



John Duff

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Johnson County Community College • Gallery of Art

John Duff: Even Though

Even though he doesn't quite fit the profile of an art world "star," John Duff deserves recognition as one of the finest abstract sculptors of his generation.¹ A master of the medium of fiberglass, Duff crafts fascinating objects whose subtly expressive structures, calmly sensuous surfaces and quietly evocative colors repay sensitive attention and generously reward the imagination. Duff's work may be classified historically as a "post-minimalist" response to the aesthetics of minimalism, the dominant avant-garde sculptural idiom in the United States from the mid- to late 1960s. The minimalists employed industrial materials and techniques to produce simple, geometric forms. Carl Andre, for example, placed rectangular stacks of firebricks and checkerboard arrangements of metal plates directly on gallery floors, while Donald Judd presented uniform rows of factory-fabricated stainless steel boxes. Andre, Judd and other minimalists sought to purge their art of subjective gestures and personal feelings, to negate narrative, illusionism and metaphor and to focus exclusively on the artwork's status as a concrete, physical fact. Post-minimalist sculptors like Duff assimilated minimalist lessons about the virtues of industrial materials and simple, economical forms, but reintroduced concerns with process, narrative, emotional content and organic metaphor.

Even though Duff's career in New York began auspiciously in 1969 with his inclusion in the Whitney Museum of American Art's *Anti-Illusion: Procedures/Materials* exhibition,² he did not emerge as a major artist until the 1980s, when he began to create the distinctive cast fiberglass sculptures for which he is best-known.³ These quietly surprising objects appear to stretch, flow and rotate before our eyes. They rise from the floor or reach out from the wall, their active volumes projecting insistently into our own space. Some seem to slice and thrust aggressively, while others gently twist and glide. In some, such as *Point Break*, the implied movement is smooth and simple, flowing over the surface of a single, unified volume. In others, like *Spread Wedge*, it is broken



Spread Wedge, 1984, fiberglass, paint, masonite, 62" x 10¼" x 15", collection Harry W. and Mary Margaret Anderson, Atherton, Calif.

and complex, leaping between disparate, juxtaposed elements. Still others, like *Exchange Place*, channel imagined kinetic energy along linear circuits created by looping steel rods.

Even though they are typically large and bulky, Duff's sculptures also appear surprisingly light and buoyant.⁴ Cast fiberglass has little physical weight, and Duff's objects are perfectly at home hovering against the wall, in seeming defiance of gravity. Like other 20th-century sculptors, Duff has rejected the traditional conception of sculpture as mass – as dense, weighty material that displaces space – and has focused instead on volume – space that is enclosed or defined sculpturally. Duff draws attention to the pregnant spaces within his sculptures either by slicing open their fiberglass shells to reveal interiors, as in *Sigismondo* and *Open Serrated Wedge*, or by allowing the translucency of the fiberglass to admit light into inner spaces, as in *Distressed Torus* or the lower segment of *Wollongong*.

Even though they are fundamentally sculptural in their physical bulk and

presence, Duff's objects also explore issues of color, light and space more commonly associated with painting. Duff consistently applies enamel paint to the inside surfaces of his sculptures to achieve a wide variety of coloristic effects. In some works, such as *Ulawatu Column* and *Single Track – Solomonian Column*, the hues are bold and solid, imparting an aura of mass and density. In other works, like *Sigismondo* and *Oblatus #1*, the color is gentler, more transparent, and "seems caught, as if in amber, just beneath the yellowed, translucent surface of the fiberglass."⁵ Whether backed by opaque or translucent paint, the surfaces of Duff's sculptures eagerly attract light, which bounces off of them in shiny highlights while often simultaneously passing through them to illuminate volumetric interiors. In a number of recent works, such as *Meniscus* and *Roberta's Tray*, Duff has abandoned full volumes and instead has stretched thin planes of fiberglass across spaces defined by curving steel rods, much as a painter would stretch a canvas. Duff presents these essentially planar objects as pictorial works, hung parallel to the wall and addressing the viewer frontally, like a painting.

Even though Duff's sculptures are neither mimetic nor illustrative, never explicitly imitating or describing another object in the real world, they are nevertheless richly allusive. Their surprising shapes and intriguing compositions stimulate the imagination and evoke a wide range of possible references.⁶ Many call to mind natural or organic forms. *Point Break*, for instance, resembles a sleek blue fin or bird's wing, *Sigismondo* a winged green insect and *Oblatus #1* an enormous purple tongue. *Open Serrated Wedge* floats off the wall "like an inchworm feeling its way down a tree branch, or a seed pod twisting as it tenses toward popping open and propelling its seeds."⁷ Other pieces call to mind man-made objects, ranging from a spiral column (*Single Track – Solomonian Column*), to a row of shields on a Viking ship (*Roberta's Tray*), to an outboard motor propeller (*Exchange Place*). Still other pieces, such as *Meniscus*, read primarily as quirky investigations of geometric spatial relationships – lines against planes, circles against ellipses, convexities against concavities.

Even though Duff will sometimes provide his sculptures with literal, matter-of-fact titles like *Spread Wedge* or *Black Floor Piece* – ironically inviting formalist readings of objects obviously rich in metaphorical potential – he will more often give them unexpected names every bit as provocative and enigmatic as the objects to which they are attached.⁸ With the aid of a dictionary and, sometimes, a bit of detective work, the meanings of these curious titles can be discovered and their significance for possible readings of particular works established. Some titles clearly are whimsical, such as *Roberta's Tray*, a tribute to Duff's high school sweetheart,⁹ or *Red Queen*, named for its fanciful resemblance to the Red Queen in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*.¹⁰ Duff named *Wollongong* and *Ulawatu Column* after famous surfing beaches in Australia and Bali,¹¹ encouraging aquatic readings of the pieces: *Ulawatu Column* appears to roll and twist like an ocean wave, while the top and bottom segments of *Wollongong* suggest a wave and seashell, respectively. *Sigismondo* was named for the 15th-century Italian tyrant Sigismondo Malatesta because its structure reminded Duff not only of an insect but also of a Renaissance helmet and breastplate.¹² The title of *Oblatus #1* comes from the Latin root of the English adjective *oblate*, meaning "flattened at the poles," and of the noun *oblation*, meaning "an offering made to a deity, especially the offering of bread and wine in celebration of the Eucharist."¹³

The definitions call attention to the flattened ends of the sculpture's tongue-like structure as well as to the human tongue's reception of the elements of the Eucharist. Finally, *Meniscus* takes its name from the term for "the convex or concave upper surface of a column of water, the curvature of which is caused by surface tension."¹⁴ The title thereby evokes the alternating convex and concave curves formed in the plane of the fiberglass by the steel rings that revolve around its vertical axis.

Even though they are fashioned from industrial materials like fiberglass, steel rods and enamel paint, Duff's sculptures do not have the sleek, impersonal, manufactured aura of minimalist objects. Duff's sculptures clearly have been hand-made and frankly acknowledge



Red Queen, 1985, fiberglass, enamel paint, 87¾" x 22" x 32⅝", collection Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; T.B. Walker Acquisition Fund, 1986.

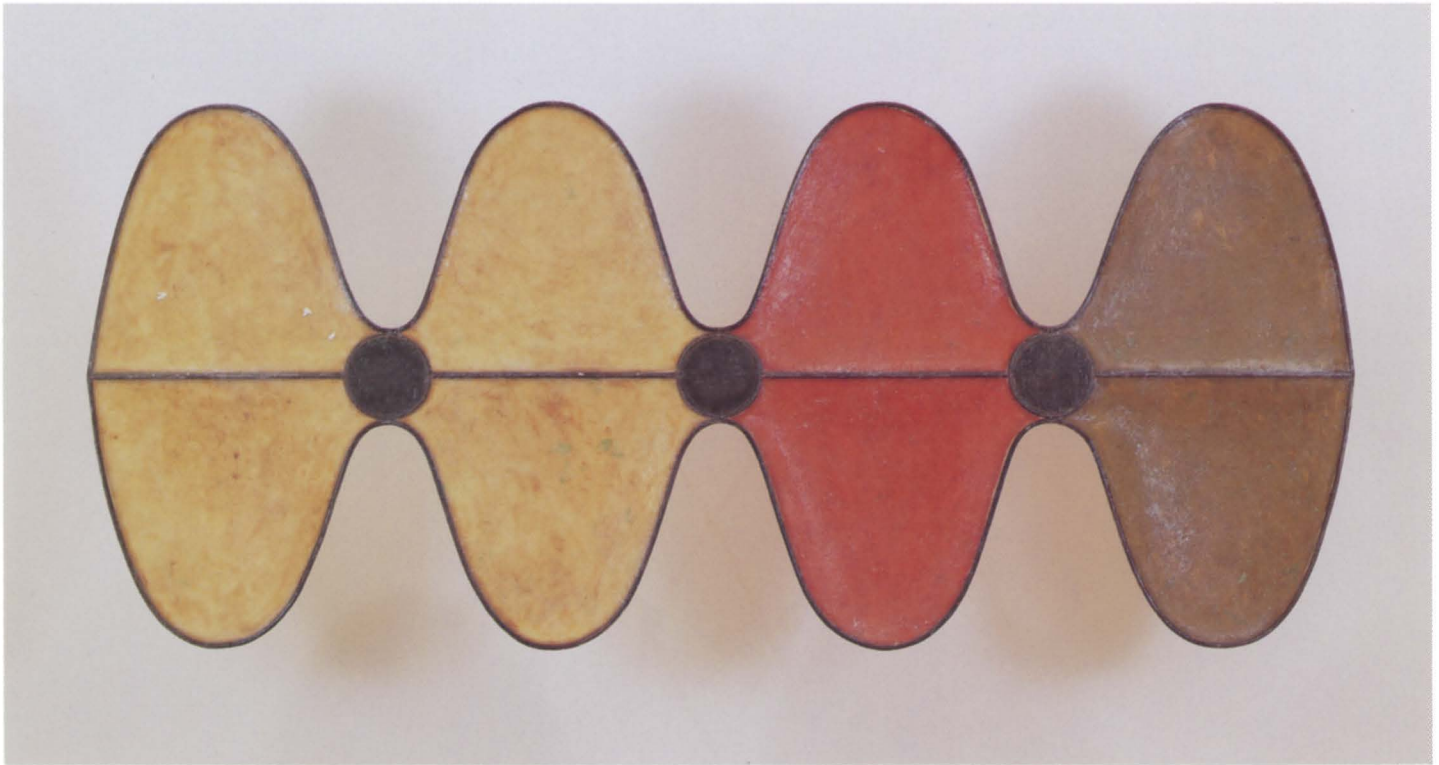
through their appearance the contingencies of the modeling, casting, assembling and painting processes. Their fiberglass surfaces are not smooth and polished but rough and pitted, recording accidents and imperfections in modeling and casting. The paint that covers their interiors is rarely clean and uniform but instead often broken and varying in density. Splinters of wood and fragments of plaster molds adhere to the outer surfaces of numerous works, such as *Spread Wedge* and *Distressed Torus*. It is not only through their frequently organic shapes but also through these various imperfections that Duff hopes his works will ultimately seem less like manufac-

tured objects and more like things that have naturally grown and evolved.¹⁵

Even though they are generated within an urban environment and are addressed to urban audiences, Duff's sculptures embody a philosophy of working with, rather than against, nature. They are there to remind us that even in our increasingly cynical, regimented, technocratic world, imaginative human minds and skilled human hands continue to make works of art with the power to move, fascinate and inspire us.

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Roberta's Tray, 1994, fiberglass, enamel paint, 41" x 95" x 19", courtesy David McKee Gallery, New York.

Notes

1. Born in Lafayette, Ind., in 1943, Duff grew up in Southern California. During his teenage years he was an avid surfer before he discovered art around the age of 19 in a high school ceramics course. He went on to attend the San Francisco Art Institute, first studying ceramics under Ron Nagle and then switching to sculpture. Bruce Nauman, already gaining a reputation as a post-minimal "eccentric abstractionist," was one of Duff's teachers during his last semester at the SFAI. After earning his bachelor of fine arts degree in 1967, Duff moved to New York City, where he continues to live and work.
2. See Marcia Tucker and James Monte, *Anti-Illusion: Procedures/Materials* exhibition catalog (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1969). In addition to Duff, the exhibition included a number of other artists now considered major post-minimalists, including Lynda Benglis, Eva Hesse, Robert Morris, Bruce Nauman, Richard Serra, Joel Shapiro, Keith Sonnier and Richard Tuttle.
3. As a teenage surfer, Duff first gained experience using fiberglass, which is used in the manufacture and repair of surfboards. He used fiberglass as a sculptural material for the first time in 1967, doubtless encouraged by the example of his teacher Bruce Nauman, who had made a number of eccentric abstract fiberglass sculptures in 1965-66.
4. Duff has remarked that with each work he is interested in "the discrepancy in the way you experience it as mass, feeling that there's

a density and weight to it but at the same time feeling that it's weightless." Quoted in Mary Ellen Haus, "Preview: Heide Fasnacht and John Duff," *Interview* 18 (November 1988): 30.

5. Nancy Princenthal, "John Duff at BlumHelman and Amy Lipton," *Art in America* 79 (April 1991): 159.

6. Duff typically associates his invented sculptural forms with images that linger from his childhood memories. He recently remarked that "the pool you draw from is something already internalized from childhood. I don't really think you get to choose or manipulate the kind of artist you are ... If you're a good one, you tap into a preexistent sensibility." Quoted in Marjorie Welsh, "John Duff" (interview), *Journal of Contemporary Art* 6 (Winter 1993): 29.

7. Bruce D. Kurtz, *Contemporary Art: 1965-1990* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1992), p. 217.

8. Duff nearly always bases his titles on associations generated by the pieces after they have been finished. As he commented recently, "I think there's a lot to be said for coming to things later. The hard part is keeping things open-ended. You can sew things up for yourself in advance so that you don't have any room to move. The whole idea is giving yourself maximum scope to move and go anywhere with the piece." John Duff, interview with the author, Oct. 29, 1994.

9. John Duff, interview with the author, Jan. 10, 1995.

10. John Duff, interview with the author, Oct. 29, 1994.

11. John Duff, interviews with the author, Nov. 10, 1989, and Oct. 29, 1994.

12. Susan Lubowsky, *Enclosing the Void: Eight Contemporary Sculptors*, exhibition catalog (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art at Equitable Center, 1988), p. 10, and John Duff, interview with the author, Oct. 29, 1994.

13. Random House Webster's College Dictionary (New York: Random House, 1992), p. 933.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 847.

15. Duff has spoken of seeking to achieve in his art the same degree of "structural necessity" he finds inherent in the forms of nature, without explicitly imitating those forms. John Duff, interview with the author, Nov. 10, 1989.

Acknowledgments

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Cover: *Wollongong*, 1987, fiberglass and enamel paint, 76" x 39" x 21¼", collection Harry W. and Mary Margaret Anderson, Atherton, Calif.