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Isaac Witkin's Recent Work

Return to First Principles

by Karen Wilkin

To say that Isaac Witkin has had a long and distinguished career is, for once, not simply a useful cliché. Four decades ago, in the early days of "swinging London," the young Witkin and a group of his equally young friends, all recent graduates of St. Martin's School of Art, burst upon the British art scene declaring themselves sculptors to be reckoned with because of the sheer audacity, authority, and originality of their spirited works. Witkin's sculptures of these formative years were, like those of his colleagues, notable for their inventiveness, their unlikely materials, and their irreverent but thoughtful reconsideration of the Modernist legacy. What set Witkin's polychromed wood and fiberglass constructions apart was their unlikely conflation of suave, swelling forms redolent of the tradition of modeling and crisp-edged junctures informed by the tradition of Modernist planar construction. These surprising objects were greeted with great critical acclaim. In 1965 alone, Witkin's work was featured in such important international exhibitions as "The New Generation" at London's Whitechapel Gallery, "Primary Structures" at New York's Jewish Museum, and the Quatrième Biennale de Paris, where he was awarded first prize. In 1971, his work figured prominently in the influential showing of "The Alistair McAlpine Gift" at the Tate Gallery, London, which celebrated the donation of an impeccably chosen collection of sculptures by Witkin and his peers. An auspicious beginning, indeed.

By the time that the Tate exhibited the McAlpine bequest, however, Witkin had long since abandoned London to teach at Bennington College in Vermont, and he had given up the burgeoning forms and the responsive (but often toxic) materials of his early sculptures to work in steel, constructing free-wheeling, generously scaled structures that he often painted in colors ranging from forthright near-primaries to subtle earth tones. Unlike his essentially self-contained, singular, volumetric sculptures of the early 1960s, Witkin's loose-limbed steel pieces were planar and greedy for space. They stretched out eagerly, spreading horizontally and reaching out with floating cantilevers, or folding themselves into muscular arches and angles that implied volume, but were, in fact, made of flat, relatively thin planes. As we moved around these sculptures, we became aware of a play of edges that competed for attention with the suggestions of open-ended masses.

Like his uninhibited early works, Witkin's audacious steel constructions won him considerable enthusiastic attention, but, by the end of the 1970s, he changed gears once again, abandoning steel and the formal vocabulary it elicited from him—just as he had fiberglass and the formal vocabulary

***The Tower I*, 1992. Bronze, 39.25 x 23 x 20.25 in.**

it made possible—in order to explore new territory. Once again he employed new methods and materials that either provoked or permitted him to test the limits of new forms, but surprisingly and in marked contrast to his earlier practice, these materials, while new to him, were rooted in the history of art. Instead of sleek, cast fiberglass or expansive, planar steel, Witkin began to test the possibilities of bronze, constructing tenuously poised assemblies of soft-edged, organic forms. And a decade ago, he added stone to his arsenal of materials. Unlike his often brash, angular earlier works, Witkin's sculptures from the mid-1980s to the present have been distinguished not only by their rather traditional materials, but also by their lyricism and their centralized organization. Many of them depend on upwardly striving or suspended, cascading structures that seem more evocative of natural growth than of manmade structures. Witkin's most recent work, made by an ingenious process that combines direct pouring and casting, is notable for the richness of its surfaces and for the layered density of its liquid forms.

***Nagas*, 1964. Fiberglass, 75 x 39 x 39 in.**

These shifts of materials, emphasis, and mood appear so abrupt that it can seem as though we were confronted by two different sculptors: "Witkin I," who practiced during the first 20 years of the artist's career and "Witkin II" who has been at work for the past two decades. The paradox is that no matter how distinct "Witkin II"'s bronze (and stone) sculptures appear to be from what preceded them, no matter how clearly they stamp themselves out as a distinct body of work, longer acquaintance not only reveals their distinctiveness, but also makes visible their seamless connection with everything that "Witkin I" did. Far from seeming unprecedented in his oeuvre as a whole, his most recent works prove the consistency of his preoccupations. Yet if his most recent sculptures signal his recurring obsessions with particular forms and gestures, they also make us aware of his appetite for transformation, his alertness to new possibilities, and his willingness to pursue new directions that arise in the course of working.

In fact, it is not simply a neat turn of phrase to suggest that one of the most evident constants in Witkin's life as an artist has been change. He has consistently courted, consciously or unconsciously, situations that would allow (or force) him to break entrenched habits and rethink even his most firmly held convictions. Over the four decades of his working life as a sculptor, he has not only deliberately changed materials, as if to discover what formal transformations these changes would effect, but he has also deliberately changed his environment, moving from his native South Africa to England to the United States, as if to discover what his responses to new surroundings might be. These changes seem to have helped Witkin to clarify his concerns; certainly they have often been paralleled, admittedly imprecisely, with the shifts in his sculptural languages. Still, it doesn't do to attach too much meaning to this loose correlation. Since 1979, Witkin has maintained a home and studio on a blueberry farm in rural New Jersey. During this settled period, however, he has produced some of his most inventive, experimental sculpture to date, works that at once sum up his past, break with that past, and point to the future. His most recent works in cast bronze or aluminum are specially noteworthy.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of many of Witkin's newest sculptures is their complexity and driving rhythms. In some, forms appear to pull themselves up as we watch, wrenching themselves up from the ground seemingly without effort, yet at the same time, the agitated traces that inflect their surfaces, like records of previous states, appear to bear witness to a hard-won triumph over the constraints of gravity. Other sculptures, more apparently submissive to physical forces, spread in complex puddles. The surfaces of both types are rich, layered, and subtle. From a distance, the profiles of these sculptures seem complicated, but clear; large, cursive gestures declare themselves. From a closer viewpoint, we become engaged by another order of incident: the intricate shifts of density suggested by the overlapped edges of cumulative touches. These passages engage the eye (and the mind) in a fashion entirely different from that of the large-scale declarations of form and mass that announce themselves at first viewing.

As a result of these differences, scale seems unstable, shifting as we look. It can be difficult to reconcile the assertive large articulations that define the whole with the counterpoint of small overlaps and hollows that reveal themselves on closer acquaintance, but, in the end, it is the tension between these disparities that animates Witkin's recent sculptures and forces us to consider them in unexpected ways. In traditional figurative works, our attention may first be captured by large-scale compositional events such as massing or contour, but it is then held

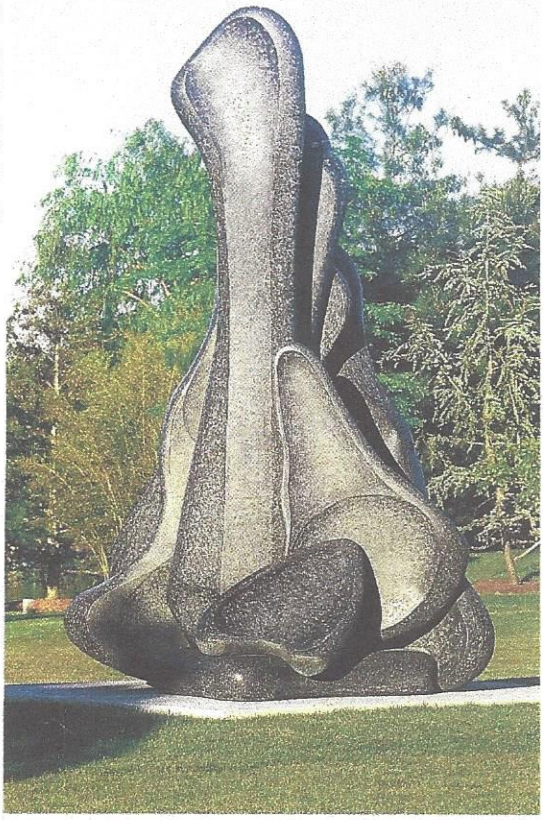
by intimately scaled incidents such as details of features, clothing, or setting. Witkin's recent sculptures are unequivocally about themselves and the history of their own making, yet the complex relationship between the large gestures of the sculptures' profiles and the small nuances of their surfaces gives them a multiplicity of scales that enriches, but does not compromise their essential abstractness.

Multivalence triggers multivalent associations. The piled, cascading forms of some sculptures suggest a variety of readings, often related to the natural world. It's worth noting, though, that these associations with nature are usually mediated by art. It is, for example, possible to draw analogies between these works and the "philosophers' rocks" of Chinese gardens, with their willfully eroded surfaces, pitted and furrowed by the calculated action of water, or to compare the sculptures, albeit at one remove, to classical Chinese landscape paintings, with their long views of craggy rocks and peaks, plunging cascades, and steep paths, among which we are invited to imagine ourselves wandering. Yet no matter how alluring these associations may be, Witkin's sculptures never lose their identity as self-sufficient abstract objects. We may begin to explore one of his recent works as though we were mentally transporting ourselves into the space of an invented world, but the literal physical presence of the sculpture soon asserts itself, in wholly contemporary terms, insisting on a certain kind of distance and forcing us to consider the sculpture as a self-contained thing unlike all other things that exist in the world.

Witkin likes the notion of "landscape scale"—Chinese or otherwise—as a component of his sculptures, yet he is less likely to speak of his recent pieces in connection with Asian art, of any kind, than to talk about his interest in Vincent van Gogh's drawings. "Those drawings made a strong impression on me," Witkin says. "I was fascinated by the way everything in them was united by those amazing, curvilinear rhythmic patterns. It didn't matter whether it was a figure or a landscape. The rhythmic marks held your attention."

The method Witkin has devised for making his new bronzes and cast aluminum works is, in fact, a kind of drawing, a three-dimensional, intensely physical type of drawing that can be as cursive and rhythmic as any brushmark or stroke of a bamboo pen. He begins by pouring hot wax into cold water. The movement of his wrist, the angle and the speed of the pour all influence the resulting configuration; repeated pours begin to create a structure. The resulting forms have a strong family resemblance because of the way

Above: *Africa*, 1976. Steel, 83 x 228 x 192 in. Right: *Wotan's Palace*, 1990–91. Bronze, 14.25 x 24.75 x 18.75 in.



***Garden State*, 1996–97. Zimbabwe black granite, 228 x 132 x 114 in.**

the wax reacts with water—the initial configurations share smooth edges, for example, and are built out of similarly sized units—but Witkin always has the option of modulating the surface during the pour and can later manipulate or recombine the resulting forms to intensify articulation and mass.

These complex, urgent sculptures are the latest manifestations of an exploration of unconventional ways of working in metal that dates back more than 25 years, when Witkin began a series of experimental bronzes at the Johnson Atelier, in New Jersey, as an alternative to the "new tradition" of additive construction in steel. By pouring molten bronze into forms hollowed out of beds of sand and remaining alert to the possibilities of what he calls the "controlled accidents" of splashes and escapes from the prepared bed, Witkin discovered or invented a new vocabulary of forms: sensuous, biomorphic, and wholly at odds with the loose-jointed angles and "folded" forms of his steel works. In a sense, it was a more physical version of the way abstract painters of the generation immediately preceding Witkin's had worked, pouring and staining their canvases with thinned out pigment, expanding on the legacy of Jackson Pollock, and making the history of the painting's evolution an important part of its meaning.

For many of these painters, perhaps most notably Morris Louis, working this way allowed them to make their paintings more abstract by completely detaching the act of applying paint to canvas from depiction or rendering. The exception to this generalization is Helen Frankenthaler (from whom Louis took his lead in making his poured and stained pictures); Frankenthaler's canvases of the 1960s are haunted by elusive images that seem to have arisen almost spontaneously. Since Frankenthaler's floods of color appear simultaneously to have found their own way and to have been willed into being by her powerful personality, it is impossible to decide whether she (unconsciously or consciously) encouraged the formation of these images or simply accepted them. Whatever their origin, their mysterious, half-glimpsed presence enriches her work. Witkin's "industrially poured" bronzes from the late 1970s invite similarly ambiguous readings. Their suave forms—sleek, nameless, and sometimes a little sinister—also provoke multiple associations with things in nature. Interestingly, the long, soft-edged forms typical of Witkin's first series of directly poured bronzes have since reappeared in new guises. For about a decade, Witkin has had several opportunities to work in stone, using industrial tools and processes, and has produced a small, but significant body of work in this recalcitrant material.

"The first stone sculpture I made," he recalls, "was 14 feet high, in black Zimbabwe granite—an incredibly hard stone. It's uncarvable. We worked it with a bush hammer and polished it, which led to wonderful color." Many of Witkin's stone sculptures deliberately defy both gravity and traditional uses of the material. He hoists delicately inflected volumes aloft or casually leans them together, to create loose-seeming assemblies of poised, elegant forms, somewhere between bones and clouds, that provoke associations as unstable as the large directly poured bronzes. (The configurations of the stone sculptures, in turn, have had echoes in Witkin's smaller works, directly in some made for casting in metal, but only indirectly in those made by pouring wax.)

Witkin's recent small-scale sculptures are no less rich in allusions and associations than the large, epic bronzes that preceded them, but the traces of the artist's hand and of his gestures remain so visible in the recent poured and cast sculptures that they are also specially intimate and revealing. Like the earlier, large biomorphic bronzes, the recent bronzes seem to fuse two opposing notions of what sculpture can be. For all their associations with growth and natural forms, the earlier bronzes appeared to have been assembled from distinctively shaped, tapering, biomorphic "building blocks" of poured metal; in fact, they were constructed in ways not entirely dissimilar from his steel pieces, by adding discrete parts to form a unified whole. Witkin's recent works also suggest, at first glance, that they have grown incrementally but inevitably, like things in nature, but with longer acquaintance, their made, deliberate, irrational (in the best sense of the word) qualities come to the fore. We are compelled to consider these sculptures as being simultaneously seamless and additive, to regard them not only as singular forms, but also as open constructions that seem, perhaps only momentarily, to suggest mass and bulk.

The recent poured and "drawn" cast sculptures are so characteristically "Witkins" that they could be termed displaced self-portraits. In a sense, their enigmatic swelling forms reprise the distinctive character of the works that first won him acclaim, as an eager young man in London. As he did in his early sculptures, Witkin once again challenges our expectations of what sculpture can be—not, as he did four decades ago, by using unexpected materials with virtually no art historical

associations, but by doing just the opposite. By working in wax for casting in metal, he ostensibly employs traditional materials and traditional methods. But he transforms those materials and methods to alter our preconceptions and make us rethink the possibilities of singular masses and inflected metal.

"Volume has always been my concern," Witkin says. "The question has always been how to get there." His first teacher was a meticulous academic maker of statues who taught him to model convincingly solid forms. In the exhilarating climate of St. Martin's in the early 1960s, the idea of what sculpture—including volumetric sculpture—could be was essentially reinvented, permanently, by Witkin, his adventurous colleagues, and their energetic, passionate teacher, Anthony Caro. (Caro was not a lot older than his students, and like them, at the time, he was inventing new sculptural languages as he went along, testing the limits of abstraction.) Witkin's early works, in fiberglass and wood, were the first evidence of his lifelong pursuit of the creation of volume without modeling in conventional ways. The steel works that followed, which at initial viewing seemed to colonize new terrain, now appear to be as much about suggested, partly enclosed volumes as about the abutment of planes, in part because Witkin's subsequent works, including his most recent efforts, have emphasized three-dimensional bulk rather than open, linear structure. The paradox is that they did so by implication rather than by description or construction.

Witkin's current methods and materials have given him a new vocabulary with which to state some of his most firmly held convictions, not literally, but metaphorically. "The way I am working now allows me to give forms volume without making volume. There's no core-to-surface surface modeling or carving from mass to volume," Witkin says, with evident pleasure. "Working in steel was an effort to express volume by how the surface of planes moved through space. With the pours I can articulate volume from surface alone. They give me the physicality I want without modeling out from the core."

Witkin's current way of working allows him to assert some of sculpture's fundamental qualities: its singularity, its ability to displace space, and its unignorable presentness. But he does so neither by building up a mass nor by modifying an existing one nor by surrounding a chunk of space. Instead, through drawing-like gestures, he creates subtly modulated "skins" that seem to contain—among other things—the memory of the entire history of sculpture, made at once tangible and elusive. Witkin's newest works are both appealing and a little difficult to grasp. They point to new resolutions at the same time that they seem to sum up his past, in new ways. Such contradictions are part of the strength of these recent works. Nothing important, it seems, ever gets lost.

Karen Wilkin is an independent curator and critic specializing in 20th-century Modernism with particular emphasis on sculpture. She has organized exhibitions and written monographs on David Smith, Anthony Caro, and Isaac Witkin.

Above: *Shore Scene,* 2004. Bronze, 7.5 x 17.5 x 13.5 in. diameter. Right: *Wave,* 2004. Bronze, 13 x 18.5 x 9 in.

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