

# The Plummet-Measured Face

The Geometries of Ronald Bladen

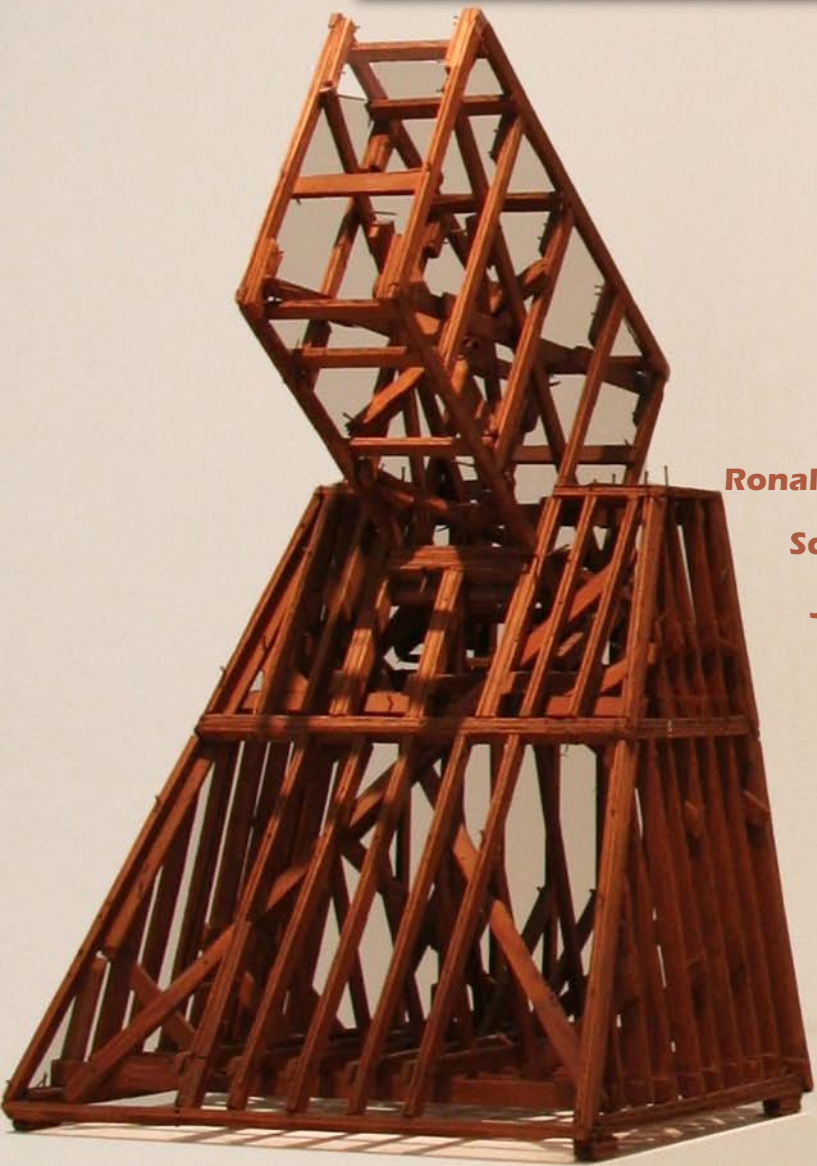
by Mark Daniel Cohen

Ronald Bladen: Sculpture of the 1960s & 1970s

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# HYPERION

On the future of aesthetics



**Ronald Bladen:**

**Sculpture of the 1960s & 1970s**

**Jacobson Howard Gallery, New York**

**October 16 – November 26, 2008**

## THE PLUMMET-

**The  
Geometries of  
Ronald Bladen**

## MEASURED



# FACE

by Mark Daniel Cohen

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The place where  
optimism most  
flourishes is the  
lunatic asylum.  
—Havelock Ellis

**T**o understand that which we see, we see ourselves. To know the nature of what we encounter, we invent its nature—we create the sense and insight into something that seems like us, and instigate ourselves that we have found a truth, that we have discovered in depth. But all we have done is fabricate a fairy tale, conjure ourselves into speciously perceiving that all we witness is secretly, inwardly like us—rife with and driven by an inner self that observes and wills, and responds, and lives. And so thereby, we delude ourselves into knowing that we are not alone.

But we are alone. We observe a mirror and perceive it a window—we are walled by glass. We propound a universe that appears to look back as we look at it, which is a close definition of the uncanny. Despite Freud's rejection of the role of intellectual uncertainty in the affect,

it seems inescapable that the inability to determine what is living and what is inanimate—what is staring back and what is not—is inherent in the flavor of the fear as it would seem to be in the revisiting of the “superannuated” belief in animism to which Freud attributes the condition. And the irrevocably ambiguous is unnerving—the line that is not so much crossed as it is smudged to an edgeless and infinite width. Yet with an irony that bears no touch of ironic sensation, it is we who decorate the uncanny to feel we are among the familiar, and the universe withholds and protects its secret: that it is mysterious, that it is incomprehensible, but there is in no sense in which it is specifically uncanny.

None of it is comparable to us. None of it has a soul acknowledging our own presumed souls as it gazes back. What we see when that is what we see is merely us, reflected. And we impute intent, an attitude, a purpose, a role in the drama through which we live, the drama we invent to understand ourselves as alive, imbue it all with import of significance to our lives—with “meaning,” as if it meant something in our regard—with ramifications for us, as we become the measure of all things. In all we see, we inject implications of hope and despair, possibility and frustration, promise and denial, optimism and dejection—judgment and judgment. But none of it is real. It is merely us: alone and fearful that we are alone, incapable of perceiving that there is nothing like us other than us, and that our uniqueness signifies nothing. Beyond our inner lives, it is just a stockpiling of facts.

The attitude of the animistic belief is the very soul of narcissism—the felt dilation of the potency and range of one’s own thoughts such that they become environmental, the sense of living within the omnipotence of one’s own thinking, roughly as Freud put it. And it is, of course, infantile and primitive.

And it has also been the business of art to a great extent. Much of art has gathered its power and applied its effect through anthropomorphization—through treating that which is inanimate as alive and that which is not human as like the human. Literature in particular distinguishes figurative writing from the purely and dryly descriptive through the application of human attributes to that which does not possess them—it is where much of the imagination in the composition goes. Even the passage above, while arguing the insipidity of the practice, practices it—“the soul of narcissism” “enacts” the opposite of its own assertion; “a stockpiling of facts,” as if the facts were being stored by, well, whom?

If one studies the techniques of literary composition—artful composition—one finds that, almost without exception, the more ambitiously and recklessly the author animates and humanizes, the better his rank, the higher his standing, and none did it so well or inventively as Shakespeare. (“The morn, in russet

mantle clad.”) The mode services well when the subject is insight into the human condition, into the subtleties of the rules of life and the secrets of the human heart, but it seems the argument must run the other way. With everything possible, under heaven and in the imagination, nothing other at its best than a symbol for human concerns, what else is there to speak of? Where else could we go?

Even painting is, through its history, largely little better: trees spilling with mood, often sinewy, mountains that appear magnificent, Expressionistic cities distorted by bad temper, and even the sublime begins to seem little more than a narcissistic glower, pretending profundity. And music—what else is it but temperament made audible, articulated, scaled?

And it is also the Phenomenological Error: any argumentative ploy by which fact is transposed into experience, by which events are significant only in their perceptions, and the human mind is indispensable to the existence of that which it is not, which is to say there is nothing it is not. It is under this aegis that linguistic analysis, of that which is not linguistic, makes sense. For to examine that which is named by investigating its name is not to explore that which is named, or the individual mind that deploys the name, but group mind—the source of the linguistic application—which is the background condition for the Phenomenological Error. Linguistic analysis made sense for Freud, for his concern was not the Phenomenological conditions of experience but psychology. However, outside of psychological science and its rigors, something insidious is afoot.

And the scientific viewpoint is quite different. There, the specifications of the quality of experience are the warp in the glass, the exploit is for the cracks in the mirror, and there are no meanings—only objective, and perhaps ontological, implications of events: if something happens, what preceded it and what will follow? How does it occur, of its own—even when it is us? There, the world is what it is, whatever it turns out to be, and the truth is the truth, even if it is eternally elusive.

For in the end, Phenomenology is of necessity a subspecies of Idealism. The essential Berkeley position is acquired: all that can be asserted is, not the existence of a fact, but the perception of the fact. To assert a fact is rather to assert the assertion of a fact, nothing more can be inferred, and so there is no truth, which by sleight of intellectual hand becomes again ontological at the last moment, in order to be denied.

It has been the business of art, until the beginning of the last century. Abstraction was specifically an attempt to scrape the backing from the mirror, a try to see through to something not us—to elude the prison house of the personal. Non-representation was a project to drop what was presumed—out of a distinctly Kantian view—to be human constructions and reveal what

our own images had been obscuring. One can note the ambition to such “spiritual” advancement towards insight in the writings of Kandinsky, who saw non-representational abstraction as part of a progress of humankind away from “the nightmare of materialism” and towards increasingly refined, subtle, and incisive emotional states, of which his abstract art was intended to be expressive. From his time and until the advent of Formalism—by which abstraction became simply a continuing experiment in new patterns of composition—abstract art continued to pursue roads to the revealing of a reality beyond the apparent, beyond quotidian human constructions.

After something on the order of half a century, Minimalism arrived with largely the same ambition—at least within the aesthetic program of Donald Judd, whose objectives were focused. The intention of his work is to eschew relational perception—to install a kind of *Gestalt* awareness that would perceive the work in its entirety rather than as a relation of parts. The purpose is to avoid the “*a priori* systems” he felt typically underlie the art we have inherited and that “express a certain type of thinking and logic that is pretty much discredited now as a way of finding out what the world’s like.”

Certainly it can be said that, in a broader context, Minimalism is a palpable reaction to the extreme self-projection of the Abstract Expressionism that preceded it, not to mention the Kandinsky program that has artists looking inward—to themselves, to their feelings rather than turning to the world, to the *a priori* authentically—a procedure as much open to the charge of invoking human-generated imagery and conception as the art it replaces. It can also be noted that Minimalism, by its most basic qualities, is a Platonic exercise, for the formula is clear: to elude the human image transposed onto the world, to find out “what the world’s like,” the artist turns to mathematics, to the imagery of volumetric geometry.

And that brings us to Ronald Bladen, one of the principal sculptors of Minimalism and one of the originators of the mode. Bladen is also another of a number of artists, and a number of recent sculptors in particular (see “The Form of Feeling” in this issue), whose reputations are nothing comparable to what they were and what they should be, and are at risk of being omitted from the art history books and their works forgotten. (Or limited in general exposure to their small number of public works, such as Bladen’s *The Cathedral Evening*, 1969, which is installed on the Empire State Plaza in Albany. And it should be noted that one website referred to *Sonar Tide*, which is in Peoria, as having been created by “architect Ronald Bladen.” The site also observes that the sculpture “holds the distinction of being voted 2005’s #1 biggest Peoria eyesore by readers of the *River City Times*.” And so goes the tale.)

Bladen, who died in 1988, is nevertheless something of a legend among those adept enough in their awareness of recent art history to be familiar

with his work, and a periodic sequence of exhibitions is at continual effort to give him back his name.

The exhibition at Jacobson Howard Gallery is the latest instance, and it is, as were all those this writer has visited, a joy to behold, as well as a

revelation of the ways in which the simplest structures of volumetric geometry can spark the imagination of an artist who was evidently born to work with them. The exhibition contains 14 works: nine sculptures, both small (models and maquettes) and full scale (standing or stretching up to 156 inches), four drawings, and one painting from Bladen's time as an Abstract Expressionist painter in the 1950s, before he turned to sculpture. The sculptural works are, without exception, exhilarating things to see. There is a dynamism about them, a sheer verve and feeling of velocity and moment, of momentousness, a quality that is distinctive among the broader range of work of sculptural Minimalism.

The essential reason is easy to note. Bladen worked in diagonals, whereas typical Minimalist sculpture was done in right angles. Judd worked strictly in boxes, ingenious arrangements of blocks. Carl Andre typically works in square panels laid on the floor, as well as cubes and wooden beams. There are other examples of Minimalist angularity—Andre does employ triangular panels, sometimes in triangular arrangements, and Tony Smith owns the reputation for infusing Minimalist works with seeming gestures through the simulation of stances and actions. There are others, but none of them has the sense of inner drive and force of Bladen.

Of course, in this, Bladen—or this response to his work—is relying on an easy and hoary formula that is the chestnut in every basic drawing class, or should be: horizontal lines imply stability and stasis, vertical lines imply growth, diagonal lines imply movement and action. It is supposedly innate in us to react that way, and perhaps it is, but there is something else here.

It is the quality of moment, as if each of these works had selected the perfect millisecond in a continuously changing action to represent the action in its essence—despite the fact that these are abstract works, works of pure geometric form and not representations of figures in identifiable actions. The principle of the perfect moment applies to figurative work, and most



Ronald Bladen, *Flying Fortress (Model)*, 1974 – 1978  
Painted wood, 1 1/2 x 33 x 3 inches



notably, potently, Michelangelo—to select the moment that embodies the intention and meaning of the action represented. (Think of the David, in the midst of turning towards his enemy—a second’s difference either before or after, and it would not be the David.)

It is difficult to say, perhaps it is impossible to say, how this can be with Bladen—as abstract works, these sculptures create no fictional world, they do not portray an action we see a figure in the midst of, we do not know what would precede this moment or follow it, we don’t know what this moment typifies as a continuous gesture. With *Black Lightning (Model)*, 1981, the form is, of course, ready made for Bladen. He created (in the full-scale work) a monumental lightning bolt on pedestals. But in the other works here, he had no such support, no such prepared reference. And for that, they are more stunning in their effect. *Flying Fortress (Model)*, 1974-78, looks nothing like a fortress. Yet, one can feel the warrior-like impetus and assault and pure power of righteous defense, the knowing that one is battling for a just cause, in its slanted-forward, recklessly thrown configuration. *Light Year (Garden)*, 1979, seems a revelation of a portion of the substructural grid work of dynamic space, the space of light waves and galactic distances, and colliding nebula and exploding stars. *Cathedral Evening (Model)*, 1971, is nothing of a cathedral. Yet, you don’t need to be told. It appears the very essence of striving aspiration to reach beyond our limitations, beyond our earthly confines, to the place where secrets are revealed and purposes shown.

And most impressive, despite the fact that it is the “quietest” of such works here, is *Coltrane (Model)*, 1970. (Also shown is *Coltrane (Structural Model)*, 1970, which reveals the wooden armature of the final work.) It is simply a rectangular box resting on one of its points, which is set into a pyramidal base that has had the top cut off. Little enough it would seem, yet it also seems the very essence of Coltrane’s manner, of his, as it was called among jazz musicians, “scrambled eggs” style—for no reason one can think to name, despite the fact that it is undeniably so.

One can easily dismiss the effect of these works by claiming that this is merely a talent for design, for developing what amount to emblems, like logos that

Ronald Bladen, *Light Year (Garden)*, 1979  
Painted aluminum, 80 x 156 x 19 inches  
Edition 1 of 3

strangely bespeak the identity one wishes to assign to something. One can claim these are just augmented chevrons, devised one by one to fit the titles Bladen gave them. But they are not so easily explained, or explained away, because their sense of moment, of portentousness, ought to make them seem somewhat human, somehow figurative, but it does not. It opens a door to seeing, or beginning to sense, precisely the opposite.

The nearly figurative, the gestural, is how Bladen often is taken. In the catalogue essay to this exhibition, Irving Sandler quotes Bladen in remarking on the development of his style, "I desired something in the grand manner since I'm still a romantic." Sandler assents: "He rejected their [other Minimalists] anti-romantic attitude and what they termed 'anti-anthropomorphism,' that is, their purging of any sign of the human body and its gestures. . . . If *Three Elements* was Minimalist in appearance, it was anything but anti-romantic and anti-anthropomorphic in spirit." (*Three Elements* was the work Bladen showed at the influential 1966 exhibition "Primary Structures," which was the first comprehensive survey of the new artistic mode.)

Mark Stevens takes much the same tack in "Maximal Minimalism," his review of the 1999 exhibition of Bladen at P.S. 1. "There is no better example of an artist escaping the straitjacket of a movement than Ronald Bladen (1918-88), who is typically identified as one of the cool 'fathers of Minimalism' but looks more and more like an American Romantic." Stevens goes on to note that Bladen sought to achieve what he called "presence," that he wished to "create a drama out of a minimal experience," and that he said his own works "seem very human to me." For Stevens, the ultimate achievement of Bladen's work is "to recover earlier—even ancient—patterns of feeling."

But it is not this we are provoked to see, not when these works are taken at their best—the way we ought to take all works of art—seen for what they might be claimed to disclose, what they might spontaneously reveal, regardless of



**On right: Ronald Bladen, *Coltrane (Model)*, 1970  
Painted wood, 30 x 16 x 16 1/2 inches  
Edition 2 of 3**

**On left: Ronald Bladen, *Coltrane (Structural/Model)*, 1970  
Wood and nail construction, 30 x 17 1/2 x 17 1/2 inches  
Unique life time**

what has been said of them, even by the artist. The challenge they present is to see in their atmosphere of moment, of presence, something that is not figurative, not human (at least not the normally human), not us (or at least what we think we are). The challenge is not to “overwrite” the works by seeing figures that are not there, just as Sontag warned us not to overwrite works of any art, of any mode, with interpretations designed to install our own intended meanings in place of those of the artist.

Look at these sculptures with an innocent eye, with an eye cleansed of expectation and the urge to see something responsive, something like us, and you will discover something quite different from what has been written about these works. Relax into seeing the diagonal linearity without associating in the human strain, the craning, the stretch, the reaching towards. They start to become something else, something alien, something remote but immediately accessible, something detached, withdrawn, inwardly turned, and austere, inwardly turned away from us for all their moment and immediacy, for all their presence. They begin to seem the detailing of an alien landscape, the artifacts from somewhere else, the deposits of some other life form, almost the result of another physics, of another world, of another reality.

But they are not, for nothing could be more here and now, more ordinary even, than geometry, than rods and boxes, triangles and chevrons. These works become familiar and strange, intimate and unapproachable, embracing and overbearing. They become us and not us, and that is perhaps a more pertinent and authentic conception of the uncanny.

Both us and not us—perhaps that is our first step away from the intellectual reflex action that paints our image on everything we see. Perhaps it is merely the us we did not know, not something ultimately beyond us. Perhaps that is all we are capable of—to see something of us that astonishes us, and we will never escape the prison we make of ourselves. Even if so, it requires the best of us to achieve it, it takes the most penetrating of our artists to bring us that far, and Bladen showed us something few have seen since.

“

Once out of nature I shall never take  
My bodily form from any natural thing,  
But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make  
Of hammered gold and gold enamelling  
To keep a drowsy Emperor awake;  
Or set upon a golden bough to sing  
To lords and ladies of Byzantium  
Of what is past, or passing, or to come.  
—W. B. Yeats, “Sailing to Byzantium”

“

Climb to our proper dark, that we may trace  
The lineaments of a plummet-measured face.  
—W. B. Yeats, “The Statues”