

Describing Space: The Graceful Art of Arthur Carter

by Carey Lovelace

At the heart of each of Arthur Carter's open-form, discreetly beguiling sculptures lies a conundrum. How can substantial metal appear so weightless? How can two linear, closed forms, against logic, intersect? Just as a Möbius strip doubles back on itself to create a trick of infinity, Carter's works, with the clarity of euclidean formulae, subtly probe contradictions amid certainties.

A dualistic tension courses throughout. In *Overlapping Arcs at 90 Degrees* (2002), two semicircles surge gracefully from either side of a central axis, a play of displacement. In *Inverted Arcs at 90 Degrees with Parallel Chords* (2005), ribbons of darkened bronze loop in S-curves around a double-vertical pole, a kind of sine wave in frozen perpetual motion. This is the dynamic equilibrium Piet Mondrian mused about in *Plastic Art and Pure Plastic Art*, "the unification of forms or elements...through continuous opposition."¹ It is a universal law, the folding of opposites into each other, expressed in the Tao Te Ching: "Is not the way of heaven like the stretching of a bow? The high it presses down, the low it lifts up."² It is the transformation of static into the mobile, of balance into flow.

Sleek simplicity shifts focus to the elegance of materials—most often, stainless steel or bronze. "In each of my works," wrote the Constructivist artist Aleksandr Rodchenko, "I do a new experiment, with a different valence from the one that came before."³ The art of elemental shapes in Carter's subtle visual riddling is associated with revolutionary movements such as Suprematism, Constructivism, Neoplasticism, the Bauhaus. The dawn of the early twentieth century was infused with ideas of progress. The avant-garde saw itself as breaking from the

spiritually unhealthy tropes of the past. Artists such as Vladimir Tatlin and Kazimir Malevich lifted ideas from the world of science and technology. It is said Malevich got his ideas for Suprematist art--which consists of circles, squares, triangles--from early aerial photographs. Tatlin, whose projected, utopian twin-spiral tower *Monument to the Third International* (1919–20) was intended to equal in symbolic magnitude the Eiffel Tower, came from a family of engineers, as did Constructivists Naum Gabo and his brother Anton Pevsner.

There was a forward-looking spirit to the artists who created these movements, a linking of art's future to industry. A similar optimism, a connection to elemental materials, engineering, even to manufacturing, can be sensed deep in the “subconscious” of sculptures by Carter, who comes from a broad world extending far beyond art.⁴ A passion for mathematics is evident everywhere. Titles of early works referenced physics and trigonometry—*Pulsar, Parallax, Tektonics, Quasar, Euclidian*.

Constructivists combined intuitive choice with ordering strategies. Similarly, Carter draws from mathematics, notably the Fibonacci series, in which, starting with the “seeds” of 0 and 1, each number is the sum of the preceding two (1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8,...). It is the ratio shaping natural phenomena such as the spiral of shells, the shape of waves, or the branching of trees; it has been used by architects to determine harmonious proportions for lived spaces. In *An Arc Connected by Two Acute Angles* (2002), for example, Carter uses it to determine the relationships in size of adjoining triangles as well as their points of intersection. The Fibonacci sequence is not the only mathematical principle employed. For example, the respective area of three bronze squares in the 8-foot-high *Mathematika* (1998), their inside edges describing a triangular void, is based on the Pythagorean theorem ($c^2=a^2 + b^2$).

Pythagoras, the founder of Western mathematics, held that numbers were the ultimate reality. Among other innovations, he determined Western musical scales. The physics of music, the harmony of relationships that it is based on, also may be an unconscious influence. Carter as a young man trained as a classical pianist. Indeed, one body of calligraphic linear ideographs that Carter has welded in recent years brings to mind musical clefs, notes, and other symbols.

Born in 1931, Carter came to sculpture without art training in the early 1990s, leaping full blown into an intellectually sophisticated style. To the outside world, he is perhaps best known as the founder-publisher of the *New York Observer*. In fact, he has had several incarnations, earning a BA in French literature from Brown University, an MBA from Dartmouth. His mathematical acumen and ability to conceptualize organizational relationships played a role in his success in four careers spanning five decades. In 1981 an interest in public affairs beyond business motivated him to found the *Litchfield County Times* near his farm in Roxbury, Connecticut. Five years later came the *New York Observer*. The turn to sculpture had its roots, strangely enough, in publishing. Unschooled in graphic design, he conceived the look of both papers from scratch. “I knew what I wanted,” he shrugs.

Active in daily layout decisions, he was inspired to begin sketching, manifesting an impressively practiced hand. It began occurring to him that he could turn the geometries and hard-edged configurations he was creating into three dimensions, using metal, a material he had familiarity with, as he had trained as a welder while in the Coast Guard’s Officers Training School during the Korean War. He began teaching metallurgy to workers on his 1,500-acre farm (which was once one of the Northeast’s largest dairy operations); eventually, they began assisting in fabricating sculptures. Soon, he converted a 3,000-square-foot barn into a foundry

and fabrication workshop, today filled with forklifts and sheet metal, lumber and even cranes, its clearance allowing him to build works up to 40 feet in height.

His earliest efforts were realized in wood. The 15-inch-high polyhedra *Octacube* (1996), seen here cast in silver and copper, was in that medium initially. Soon, he began a series of freestanding metal configurations. In the 8-foot-high *Psyche* (1997), quadrilaterals seemingly floating in space helter-skelter assume a quasi-humanoid posture; the interlocking forms also recall the soul's intersecting drives and impulses. Reminiscent of David Smith, a hero along with Mondrian and the Constructivists, large-scale works are sited among the windblown lawns, fields, meadows, framed against deciduous forests—*Psyche*, *Mathematika*, or the intersecting elliptical planar circles of *Suffusion* (1999).⁵

Also on the property is a stunningly handsome copper-roofed studio designed by Carter himself, with large windows looking meditatively onto a forest. There, preparatory work is done—notably sketches in pencil, felt-tip pen, and occasionally charcoal on fine-woven paper. (Many are included in this exhibit). These have the air of finished works, exercising the muted color sense seen in drawings by Malevich and El Lissitzky. Like Rodchenko's, Carter's primary tools are the straight-edge and the compass; the sparsest studies artfully manifest the same dynamic dualistic tensions present in his sculpture. Color elements themselves are used sparingly, almost sculpturally. In one study, for example, a red crescent-moon form curves up against two overlapping chair-shaped quasi-octagons, creating the impression of multiple planes colliding in an intangible universe.

Next he creates copper-wire-and-clay maquettes a few inches high. Those deemed successful are scaled up to several feet. Pieces can take several months to complete. Finished works are hand-polished, sanded, and burnished, achieving a variety of surface finishes—

irregular and coarse, or creamily matte, or soft and pewterlike. Some retain their metallic glimmer, others are painted. Aside from visible weld marks and traces of the hand in the textured polish, little residue remains of creation's labor; just the tiniest uncertainty gives the sense of the author behind.

As early as the late 1990s, Carter began executing ambitious public commissions. In *The Couple* (1999), two intersecting rings—one bronze, one steel—stand 30 feet high at 90 Park Avenue in Manhattan. At the United Nations Plaza, *Morph* (1998), comprising steel swooning out to the side into an S-curve, resembles a charmed snake. Not far away, the flat bronze glistening blades of *Largo* (1997) jut upward 6 feet, polished with broad up-and-down surface strokes. Carter's *University* (2003) stands adjacent to New York University's Bobst Library. And in Washington, D.C., the bronze *Suffusion* (1999), three intersecting spheres each 12 feet in diameter, with blue patina, inhabits a plaza at George Washington University. The economy of means in Carter's creations helps them to live easily in their surroundings.

In 2000 he began to produce smaller, calligraphic compositions of fluid linearity and graphic simplicity, standing some 20 to 40 inches high on a flat base. Pieces such as *An Arc Connected by Two Acute Angles* (2002) or *Two Parallel Inverted Arcs with Parallel Chords* (2003) bring to mind ideograms, musical clefs, mathematical symbols. The following year, filaments became more complex, circumambulating arcs turning in on themselves with increasing elaboration, like ribbons of energy—as with *Intersecting Ellipses with Parallel Chords* (2003) or the various versions of bronze 38-inch-tall *Elliptical Loops* (2005).

More recently, the artist has been experimenting with planar fields, a deviation from his more linear-oriented works. First, in 2008, came untitled sculptures around 20 inches tall, freestanding but emphasizing mass rather than line. In one, a shape resembling a thick musical

note peers over a flat, crested blade, its exposed planes incised with textured polish. A series of wall reliefs has offered him further opportunity to explore surface area. In *Aluminum Elements Spaced According to Fibonacci* (2008), planes of attached quadrilaterals project upward to varying heights, seeming to reference geometric hard-edged painting as well as sculpture. In a remarkable bronze, an untitled 2008 wall work, soft lines resembling horizontal brushstrokes play against three projecting rectangles. Tricks of light on the burnished face create an almost painterly dimension.

Although his sculptural oeuvre is focused and concise, Arthur Carter has lived his life (as it were) on a broad palette. It's intriguing that his desire from the beginning was to move beyond drawing and the page to *claim space* in such a physical way. Luminous materials play ever so slightly with the logic of space. The works have the air not just of the fine object; they express an alchemical elegance that underscores the haunting simplicity of their algorithm.

Carey Lovelace

New York City, December 2008

¹ Piet Mondrian, *Plastic Art and Pure Plastic Art* (New York: Wittenborn, 1945).

² Lao-Tzu, *Tao Te Ching* (New York: Penguin, 1963), 139.

³ Magdalena Dabrowski et al., *Aleksandr Rodchenko* (New York: Abrams, 1998), 51.

⁴ Yet, despite its economy of means, Carter's oeuvre is at variance with minimalism, a dominant style since the 1960s. It's true that he shares with contemporary sculptors such as Chuck Ginnever or Isaac Witkin an artistic lineage to the welded iron assemblages of Julio González. However, instead of dealing with mass, it always derives from the line or stroke; instead of referencing primal megaliths, Carter's works reside in the realm of Plato and pure ideas.

⁵ Many of Carter's works, particularly large-scale sculptures, have been realized in varying sizes and materials. A version of *Psyche*, for example, is in the lobby of 300 Park Avenue.