



Donald Lipski: Sculptures

April 18 - May 28, 1993

Johnson County Community College • Gallery of Art

Donald Lipski's Sculptures:

A Life of Their Own

In the late 1970s, when Donald Lipski produced his first major body of work, *Gathering Dust*, the prevailing trends for the art of that period seemed to proclaim themselves in terms of scale. If the canvases and photographs of artists like Julian Schnabel, David Salle and Robert Longo were beginning to herald the grandiose stature of art works of that era, Lipski's collections of small objects must have seemed almost unassuming and demure by comparison.

But decisions about scale and dimension are not merely market concerns. They are central to the underlying meaning of any work of art. Consider, for example, two poems: the first, written by Gerard Manley Hopkins, takes the reader on an unrestrained, rhapsodic, emotional roller coaster ride:

*Cloud-puffball, torn tufts, tossed pillows,
flaunt forth then chevy on an air-
built thoroughfare: heaven-roysterers, in gay
gangs they throng; they glitter in marches...*

The second poem by Issa is stark and simple:

*only one guy and
only one fly trying to
make the guest room do.*

Each poet has adopted a mode of expression appropriate to his concerns. Though very different in form, the expansive, rollicking experience in Hopkins' verse neither negates nor invalidates the guileless clarity of the haiku poem.

Like the haiku poem, there is a disarming, disquieting modesty to Lipski's art that gives it an underlying power. In *Gathering Dust*, for example, the components composing each work are presented grid-like across a single wall, resembling a display of fishermen's flies. A blue rubber band wrapped around a safety pin, a hair grip sticking out of a cigarette butt – each small object becomes both bait and hook combined. The series has the vivid beauty of decoys, and, like decoys, they invite a sense of misrecognition. Yet the objects are disconcertingly obvious in their simplicity. At once ephemeral, yet with an air of permanency, the works are both humorous and deadly serious in their intent.

The key to the kind of perception Lipski's art initiates is that of distraction: the works are like products of the reveries of doodling. But the miniature scale of each component explores both an "intimate immensity" as well as examining the seemingly inconsequential. The world of child's play is opened up to reveal something essential about the real world.

This double take of misrecognition isn't, however, the kind of deliberate misreading we associate with Surrealism. In Surrealism, familiar objects were often chosen for their mundane, commonplace qualities as a means of illuminating the magic alchemy of the imagination. Dada and Pop Art used these same objects as the focus for contextual transformation. But for Lipski, everyday objects suggest quite the opposite: they reveal their own obscured origins and mysterious functions. As viewers, we are always brought into a direct encounter with the object as seemingly inconsequential, untransformed, obscure in function and symbolically remote.

And even though some of Lipski's works might be visually reminiscent of Andre Breton's object poems or Man Ray's *objets trouvés*, his art is not the poetry of juxtaposition. Nor is it a spectacular transformation of the mundane. His decoys remain mute. They carry the silence of their mystery with them. If his art, at first viewing, seems to invite a

sense of imaginary transformation, it never exploits the child's vantage point of play. Instead, the worlds touched on by Lipski's sculptures hold their secrets close. The desire to impose our own imaginary worlds onto his world of objects is constantly thwarted. Lipski allows the elements in his art to freely invoke their ephemeral and provisional qualities – qualities that create an inviolable and permanent shell around each object.

The fascination underlying all Lipski's art is that it always takes the viewer to the brink, to the gateway of a secret space that every object inhabits without compromising its essence by easy access. Denied the facility of being pulled into an imaginary relationship with them, we are brought into contact with a shroud of exteriority that seems to embrace each component.

In the series *Passing Time*, for example, a child's chair is mummified in masking tape. In *Red, White and Blue*, another chair is tightly wrapped in a muslin flag. Both pieces exaggerate associations of bondage while at the same time they physically interiorize the space of the commonplace object. The works create a visual joke, yet they also emphasize a sense of spatial self-containment and self-enclosure common to all Lipski's sculptures.

Lipski's objects always seem to be caught in mysterious acts, the origins



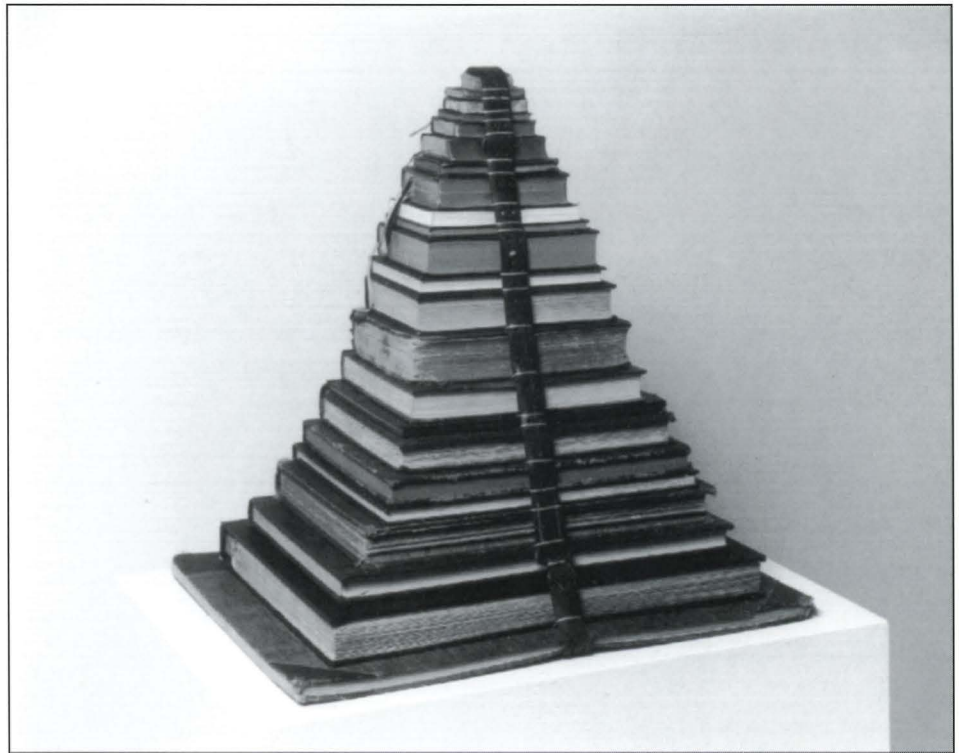
Untitled, 1991, 27" x 76.75" x 30", Courtesy Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Chicago

and destinations of which are equally obscure. In his *Broken Wings* series, for example, familiar industrial fragments – mechanical components gathered from the Grumman Aerospace facilities – are presented as if they are participants in a formal dance. The objects perform a duet, frozen in a forgotten ritual of gesture and response. And in *Building Steam #318*, a pair of shears is bound and presented like a Stone Age Venus. Utensils are trapped, frozen in the dysfunctionality imposed on them by the artist.

Lipski uses books in a similar fashion. Generally produced and published for their content, access to the book's content is exaggeratedly denied in his sculptures. A ziggurat is made from a pyramid of books in *Untitled*. The books are unyielding, compressed, giving them the magic and mysterious aura of a ceremonial, fetishized object. And in *Building Steam #388*, a book on Hebraic literature is riveted in a clamp by the ideogram of a sickle moon. The sickle moon is created by the shape of the clamp which itself echoes the shape of the book after a piece of it has been removed. The sacred and the archaic are thus sealed together in the image.

Lipski's art always provides us with images of the sacred, the archaic and the infinite. In the work *Untitled*, an archetypal image is awakened in the ordinary when a wheelbarrow filled with lighted candles, leaking its load, becomes an ancient haywain. An image of abundance is linked to death by the rows of memorial candles. Because there is the potentiality for movement, the wheelbarrow threatens the firm basis on which the rows of memorial candles are stationed: to upset the wheelbarrow would be to upset this liquid haywain of abundance. Images of both life and death converge on the wheelbarrow's narrow base. Equally, the ranked candle flames, perched on their precarious foundation, bring to mind the threat of an accident. This memorial is, we realize, rooted on a wobbly foundation of imminent catastrophe. Lipski's work teases out such cosmic themes from the residue of the unessential, from the leftovers of the surplus of production.

In this work, as in many others, Lipski magnifies the ready-made by means of repetition (the candles). But



Untitled, 1991, 24" x 23.25" x 17.5", Courtesy Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Chicago

perhaps nowhere is the use of repetition more dramatic than in *Free Reef*. A crater is created out of spilt glass that is pouring out of a ring of galvanized steel buckets. The buckets form a tight circle spanning outward as if through centrifugal force. The image is that of a corona of shattered transparency. Both the accidental and the accident itself (the spilt glass from the buckets) become a vortex of catastrophe. The random, splintered outpourings suggest a crater rim for an explosive center. Here, the accidental is magnified into the geological, the seismic and the cosmic.

Still, however much we might make of the sacred or erotic associations in the work, the elements comprising Lipski's art always remain objects, enclosed in their own indifference against the perverse misuse of artistic ceremonial acts. Physically constrained and protected from ritual use, his art objects seem more like touchstones for a lost world. His delicate art of staging effects only a theatrical transformation onto the found object.

The first found objects to enter into the realm of art untouched are reputed to have been introduced by the French poet, Apollinaire. For him, a used and worn-out worker's cup was "soaked with humanity." Apollinaire sensed an essence of pathos in the muteness of the

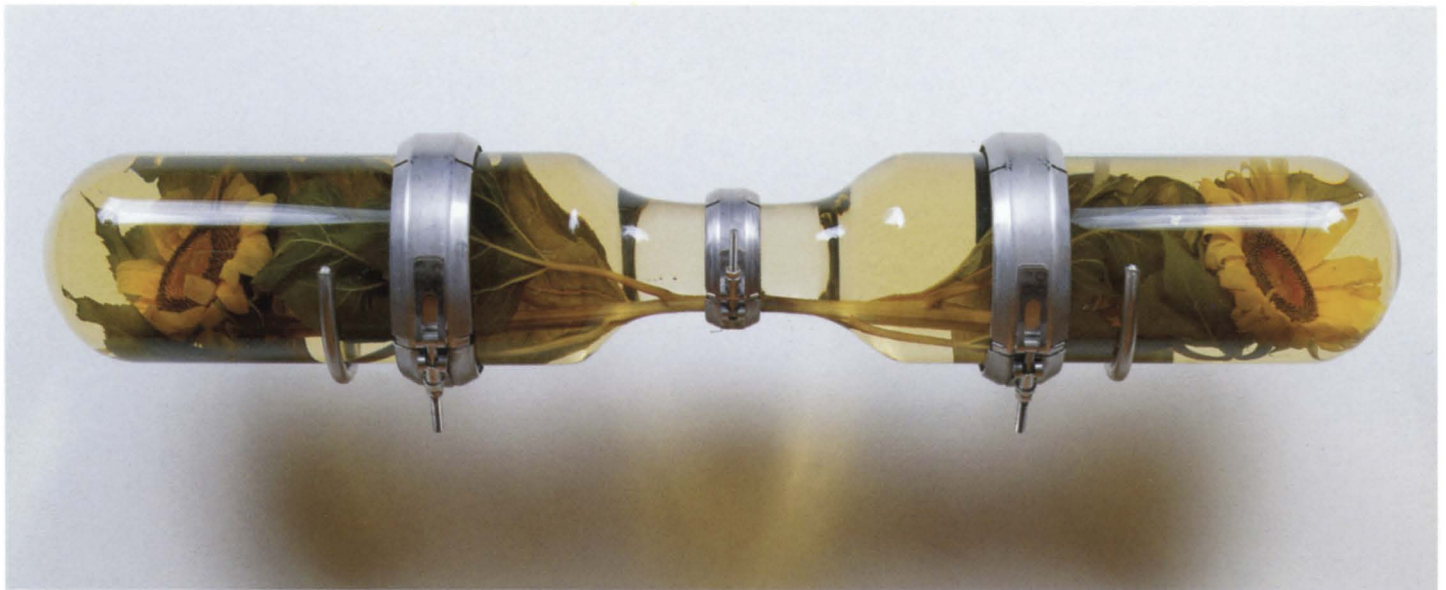
utensil. And, in many ways, Lipski's art seems to recover something of the poetic resonance that Apollinaire bestowed on both words and objects before the ready-made became a pawn in the conceptual games of contextual shifts in the art of the 20th century. But one suspects that Lipski's is not quite the humanistic identification that Apollinaire espoused. Though each component in a Lipski sculpture might belong to the smaller, simpler world of nostalgic recollection, they have nothing of the reassurance of nostalgia. They bear only the pathos of double dispossession: first, in their seeming redundancy, and then in their subjection to an alien function.

Time and again, his art returns us to the elusive mystery world the haiku poem explores:

*if there's nowhere to rest at the end
how can I get lost on the way?* (Ikkyu)

In the final analysis, Lipski's work is about the mysterious integrity of things. As lost objects, they become disquieting presences in a world that has been bereft of physicality and reduced to the invisible functionality of electronic expression.

Rosetta Brooks
Independent art critic/curator



Waterlilies #54, 1990, 8.5" x 42" x 6", Collection Daryl Gerber, Chicago

Exhibition Checklist

Free Reef, 1987

galvanized steel buckets, broken glass
10.5" x 100" x 100"
Courtesy Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Chicago

Waterlilies #54, 1990

acid wasteline tubing, sunflowers,
solutions, hardware
8.5" x 42" x 6"
Collection Daryl Gerber, Chicago

Blood #1, 1991

acid wasteline tubing, water, vials,
hardware
11" x 136" x 4"
Collection Syd Goldfarb,
Malibu, California

Waterlilies #26, 1990

acid wasteline tubing, roses, water,
preservatives, hardware
23" x 98" x 8"
Courtesy Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Chicago

Schramm Cart, 1988

cart, stainless steel mesh, game pieces,
dice
60" x 15" x 22"
Courtesy Carl Solway Gallery,
Cincinnati, Ohio

Untitled, 1991

acid wasteline tubing, lemons, water,
hardware
8" x 132" x 2.5"
Courtesy Carl Solway Gallery,
Cincinnati, Ohio

Untitled #89-50, 1989

airplane wheel and tire, steel cable
63" x 41" x 20"
Courtesy Carl Solway Gallery,
Cincinnati, Ohio

Building Steam #432, 1982-85

army helmet, brush, filament, water
15" x 15" x 14"
Courtesy Dorothy Goldeen Gallery,
Santa Monica, California

Untitled #90-07, 1990

fly swatters, hardware
44.5" x 44.5" x 6.5"
Courtesy Dorothy Goldeen Gallery,
Santa Monica, California

Untitled #90-37, 1990

wood, wooden sticks, sand, hourglass
23" x 11.5" x 11.5"
Courtesy Carl Solway Gallery,
Cincinnati, Ohio

Gathering Dust, 1978-1988

mixed media
variable dimensions
Courtesy Carl Solway Gallery,
Cincinnati, Ohio

Gathering Dust, 1987

mixed media
variable dimensions
Courtesy Dorothy Goldeen Gallery,
Santa Monica, California

Untitled, 1991

books, leather strap
24" x 23.25" x 17.5"
Courtesy Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Chicago

Untitled, 1991

candles, wooden wheelbarrow
27" x 76.75" x 30"
Courtesy Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Chicago

Untitled #91-03, 1991

sled, string
48" x 13.5" x 19.75"
Courtesy Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Chicago

Untitled #90-35, 1990

plaster, violin case, violin bow, saw,
hardware
35" x 10" x 12"
Courtesy Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Chicago

Untitled #89-37, 1989

saw, steel wool
60" x 12" x 3"
Courtesy Carl Solway Gallery, Cincinnati,
Ohio

Untitled, 1991

candles, wooden yoke
30.5" x 53.5" x 11.25"
Courtesy Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Chicago

Untitled, 1991

candles, two stainless steel cannisters,
canvas straps
28" x 13.5" x 8.25"
Collection Anne and William J. Hokin,
Chicago

Untitled, 1990

nylon rope, copper tubing
53" diameter
Courtesy Carl Solway Gallery,
Cincinnati, Ohio

Acknowledgments

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Finally, we extend our thanks to Rosetta Brooks for her excellent essay on Lipski's work.

Cover: *Untitled #89-50*, 1989, 63" x 41" x 20",
Courtesy Carl Solway Gallery, Cincinnati, Ohio