

Projects 1 : Win Knowlton : the Museum of Modern Art, New York, March 13-April 22, 1986

[Bob McDaniel]

Author

Knowlton, Win, 1953-

Date

1986

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The Museum of Modern Art,
New York
March 13–April 22, 1986

projects: win knowlton

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Bird Bottle. 1985.
Cast concrete,
9¼ x 7½ x 2¼" (23.5 x 19 x 5.7 cm).
Collection the artist.

Archive
MOMA
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introduction

This exhibition of work by Win Knowlton inaugurates The Museum of Modern Art's new **projects** series. Designed to present recent work by contemporary artists, it has been based on the Museum's original **projects** exhibitions, which were held from 1971 to 1982.

Members of all the Museum's curatorial departments participate in the selection process, and the final choices of artists will always evolve from the active dialogue and close critical scrutiny of these curators of today's art.

A wide range of individual exhibitions, as well as occasional small group exhibitions, will be organized on a regular basis in order to focus on a variety of current concerns and new developments in the visual arts. For example, this season has witnessed a renewed interest in sculpture. During the past five years, when painting achieved a visibility and a stature that would not have seemed possible during the seventies, sculpture appeared relegated to a secondary position, in spite of the fact that many talented established sculptors continued to do excellent work and many younger sculptors began to develop unique points of view. As a result, new sculpture is one specific area to be explored in this series.

In the face of the extreme complexity and unbounded energy that characterize current art, Knowlton's recent work possesses an intelligence, a humor, and an integrity that is particularly refreshing. We are very pleased to be launching the **projects** series with this exhibition of his work.

Linda Shearer
Curator
Department of Painting
and Sculpture

Iron Boots. 1984.
Cast iron, two pieces,
a. 6 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 17 x 9 $\frac{1}{2}$ " (16.2 x 43.2 x 24.2 cm),
b. 6 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 16 x 9" (15.6 x 40.6 x 22.8 cm).
Collection the artist.

win knowlton: sculptures

Since the mid-seventies, figuration has played a more important role in the work of many artists. After a reductive period in which purity of surface and systematic, modular repetition of incident predominated, artists now show new interest in expressive form and the manipulation of medium. In Europe, national cultural histories guide such artists as Anselm Kiefer, Sandro Chia, and Jörg Immendorff; in the United States, democratic images from popular culture provide material for the pictorial compositions of Eric Fischl and David Salle. The most publicly recognized of this new art today has strong literary content.

Less publicly acknowledged than this group of pictorial storytellers is another, growing group of figurative artists who place an even greater emphasis on medium and manipulation of material to achieve an expressive image. These artists, Win Knowlton among them, show signs of recognizing real needs in contemporary art, and their best work is formally expressive and appealing.

Although the imagery of this group is superficially similar to that of the pictorial storytellers mentioned above, it tends more toward expressive distortion. In Europe we see, filtered through twentieth-century art history, familiar still lifes (in the work of Markus Lupertz, for example), landscapes (Howard Hodgkin), and sculptural images (Georg Baselitz). There is less finish to the surfaces of this work than in the earlier work to which it may be seen to refer. The importance of medium increases as the work asserts itself more as an independent object and its significance as an imitation of external reality diminishes.

The American faction of these artists draws from visual sources that had their origins in high art, but which have since been appropriated by producers of low-culture art forms: comic books, animated cartoons, fifties science-fiction films, etc. In the work of such artists as Bill Jensen and Elizabeth Murray it is possible to see bits and

pieces of imagery that resemble low-art versions of classic Surrealist biomorphism. The mutations, distortions, and displacements that these artists perform on such low-culture imagery are very much in keeping with Surrealist practice and invest these well-known forms with an expressiveness very near that of their Surrealist prototypes. These forms have not carried such emotional resonance since their arrival on the scene in the twenties.

In the best work of these artists image-reading does not overpower appreciation of medium. Increasingly, they call greater attention to the physical composition of their work. This concentration on materials explains why the edges of these artists' paintings frequently "want" to be seen without an encumbering frame. The paint, its behavior during application, and the canvas that so clearly lies under that paint are of highest importance to the artist. The supports in Elizabeth Murray's new paintings are in fact becoming more and more three-dimensional, furthering the roughly painted, illusionistic shading of the images. Howard Hodgkin's paintings spread out around the face and edges of the frame: soft, velvety painted imagery sinks down into the "liquid" surface and seems to soak through to the edges of the frame.

This stretching-out of the picture surface into a third dimension physically reflects a new faith in the integrity of the art object in and of itself, and not just as a reference to something else. Three-dimensional sculpture is, logically, particularly important at this time.

Whether painting, drawing, or making sculpture, Win Knowlton shows us solid forms occupying space, flat pictorial or three-dimensional. He has exhibited individual pieces over the past six years in group exhibitions in New York, where he has lived most of his life. This is the first opportunity to view a number of his pieces in a public exhibition.



We detect a hint of the comic in some of Win Knowlton's works, a reminder of their probable "source" in American low-culture imagery. The objects in the shoe series resemble animated cartoon figures from the thirties and forties, and the biomorphism of several of his forms, for example *Bird and Man*, is reminiscent of alien landscape elements from overwrought science-fiction films of the fifties. This connection to the trivial is sufficiently held in check by the "seriousness" of the artist's materials and the emotional resonance of his forms.

The best of Knowlton's work, such as *Iron Boots*, a cast-iron floor sculpture, elicits a complicated response. We first "see" this work as a pair of beautiful found objects, perhaps discarded machine parts. This interpretation yields when we realize that there is a uselessness about the odd, bird-head shapes of the objects, that they could not be technological in origin. *Iron Mercury* presents us with a nine-foot-high iron shaft rising assertively from a globular base. There is a compelling majesty about this turgid, biomorphic form. Again, as in *Iron Boots*, we tend to slip from relating to this as something familiar (a thermometer or phallus, perhaps) to appreciating the formal beauty of the work. In these works we are given forms that we recognize as the shapes of "something," objects with whose phylum or class we may have had some experience in the past. Then the process of exploratory musing, of unguided analysis, begins. The suspension of the intellect that these mysterious objects produces provides the situation necessary for their success. That success is an aesthetic one, involving epiphanal moments of recognition.

It is impossible to know to what degree the shapes of Knowlton's sculptures are preconceived. We do know of the artist's respect for the late work of Philip Guston, in which everyday images like shoes and bread also appear. We know that Knowlton is a birdwatcher, which may speak to the frequent appearance of bird imagery in his work, and that he is interested in geology. The actual look of each image—its size and shape, the formal relationships within it—suggests form finally dictated by the physical capacities and limitations of the body of the artist creating it in concert with the capacities and limitations of the medium. Knowlton's pieces seem simply to "arrive" as the natural product of a dialogue between the artist and his materials.

Win Knowlton produces beautifully crafted, intuited forms that invite our experience of them as complete art objects, objects of both this world and another. The other world is the aesthetic that unifies the maker and the viewer through the intuited art object.

Bob McDaniel
Curatorial Assistant
Department of Drawings

biography

Born Boston, Massachusetts,
September 28, 1953

education

Parsons School of Design,
New York. BFA, 1978

Winchester College of Art,
Winchester, England. 1977

Instituto Allende,
San Miguel de Allende, Mexico. 1974

exhibitions

1985

Drawing Center, New York
Selections 29
Group Show

Manhattan Art, New York
Sculpture & Drawing
Group Show

1983-84

Jack Tilton Gallery, New York
A More Store
Group Show

1982

Artists Space, New York
Selections
Group Show

1981

The Clocktower, New York
Two-Person Show

1980

Organization for Independent Artists,
New York
On Ward's Island
Group Show

The Museum of Modern Art

PROJECTS: WIN KNOWLTON

March 13 - April 22, 1986

CHECKLIST

Bird and Man. (1984)

Cast red brass (two pieces)

2 3/4 x 4 x 19 1/4" (7 x 10.1 x 48.9 cm)

3 1/2 x 5 3/4 x 21" (8.9 x 14.6 x 53.3 cm)

Collection of the artist

Iron Boots. (1984)

Cast iron (two pieces)

6 3/8 x 17 x 9 1/2" (16.2 x 43.1 x 24.1 cm)

6 1/8 x 16 x 9" (15.6 x 40.7 x 22.8 cm)

Collection of the artist

Plowman. 1984

Charcoal and ink on paper

22 1/2 x 29 7/8" (56.5 x 75.9 cm)

Collection of the artist

Bird Bottle. (1985)

Cast concrete

9½ x 7½ x 2¼" (23.5 x 19.0 x 5.7 cm)

Collection of the artist

Black and White. 1985

Pastel on paper

20 1/8 x 30" (56.2 x 76.2 cm)

Collection of the artist

Drink. 1985

Pastel and ink on paper

22½ x 29 7/8" (56.5 x 75.8 cm)

Collection of the artist

Standing Ellipse. (1985)

Cast concrete

46 3/8 x 20¼ x 12 1/8" (117.7 x 51.4 x 13.7 cm)

Collection of the artist

Untitled. (1985)

Oil on plywood

5 x 10¼" (12.7 x 26.0 cm)

Collection of the artist

Untitled. (1985)

Oil on plywood

6 1/8 x 6 3/4" (15.5 x 17.1 cm)

Collection Robert Guillot

Untitled (Triptych). 1985

Pastel on paper

66 3/4 x 30" (169.5 x 76.2 cm)

Collection of the artist

Concrete Loaf. (1986)

Cast concrete

6½ x 10½ x 6" (16.5 x 26.6 x 15.2 cm)

Collection of the artist

Iron Bread. (1986)

Cast iron

5 7/8 x 9 3/4 x 4½" (14.9 x 24.7 x 10.7 cm)

Collection of the artist

Iron Mercury. (1986)

Cast iron

108 x 9 x 9" (274.3 x 22.9 x 22.9 cm)

Collection of the artist

Iron Urn. (1986)

Cast iron

15 7/8 x 24 5/8 x 5½" (40.5 x 62.5 x 13.3 cm)

Collection of the artist

Untitled. (1986)

Cast concrete

17 7/8 x 33 x 16 7/8" (45.4 x 83.8 x 42.8 cm)

Collection of the artist

Vaudeville. 1986

Mixed mediums

22 x 29 7/8" (55.9 x 75.8 cm)

Collection of the artist