

# The Sculpture of Arthur Carter

By Hilton Kramer

Back in the 1950's, when Abstract Expressionist paintings was the *ne plus ultra* of what was thought to be avant-garde, the French novelist André Malraux, who was then creating a stir with a treatise on art called *Voices of Silence*, made a sobering observation. Painting, he declared, was an art we had inherited from the past. Sculpture, on the other hand, was described by Malraux as the art which the modern age had been obliged to reinvent. It was the kind of observation that struck one as having the finality of truth as soon as it was made.

In the early decades of the twentieth century, this project of reinventing sculpture took a variety of forms, yet most of them had one characteristic in common. In works as diverse in spirit and style as those conceived by Tatlin, Rodchenko, Gabo, Picasso, González, Archipenko, Laurens, Duchamp, Calder, Giacometti, and David Smith, there was a pronounced determination to put sculpture on a diet. What this meant in practice was a repudiation of mass in favor of space. What it also meant was something more specific: a repudiation of the heft and grandiosity associated with Rodin and his sculptural progeny.

Rodin's dictum that "Sculpture is quite simply the art of depression and protuberance"—more familiarly recalled as the art of "the lump and the hole"—was rendered obsolete. Thenceforth the articulation of space by means of open-form construction would command priority over the more traditional methods of carving and modeling. New materials, sometimes as slender as wire and string, were put to new sculptural purposes.

So, too, were new tools and techniques, the most important of which was the oxyacetylene torch for the cutting and welding of metals. This had the effect of introducing into the art of sculpture an entirely new syntax.

With its purely abstract, open-form, constructed trceries of polished and sometimes painted metal, the recent work of Arthur Carter clearly belongs to the tradition of this New Sculpture, as it began to be called in the 1950s. To this tradition Carter brings a concentration on the kind of linear composition that was once the cause of immense controversy in the art world. Although much of the New Sculpture was dubbed from the outset to be “drawing in space,” the work itself was more often than not derived from painting, especially Cubist painting and collage, rather than line drawing, and was this more painterly, too, in adopting such traditional pictorial subjects as landscape, still life, and domestic motifs like female figures combing their hair. Yet in its earliest development by the Russian avant-garde, pen-form metal sculpture was strictly abstract, and it is to this convention of pure abstraction that Carter’s sculpture also belongs.

Although now established as one of the fundamental modalities of modernist art, drawing-in-space sculpture met with some fierce resistance, even among modern artists and critics. Henry Moore, for example, made no secret of his total disapproval. Moreover, Moore’s English sidekick, the critic Herbert Read, wrote an entire book—*A Concise History of Modern Sculpture* (1964)—that dismissed open-form construction as a mere “scribble in the air.” Even the great Picasso was not exempted from Read’s sweeping censure. About Picasso’s “Construction in Wire” (1930), Read wrote: “The idea is to define space by wire outlines—a ‘drawing in space’—which is a complete

denial of sculpture's traditional values of solidity and ponderability." And further: "This new sculpture, essentially open in form, dynamic in intention... is not cohesive but cursive."

Still, even in his disparagement of open-form sculpture, Read was correct in identifying its principal features as "cursive" and "dynamic in intention." Cursive, with its suggestion of discrete elements, is a fair description of the syntax that determines form in Carter's recent sculpture, just as "dynamic in intention" accurately accounts for the way space is used as a highly-charged sculptural material in Carter's new linear constructions. For as Naum Gabo wrote in his 1959 Mellon Lectures: "In a constructive sculpture, space is not a part of the universal space surrounding the object; it is a material by itself, a structural part of the object—so much so that it has the faculty of conveying a volume."

In much of Arthur Carter's new work, with its shifting dialogue between the curvilinear and the geometric, the resulting structures often stroke one not so much as drawing in space as calligraphy in space—or even ideograms in space. Their cursive, headlong occupation of a circumambient space has something of a gestural quality of fine calligraphy—a "scribble in the air" aspiring to be monumental. And if at times we are reminded of Brancusi's *The Kiss* whenever I see *The Couple* (1999), his monumental outdoor construction of polished stainless steel and bronze at 90 Park Avenue in Manhattan, that too is part of its resonance and charm.