



MUSÉE D'ART CONTEMPORAIN DE MONTRÉAL



HENRY SAXE

ŒUVRES DE 1960 À 1993

From May 20 to September 25, 1994

LINES AND MATERIAL

I don't want to make anything that I can't handle myself. The part that remains in sculpture for me is what I can handle myself, physically within the range I want to work in. My independence is there, my freedom is there.* HENRY SAXE

"Handle" is a key word in the work of Canadian sculptor Henry Saxe. His concerns are expressed through the medium of a material — whether this be wood, aluminum or steel, or even a simple pencil that leaves its mark on paper. He likes to handle his raw materials himself; he must have a physical sense of the weight of the metal in his undertakings, in order to overcome its apparent inertia and impart movement to it. Throughout his work, we feel the importance of the creative process, which involves organizing various elements so as to establish interesting spatial relations.

Henry Saxe completed his final year of training at Montréal's *École des beaux-arts* in 1961 while also taking printmaking with Albert Dumouchel. His pictorial work followed the route of abstraction. The artist expressed himself in dynamic drawings with great gestural expressiveness, and in paintings which, with their coloured planes embedded into one another, reveal the influence of American abstract expressionism.

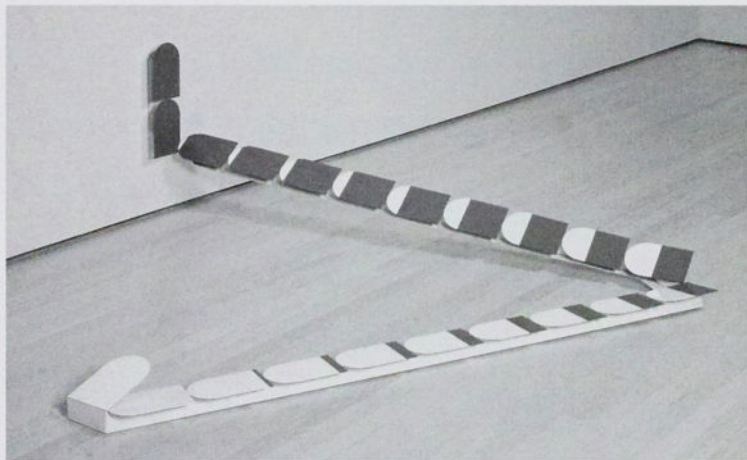


FIG. 1 THISAWAY, 1966
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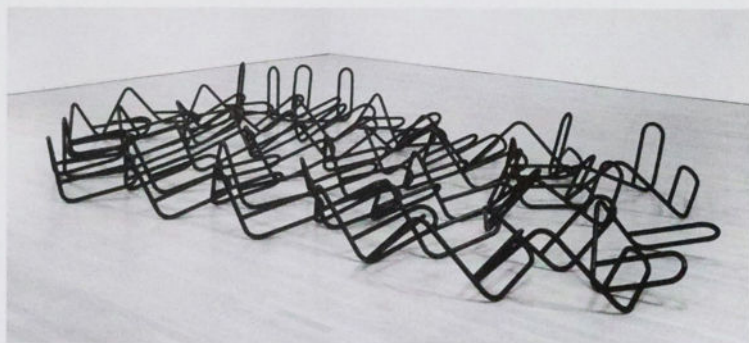


FIG. 2 SEAPLEX, 1970
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Seeking to convey his graphic explorations in a third dimension, Saxe made a few collages, and then some cutout panels in which he used pure colours. In 1964, he produced his first sculpture, *Sojax*, a piece in painted wood that heralded his imminent abandonment of painting. It is noteworthy that, unlike the traditional sculptor who carves or casts his works and places them on a pedestal, Saxe prefers to enter the spectator's space by placing his pieces right on the floor and creating them using the assemblage technique.

To begin with, Saxe developed a series of works that examine the notion of module and the different ways it can be joined. Repetition of the module is important in these pieces, since it is through an overall view that a volume takes shape. One of his first sculptures, *Thisaway* (Fig. 1) is made up of identical small, stationary, coloured planes that are juxtaposed. The work nevertheless carries on a dialogue between painting and sculpture, in that it touches the wall at the same time as it rests on the floor. Saxe next experimented with more flexible and complex junction points with a view to increasing possible variations. These modules, some of them three-dimensional, are equipped with simple or caterpillar-type hinges, allowing the artist to modify the way the sculptures fill the space, by bending or rotating them, according to his fancy.

In 1970, Saxe elaborated another type of module as a result of his acquisition of a new piece of equipment, a pipe-bender, enabling him to bend metal tubes. Although this may seem a mere detail, it reveals the artist's deep respect and consideration for the material, to the point that spatial and technical limits can curb his production. In a typical work from this period, *Seaplex* (Fig. 2), Saxe circumvents his original material, a steel rod, by giving it the form of a link in a chain. The resulting intertwining gives the impression, not of a rigid, strict grid, but of a flexible wire mesh enlivened by an undulating, paradoxically fluid, movement.

Saxe took a major new turn in the early seventies, when he began to investigate more open structures. Abandoning the use of the module, works made up of familiar materials — bits of rope, pipes, and manufactured items like ladders or tripods — gradually emerged from his handling. Let us take a look, for example, at *Wedge* (Fig. 3) a grouping whose central concept is the triangle, the shared geometric figure that brings together the ladder, the tripod, the suspended triangle and the three-legged structure, which seem to form four heterogeneous parts. Here the artist shows a new spatial sensitivity: the work is intended as a kind of installation since it is presented, not as a series of volumes, but as a network of lines woven in space. The objects are chosen for their formal qualities and shed any utilitarian reference, as we can readily see by noting the precarious balance of the ladder with one leg changed, so that it has only three points of support! Preferably, our eye should focus on the materials' contrasting physical and formal qualities — the organic character of the wood in comparison with the mineral nature of the steel, or the rigid aspect of the metal as opposed to the flexibility of the rope.

In 1973, Henry Saxe moved to Tamworth, near Kingston, Ontario, where his more spacious, newly built studio would expand his ability to experiment. His sculptures are the product of a lengthy dialogue with the materials he has at hand. Tired of using sculptural models, he prefers direct contact with the steel beams, plates or bars he employs. He is sensitive to their different tex-



FIG. 3 WEDGE, 1971-1972
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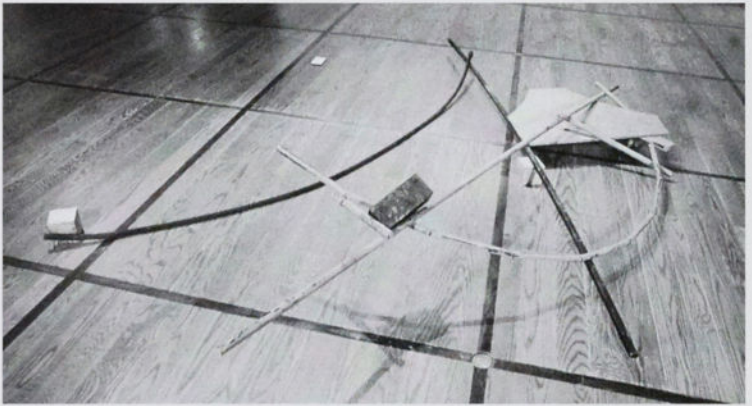


FIG. 4 OVER AND UNDER, 1974
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tures, their respective masses, and is excited by the visual richness of the different spatial relations which he can establish between these objects.

Now let us look at *Over and Under* (Fig. 4), a piece from 1974. This work can actually be described as a drawing that occupies a three-dimensional space; it clearly illustrates the assemblage process that consists of weaving the different elements together. Except for the rod segmented into 10 parts held together by welds, to prevent it from breaking apart if it is moved, the whole rests on a skilful balance of weights. By circulating around the piece, viewers are invited to imagine the artist's handling of the materials by working backwards; they must feel the forces in play, and realize the stability of the piece balanced by the mass of the elements, their degrees of flexibility, their tensions, etc.

Starting in 1976, Saxe's work followed a different direction, leading him to sculptures displaying a much more unified, concentrated structure. We notice a constructivist character in the presence of overlapping planes. These works affirm horizontality, above all, and they generally relate to the space through their contact with the floor. A typical work might be *Eight Stations* (Fig. 5), which reveals an apparently disparate assemblage, like a random assortment. And yet Saxe glorifies the finished work by drawing the viewer's eye to the traces of his handling: welding, bolting or simple support. "I'm trying to keep a form of sculpture that is very simple in its structure," says the artist. "I'm not into structure as complexities but just simple weight distributed in a compression state, one thing over another. Everything secured, procedurally made as if it was fabricated by a guy who was just a welder."* During this same time, Saxe expressed his interest in movement through draw-

ing, in pieces that nonetheless remain autonomous in the sense that they are not preparatory work for sculptures.

In 1987, Saxe returned to aluminum, a light, malleable material that reflects light. He experimented with new processes to create much airier structures that bring out the mobility of the elements in relation to one another. The *Balls* series, in contrast to the compact appearance of the previous pieces, expresses rhythm and lightness. These works seem to draw their own form as they whirl in space.

With his emphasis on maintaining the integrity of his materials, at the same time as he calls into question sculptural practice at its most fundamental level (its connection with the ground, its status as an object, its formal qualities, the process of assemblage), how should we describe Henry Saxe — as a grammarian or a poet? By gazing into each work, the viewer can see the clever internal balance of the elements arranged with a rigour that may, at first glance, seem grammatical. It is worth taking time to look, however, as all these hollows, contours and lines of tension begin to reveal a spellbinding poetry. ■ MARIE-FRANCE BÉRARD

* Exhibition catalogue, *Ron Martin. Henry Saxe*, XXXVIII Biennale di Venezia, February 16 - March 26, 1978.

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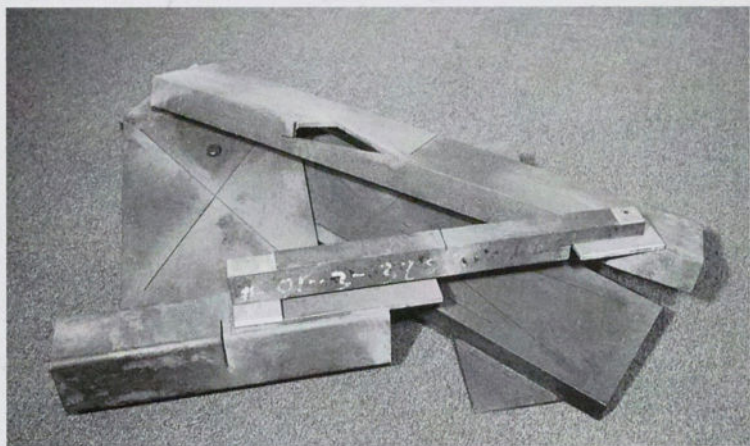


FIG. 5 EIGHT STATIONS, 1983
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