperial Grounds, home of the Emperor's family.

The building itself is predicated upon "two sets of metaphors.... One metaphor expresses a symbol of Canadian spirit — Canada's natural heritage and industrial spirit linked by the people of Canada. Another metaphor expresses an ancient aspect of Japanese culture — Ikebana — the traditional Japanese art of flower arrangement. The basic structure of Ikebana can be expressed by Earth, People, and Heaven [the symbols of which are, respectively, a square, a circle or disc, and an equilateral triangle with one apex pointed directly upward]. The two metaphors are bridged by a common element

日本カナダ



日本カナダ



Above: *Canadian Shield* 1988
Bell-metal
17 x 24 in.
Photo: Ken Elliott

— the people." The people are to be incorporated into the design of the building through the abstraction of the five senses (touch is foregrounded by the presence of a rock "discovery wall" in the lower part of the building; taste is represented, rather bathetically, by the "Canadian food" served in the restaurant on the fourth floor; and so on). The three levels of Ikebana are echoed in a tripartite Canadian reading of the building's ascending levels as "natural heritage, people, industrial spirit" (however ruefully one observes the progress of progress, one nevertheless regrets that "heaven" is thus unequivocally paralleled to "industrial spirit").

Smith's bells, infinitely more sheer and delicate than their raw size would indicate (each of them is 21 metres long and weighs 1,400 kilograms), are to function, in Moriyama's Ikebana five-sense scheme for the building, as the embodiment of the sense of sound: the bells are resonant tubes that can be tuned and are designed to be played, as Aeolian flutes, by the variable overblowing of the wind

as well as being sounded by electrically activated and electronically controlled strikers in the inside. The two bells are virtually identical, though their positioning is sufficiently different as to make them seem dissimilar. Each bell takes the form of an attenuated arch, the curvature of the earth, expressed as a double-pointed needle suspended from above and drooping gently, and with mathematical precision, toward the ground at each end. Smith's two great metal arcs thus not only provide Moriyama's sense of sound, but also function as subtle outerings of the Ikebana earth-people-sky ascension (and subsequent descent from sky to people to earth again).

The first of the bells, titled *Arc*, will be located at the entrance to the embassy (facing the eight-lane thoroughfare and the Emperor's gardens). This bell, which has a surface texture of rock, will be suspended above a long, boat-shaped pool. The pool will serve both to reflect the arc of the bell (and thus seems almost to complete the joining of the arc with its own illusory double) and to perform as a symbolic river (the water can be pumped through a drain at the lower end up to the higher end, at which point gravity will return it to the pump again), its slow but persistent movement reading as vitality and growth. The second bell, titled *Bow*, will be inside, suspended over a long footbridge that leads deeper into the building. This second bell, which has a surface texture of tree bark, echoes the rise and bend of the bridge, enacting the progress of its curvature overhead as if it were a kind of guide or beam to follow.

More formally and spiritually generalized than the culturally reflexive brass tower bells of *I Give Bliss, I Give Warning*, Smith's giant bells for Tokyo are majestic essays in diplomatic appropriateness and tact. The slow, understandable calculus of their plotted curves reads simultaneously as procedural caution and as a graceful incitement to completion and fulfilment. Harmonious vectors of rise and fall, of cultural difference and cultural agreement, the big bells hang over water and above the heads of the people as sounding icons of trust and objectifications of faith — epic parentheses within which two dissimilar cultures can proceed, sunrises and sunsets in metal that have grown articulate.

Top left: Drawing/model of front elevation, new Canadian Embassy, Tokyo (Moriyama and Teshima, Architects) showing *Arc*
Xerox, carved wood, rice paper
44 x 32 in.

Middle: Section drawing showing *Arc* and *Bow*
Xerox, carved wood, rice paper
44 x 32 in.

Bottom: Architectural model showing *Arc* and *Bow*
Mixed media, 34 x 38 in.