

Walter Dusenbery

The work of sculptor Walter Dusenbery, in its biomorphic form and sensitive materials, instantly calls to mind the work of some of the great modernist sculptors. His beautifully crafted travertine ring, "Aurora," for instance, shows the unmistakable influence of Constantin Brancusi and his student, Isamu Noguchi, with whom Mr. Dusenbery worked for several years. Any number of his pieces also would sit comfortably with those by Barbara Hepworth or Jean Arp.

But after this perception registers, another dynamic becomes evident - the postmodern idea of appropriation. Mr. Dusenbery displays strong references to elements of classical Greek architecture. A moment later, the earlier impression intrudes again, reasserting itself even more strongly. Now *this* is interesting work!

Like Mr. Noguchi, who also has long been concerned with the dynamics of large-scale sculpture in the context of integration with architecture, Mr. Dusenbery understands the important distinction between the appropriation of style and the assimilation of an aesthetic philosophy. It is this understanding, and his commitment to the further refinement of modernism, that cause his work to be important. He does not take for granted that modernism - whether defined as self-referential abstraction, or simply as the gradual refinement of visual imagery in a non-objective fashion - is a dead issue. Consequently, any Washington gallerygoer interested in directions of contemporary art beyond the postmodern period should pay a visit to "Walter Dusenbery: Classical Forms," an exhibit at the Fendrick Gallery (3059 M St. NW).

In this so-called postmodern age when appropriation for the sake of irony is the norm in visual arts, it is refreshing to see the work of an artist who appropriates not just an historical mode or style, but a philosophy. Mr. Dusenbery's sculpture exposes postmodern appropriation for the hollow, tautological idea it really is. For it is with the reexamination of ideas, and their application to contemporary aesthetic problems, that the arts move forward, becoming refined beyond the conventions of their own period.

Evident in all Mr. Dusenbery's work in this exhibit are all sorts of references to organic forms (hence the term "biomorphic") and abstract conventions which may at first seem at odds with the homage to classical architecture. This artist's sculpture creates a visual dialectic, pitting two concepts against each other. This not only creates formal

tension, giving the work great presence, it ensures that whichever aesthetic approach the viewer brings to the work, the sculpture is not diminished by the lack of consideration of an opposite view. This is the first indication that one is in the presence of something special -



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something which differs markedly from so much contemporary postmodern sculpture.

For instance, Anne and Patrick Poirier have appropriated the surface appearance of classical ruins, in the approved postmodern style, in their well-known sculpture. But these French sculptors have not sought to understand what that architecture was all about. They have employed the "ruins" appearance as an ironic device - a metaphor, if you will - to compel the viewer to consider the fate of his own culture; its potential for self-destruction. The trouble is that once the viewer has processed the visual information, figured out the references and appreciated the irony, there is precious little left in terms of purely aesthetic considerations, such as visual harmony and balance or the beauty of careful craftsmanship. In other words, appreciating the irony of postmodern appropriation is like eating a cream puff: It tastes great, but it doesn't satisfy hunger, and it's probably bad for you anyway.

Mr. Dusenbery's work has no such limitations. What he has set out to do with pieces such as "Pedogna," a graceful, tapering tooth of bronze, polished on one side, craggy on the other, and the lovely "Tre Potenze," which resembles the worn buttress of some ancient castle, is to integrate Brancusian ideas of biomorphic form with those of functional, man-made structures. He has understood that, to the ancient Greeks, architecture was sculpture, and sculpture that was based on transcendent ideas of beauty which were largely based in the appreciation of organic structure. The viewer will see in Mr. Dusenbery's sculptures not only the careful attention to ratios and intervals; not just the graceful elements of columnar entasis; and not just abstraction for the sake of delight in the possibilities of material: he will see a sheer love of natural form.

Looking closely, one will see that these works were influenced as much by the wonderful freeforms produced in sandstone by the action of wind and rain, such as the natural bridges and "chimneys" of the western deserts. Look again, and the eye is very carefully led around the works by the use of sectional divisions - contrasting hues and textures.

This is tremendously thoughtful work. Mr. Dusenbery has evidently thought deeply about what his sculpture must do - how to make it integrate the twin paradigms of cultural/historical and organic/material integrity, and more importantly, how to enable the viewer to apprehend these dimensions in the work. This he has accomplished through the time-honored device of seduction. His sculptures are positively sensuous. Even considered outside of a potentially rather lofty art-historical context, they are lovely to look at, and hard not to touch.