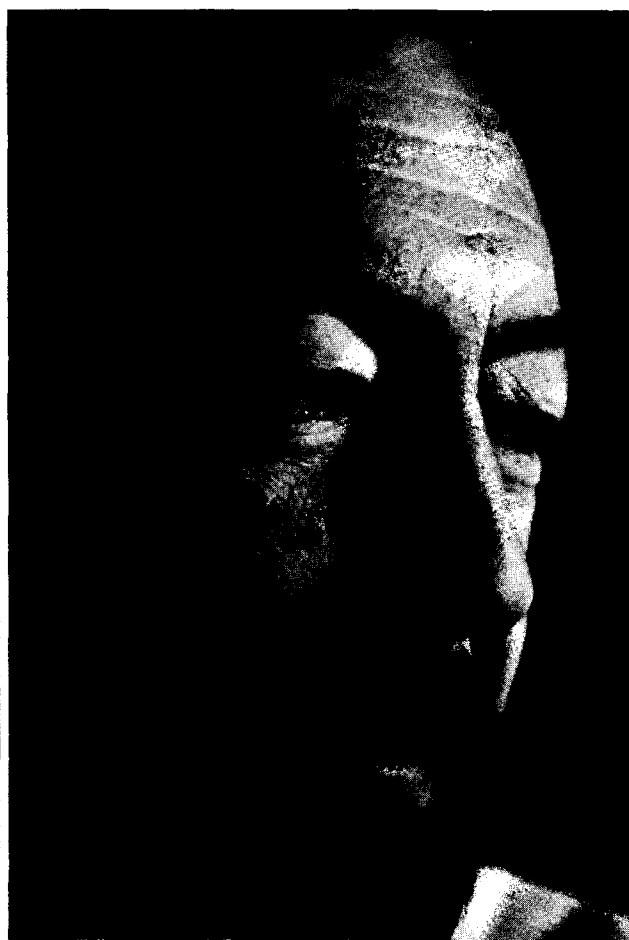


Leonard Baskin: "Animate with Hope"



Portrait of Leonard Baskin by Margaretta Mitchell

IN THE PAST 15 YEARS Leonard Baskin—sculptor and graphic artist par excellence—has reached his artistic maturity. Standing outside modern “schools” of art, possessing an extraordinary knowledge of and respect for traditional artistic forms, Baskin is one of the few contemporary artists whose sensibilities have not been brutalized by the twentieth century.

There is something of the scholar in the artist. Not only does his work show a multiplicity of meanings in his choice of imagery, but Baskin himself writes (and speaks) an elegant baroque prose, as dense and lively as his work itself.

Few artists, particularly in these uncongenial times, develop a philosophy of art. Of those who do, few can or do express their world view in words as well as in works. Baskin, however, from his home, surrounded by sculptures, a huge library of illustrated books and his personal art collection, speaks like a sage. In this environment, his quiet voice has intense authority:

“When I saw the Whitney’s annual exhibition of contemporary sculpture by presumably living artists, I was horrified, horrified because for the first time I was confronted by a species of art which I could not understand from an ideological



The Mendicant

point of view. I could grasp and cope with the philosophical problems of abstract expressionism, however limited I felt it to be. Much of the new art is, of course, irrational and offers no particular problems of understanding . . . But the new elemental purely super-objective environmental sculpture has one utterly baffled. In truth it is nothing more or less than a strike at art itself, for it denies art. It is not merely a concern with formal problems, organization of shapes in space; it seeks to minimize what sculpture is and could be to the barest essentials of sheer form. And beyond that, the sculptors do not bother to fabricate these works of art themselves. Ideally, from their point of view, these works of art perhaps operate best when they are manufactured by a mechanic. The artist (I am using the word throughout for I have no ready or easy substitute) prepares his specifications. What emerges is, for example, a box, a cube, made by a steel or tin smith, standing in the middle of a room, displacing space. But what in God’s name is it meant to be—what is it meant to do?

“I can understand an attempt to probe at the heart of a form, to try to derive the essence of a form—I can understand that by stretching my imaginative equipment. Presumably the essence of anything is the heart of anything. At the very heart

An Interview by Margaretta Mitchell



Tobias and the Angel

stands the utmost reality. Here we are presented with, as I say, the minimum of a form created for its own sake. About nothing—it is the heart of nothing. Whether the object is solid or void, it represents nothing, it communicates nothing; it exists in space. It has no presence as far as I can see, and presence is the one mysterious quality which the critics like to attribute to works of this kind. It is, in other words, a vast Emperor's Clothing. Nothing I know of in the history of art has come so close to a fulfillment of that ancient fable: 'The Emperor is naked!' cried the little child.

"What should it be? I'll give you a pompous answer. Art should attempt to express what is in every other way inexpressible. I'm not sure what it should be—but I'm awfully sure what it should *not* be. The architectural basis of all things

begins with Cezanne—he is the ultimate culprit. From him flows cubism and from cubism synthetic cubism and all of its other manifestations—futurism, abstract expressionism, pop art—all losing touch with reality. Op art, of course, doesn't participate—it's an ideational activity which rationally organizes in order to fool the eye, a great plaything. It is nothing more than itself.

"It's all a part of the entertainment/fashion industry. There have to be new faces, a new line of goods. See how quickly every new fad in art finds instant expression in clothes? Works better in clothing, too. And see how incredibly fast these modes succeed one another? Oh hell, I've been saying this for years and no one else but the Philistines seem to agree, and to hell with them! The Emperor is indeed naked and the charla-



Eagle

tans in the art world—the tailors of new artifacts—have been leading the sophisticated world, the world that is terrified of disapproving, the world which is bowed under ancestral guilt, the world which is suffering what I call the Van Gogh syndrome: ‘It may turn out to be important. It may turn out to be great. How do we know? Look what we did to Van Gogh! We must never reject anything an artist makes for fear of his future greatness!’

“The worse piece at the Whitney, if one can use so reactionary a notion as judgment, was a piece with no title, happily, which consisted of a board painted red leaning against the wall. Nothing more, nothing less. To my utter distress, someone bought this work. I am at a hopeless loss to know, a) what impelled anyone to buy it? and b) why did the artist make it or (more accurately) cause it to be made? One could, of course, turn to explanations of faddism, of chic, of being in the know—people evidently buy things for that reason—but that still leaves the mystery of its creation unanswered. Obviously I have nothing but the fiercest contempt for this nonsense. The show very nearly sickened me and I had to leave the museum in a very high state of dudgeon indeed.

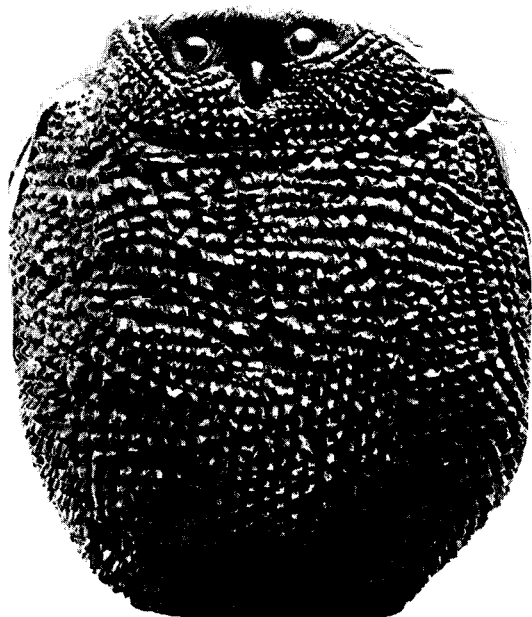
“Do I feel a necessity to carry on the great tradition of art, to relate it to this century? I think it is death not to. But I think

that you cannot do it simply by mimicking the older artists. I think of tradition as a great tree trunk. Each period puts out branches which are new, which derive from, receive help from the main trunk. One of course uses all the devices available to our times, but bent to one’s own purpose, assimilated and expressive of one’s distinct and unique sensibility. But the reasons for making art have not changed. People fundamentally have not changed: that seems to me the biggest point of all. It is generally thought that we vastly differ from the men who preceded us. So there’s an avant garde. But how can you have an avant garde when it is completely and totally accepted? Avant garde one week and Harper’s Bazaar the next. . . . In truth we are overwhelmingly kin to our forebears.

“One of the great problems is that the younger persons are great mimics. And in many of the art schools the young student is not going to submit himself to the arduous training which teaches him to draw, the one really basic thing he has to know. You remember what Matisse said in that famous letter to a young artist: ‘Learn everything there is to learn, then do what you like.’ Follow Matisse’s dictum and have a choice. In the schools you find imitations of Warhol, Jim Dine, Robert Indiana, the whole works, and they are very easy to imitate. The less training the better when it comes to pop, for it’s sham



Poet Laureate



Owl

and banality. What happens when the kids wake up and want to do something else? They will be slaves to their lack of craft. What a terrible position to be in!

"I've said all this before. I suppose that my most powerful epigram is to ask why we should settle for an art that does not bleed when we prick it. Why settle for the puny and meaningless? People have not changed in spite of the irrelevancies of their atomic weapons and other Great Toys. But if you want to understand the motivation for a great deal of art in our time you have to understand, in a highly difficult and technical way, the coming to the absurd and the anxious. The absurd: our great new key word. The celebration of the absurd! Obviously you cannot maintain gentlemanly, bourgeois mannerliness in a time when the bomb may end the world and when profit-making flowers in the gore of Vietnam. The celebration of the absurd, the irrational, the banal, is infantile and impotent. You must coalesce, marshal your artistic forces and smash it, destroy the venal crap that overlays our landscape. Give up the subjective-objective twaddle and pierce to the matrix of reality where man abounds, maimed yet arduous, blasted yet quick of pulse, perilous yet still animate with hope."

The McCarthy Campaign

HISTORY IS FULL OF LAST CHANCES, lost opportunities and unperceived possibilities. The history of political liberalism in America for the past 20 years is composed of very little else. Now, in the winter of 1968, when the country is practically *in extremis*, the keepers of that liberal heritage have found themselves confronted by the severest—and the final—test of their legitimacy. There is no way within the system to save the system except by the presentation of a practicable, *possible* political alternative to the present impossible choices.

For a year or more, liberal activists have been fussing about with one project or another, searching for a pool of political energy and a way to exploit it. There were local “moderate” peace candidates, Vietnam Summer, the National Conference for New Politics, a King-Spock ticket, a Hatfield boom and a Kennedy Restoration. Not all were real, and those that were led to nothing or else spun off their radical components into discrete, tangential orbits. Finally, after all that trying, the very core of the liberal tradition has brought forth its candidate for the last, best hope of America.

He is, of course, Eugene J. McCarthy, and now it appears that he is no hope after all. McCarthy is a sympathetic, intelligent man, sincerely rational and profoundly cynical. If politics were nothing more than a show of sensibility, McCarthy would be counted a success; there is a touch of the (minor) poet that conceals the corruption and compromise of his role. But of the uses of power he knows little, and cares less. His campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination has had its occasional moments of exuberance, but mostly it has been flat, tasteless and strangely out of context with the crisis of its time.

“I don’t know whether it will be political suicide,” McCarthy joked at his press conference on the day when, at the end of November, he announced his candidacy. “It will probably be more like an execution.” All along, the message of his campaign has been its hopelessness, and McCarthy seems to derive a certain reassurance from his lack of effect. “It’s nonsense to set my mind on the presidency,” he said some weeks later in his Senate office, as he sunk into a dark, fragrant leather chair. “The challenge on the issue—that’s the important thing.” In the windmill-tilting racket, the tilt is all; no one wants—or expects—the vanes to stop. “I’m testing the system,” McCarthy concluded softly, and then nodded his head to acknowledge that he had no doubt that the system would be found wanting.

What lays beyond the rhetoric of challenge in McCarthy’s mind is still obscure. In the campaign legend, the germ of the idea was planted by his daughter, Mary, who from the margins of Radcliffe radicalism chided her father for not making good on his liberal ideals. Father had indeed been cautious. In private he worried about the war, but in public he

said little, and in Congress he lined up with the Democratic leadership more often than not. He had voted for the Tonkin Resolution, extension of the draft and the various war appropriations. Suddenly he grew uneasy. “If you’ve been around for 30 years passing moral judgments on politics and society, you’ve got to take a stand,” he said one morning a few weeks ago. “You can’t go waving your wooden sword forever.”

ONCE MOTIVATED, McCarthy began sniffing out the dank places of liberal politics for possible sources of support. He found encouragement on the (slightly) left wing of ADA, where anti-war sentiment was strong. The half-dozen or so Democratic congressmen who have arranged themselves in noble but futile coalition (“the Sisyphus Club”) were pleased. He could count on most of SANE, the legions of the California Democratic Council and the New York Reform Democratic clubs. He had seen the ads for dissident and concerned Democrats in the usual liberal periodicals, and he assumed that most of them, whoever they were, would welcome a “peace” candidacy, as long as the candidate were over thirty and shaved regularly. Most of the political preparation had been done by the National Liberation Front and the North Vietnamese: they had made anti-war politics possible in America by winning the war in Vietnam. And the liberal space had been stretched by the radical war protest movements, which had been at work all during the time McCarthy had been agonizing over the national honor and keeping his mouth shut in the Capitol.

McCarthy declared his intentions in a press conference in the Senate caucus room (where John Kennedy had done the same thing eight years earlier), then flew to Chicago where the Concerned Democrats were conveniently assembled for endorsement of his candidacy. The affair had been arranged by Allard K. Lowenstein, who at age forty was in the process of casting off his role as the oldest student leader in America in exchange for a more adult profession. Lowenstein has made a career of checkered careers. He was president of the National Student Association shortly before the CIA took over, and remained chief kibbitzer in the NSA old-boys network. In other incarnations, Lowenstein was a dorm counselor and teacher at Stanford (he left amid charges that he was turning students on to political activism), an important organizer of the 1964 Mississippi Summer Project (he turned against SNCC for its radicalism in midsummer), an aspirant for the Reform Democratic designation in a New York congressional primary, an aide to Hubert Humphrey, a publicist for South-West African independence and a vice president of Americans for Democratic Action.

Lowenstein saw his political future in the Kennedy camp, but his entreaties to Bobby to run for the presidency in 1968 had been unavailing. In September, Lowenstein made a deter-

by Andrew Kopkind