

INTERVIEW

The following is an edited transcription of an interview with Richard Prince by Camille Breitman, Student Associate Visual Media Editor of TCR, and Barbara Larivière of the University of British Columbia. The interview took place in Prince's studio at UBC on November 24, 1988.

CB I want to know how you get your ideas for sculpture.

RP Well, I think one can talk about getting specific ideas for specific pieces. One gets grand schemes now and then, but not very often. I think one is just interested in the world, and I think if you're curious about the world, ideas for making art will come to you.

I've been making art now for about twenty years, and taking it seriously, and have a store of images which I've already made, each one tending to lead to another. Normally, one is walking down the street, driving a car, reading a book, watching television, going to see a movie, and all of a sudden some piece of visual or literary information will jump out and for whatever reason it's captured, and you say, "Now there's an interesting notion about which to make a sculpture."

BL I find your style is quite a cool style, or it appears to be quite cool because of the materials you use, yet it all relates back to objects in nature. In the waves, and the flying fish, there appears to be a romantic element in your work. How do you feel about that coolness versus nature?

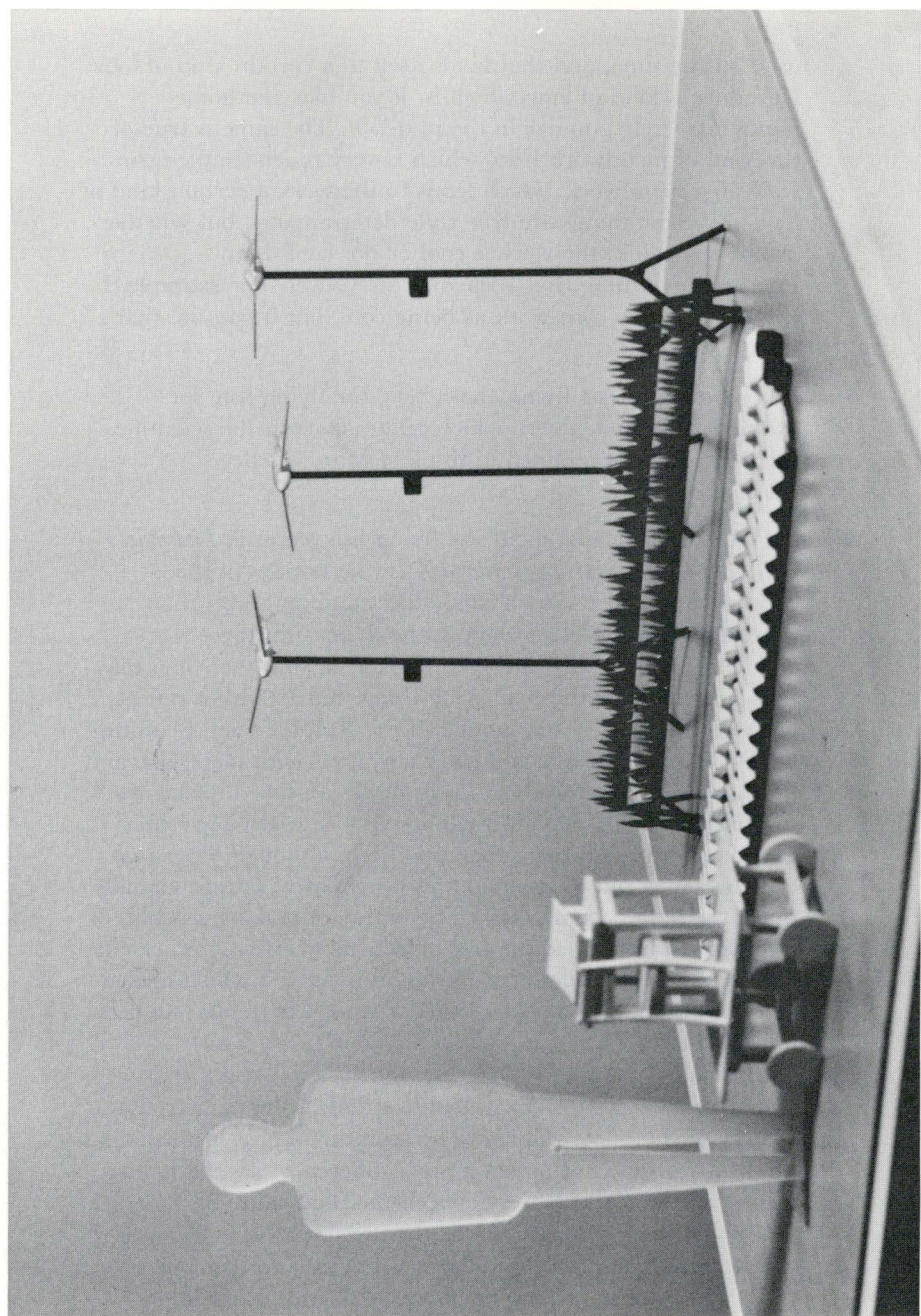
RP How one gets one's ideas is distinct from the origins of style, which are equally complex. One of them is the fact that I have a certain method, or a certain set of skills, and the physical skills become determining factors in the making of the work. With certain kinds of tools, certain kinds of things are easily produced. In the use of wood, a certain kind of joinery will be

used all the time, and that lends itself to a certain kind of look. I produce a kind of look which is, if you like, the home-handyman style popular in the mid-'50s. The same is true of the kind of metalwork I do, which is very much simple farm workshop metalwork, which lends to the work a certain kind of look. All these things are true style determinants, but whether or not one thinks the work is cool or not cool, is an interpretative thing that I leave to the viewer. For example, I wouldn't see my own work as being cool, but if you do, that's fine.

BL When you combine living characters, the flying fish, for example, with machinery which relates back to the scientific revolution, one is inclined to think of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* robot.

RP Let's talk specifically about the flying fish piece, in *Literature (With the Coast of Africa in Flames)*. In the notions of the contrast between a mechanized object and an object that represents a living being such as the flying fish, there is a common concern with the robot-maker, in that the robot may be a substitute for the real living thing. But I think it reflects back even farther, to the notion of the sculptor's act. Sculpture is an odd way to perform a metamorphosis with materials, and that's what the sculptor's job is to do. I can take a piece of marble, as a sculptor, and I can carve it into a living being, and therefore I can turn stone into flesh, although I can't go quite as far as old Pygmalion and his Galatea; I can't actually make the flesh become alive. The notion of making a robot, or of making any of these natural objects move, is very much that of trying to create the image of life in an object which has no life. I think that's really the heart of what I'm doing, the heart of the sculptor's act.

The sculptor works in the same dimensional realm that we live in. It's not an illusory world like that of the painter or the drawer or the photographer. The sculpture works in the actual physical world. That makes a great difference; it's the nature of this constant opposition between the physicality of the object made and the illusion of life, or the illusion of whatever you're trying to represent in the sculpture. This always remains a much more constant kind of conflict than can occur in painting, where the viewer automatically accepts the notion of the illusion as being built into the nature of that medium.



CB Would you say that's one of the reasons you go to model-making as opposed to drawing for your initial studies?

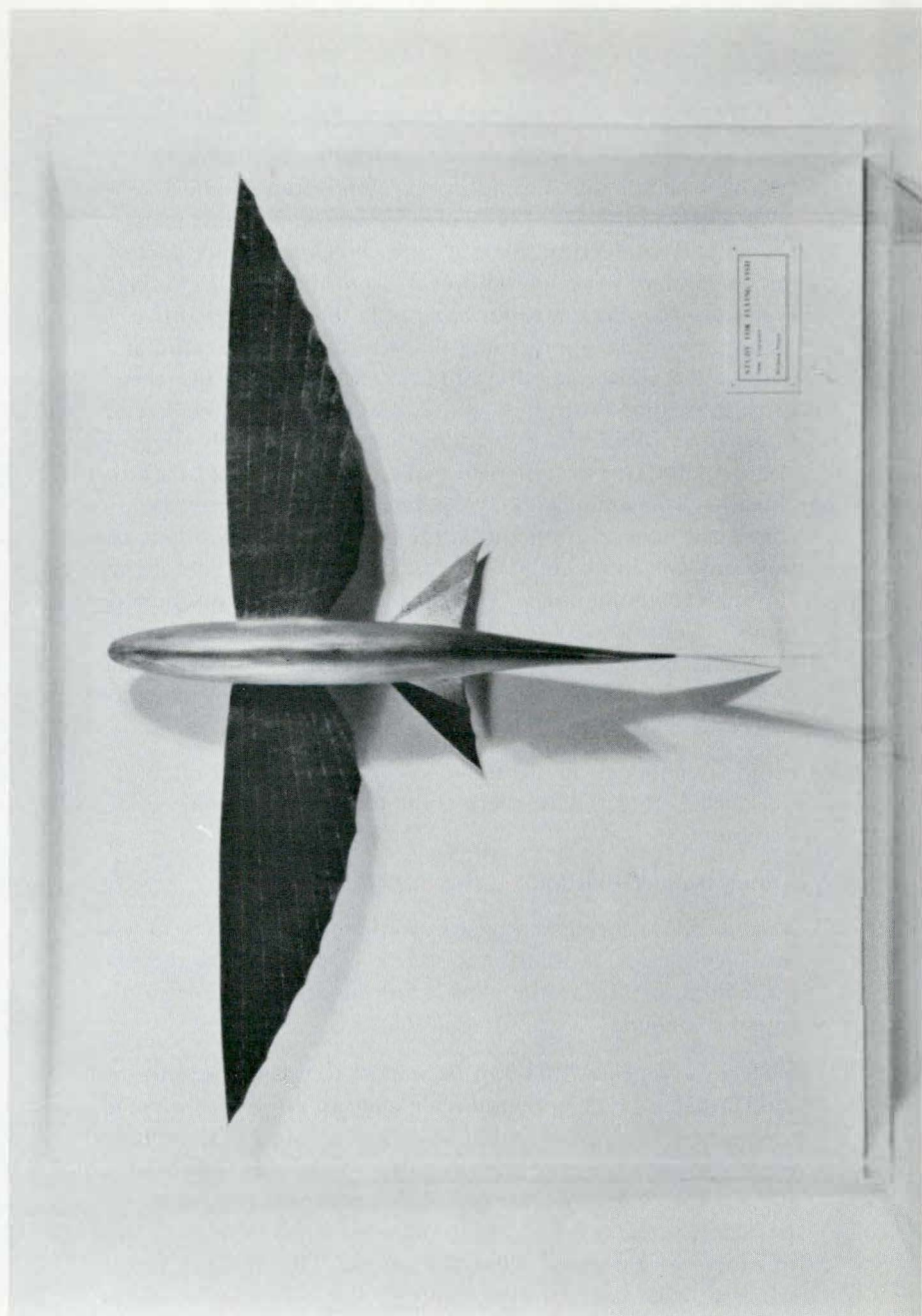
RP Well, it might be. I think there's a much more pragmatic reason, which is that I'm not a very good drawer, and I've never enjoyed the act of drawing. Somehow, I've just never become accustomed to doing it, and therefore it's not part of my vocabulary of action. However, from the very beginning, ever since I've been a child, I've made things in a craftlike sense, and so that's something that I'm much more familiar with, and it's also something I'm much better at. I like the three-dimensional or physical qualities of an object, so I tend to do all my preliminary work in that form. It's only since about 1980 that I've begun to make models leading to a large object — or in some cases not leading to a large object. It comes out of certain practical considerations; for example, the time invested in making a large piece can be considerable, as can the economic outlay. Therefore one wants to test ideas out, in a simpler and perhaps cheaper form. And a quicker form, too. Model making is a very practical way to go about doing that. And for me, it's more practical, and more enjoyable, and more satisfying than drawing.

CB I find your models so attractive in themselves that I often wonder whether the art piece is the model or the final sculpture.

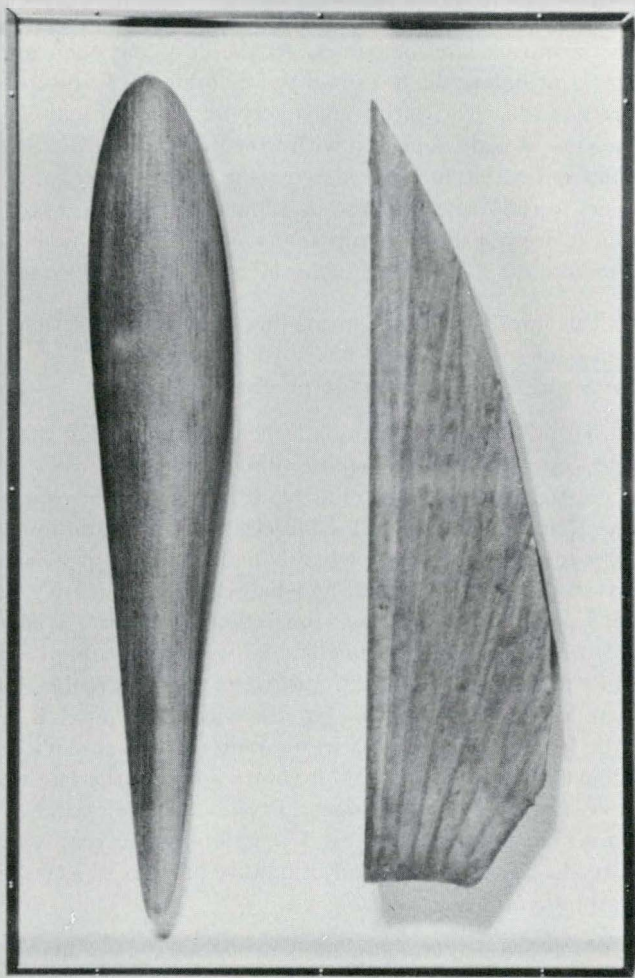
RP I often wonder that too.

CB A sculptor can be encouraged in contemporary society to make an object larger, so that the grandeur is what startles the individual, but I find the models are the actual art pieces, the rough diamonds.

RP Well, in some cases they can be, except that there is built into model-making that notion of scale change. Now with some of the objects this idea of scale is very precise, and in some the notion of scale is either played with or extremely imprecise. Of the work presented in this article, for example, the piece, *Literature*, presents a number of different scales of objects, some of which are extremely clear and simple. The flying fish are what we would accept as normal fish size, whereas the waves are presented at some anonymous information size. It happens to be the size available in sheet metal siding. The flames are



STUDY FOR FLIGHT, 1914
Paper, 1914
Michael S. Saper



almost arbitrary size for flames, yet the desk and chair are very precisely at half scale, too small to be children's furniture and too large to be toys. So it's got a very odd kind of scale, and the notion of scale is played with very particularly, because I wanted to be able to break down some of the theatrical barriers to the piece, but also to allow the viewer to roam within it, from a more omnipotent viewpoint. I wanted the viewer to have the sense of being in control of the viewpoint.

CB Does this interest in scale, in making things to perfection, reflect back to your initial interest in architecture? For architecture is really an art in precision. . . .

RP Well, I think it can be. I think largely it's something that was trained into me, by just making things as a child, whether it was plastic models or model airplanes or any of the other things that I made as a kid. I noticed that if I made something well, it looked better than when I made it badly: it was more satisfying, or worked better, or whatever. So I think it's just a habit I got into, doing things precisely. Eventually, it became a defensible stance in the intellectual way. One thing is that we live in a world of objects, and we're all of us really very precise at criticizing objects. No one accepts a toaster if the handle falls off. Somehow I see no reason why art can't be made as well as a toaster. So it comes down to the fact that we do live in a world of real objects from which we expect a certain kind of quality, and so I function in that real world too and try to put the same kind of quality into art objects. It's something you learn to do.

CB When you are making your models, do you choose the materials at that point, or is it after the models have been finished, when you start working on the larger piece, that you choose your materials?

RP I've always known the final scale of the eventual object that I wanted to produce, within fairly reasonable limits, and therefore the models themselves are intended to represent materials which are conceived of as part of the original piece.

BL The origins of your work seem to be in the scientific revolution. What brought this to my attention was the picture you have of Henning Brandt, the discoverer of phosphorus, which was apparently one of your inspirations for *Tropic (Mercury Pump)*. I felt that you'd obviously seen and thought about the discovery of phosphorus, and that that had led you to — not to the phosphorus itself — but to the scientific revolution. The Henning Brandt picture symbolizes the anomalous nature of scientific revolutions. Could I ask you to talk about science and the way you use machinery in combination with nature?

RP What you're saying is true. But my interest in the scientific revolution is mainly as an image of any kind of change, or more precisely, what might be my romantic or literary attachment to that image of change — that's what is at heart exciting.

Your initial question has to do with the nature of materials. One often can get excited by a material *per se*, and use that as a background, or use that inspiration of the nature of material, to try to form a piece. Both the pieces, *Tropic*, for example, and *Ex Machina*, are fundamentally based on the idea of exploring the nature of material. In one case, the idea is to present the material — this molten gold-like substance — as a substance pure and simple in itself, as a substance of awe, or wonderment, or magic. In that case it refers very directly to this image of Henning Brandt and the discovery of phosphorus by Joseph Wright of Derby. Because that image itself presents the wonderment of the discovery by the alchemist-philosopher who's produced purified phosphorus.

But for me, it's not the scientific revolution *per se* that I'm interested in. I'm not exploring the idea of science, but am excited by the notion of scientific discovery as a model for the creative act. Obviously in this case, it's my own creative act, making a discovery about some aspect of the visual or physical world; I use that as the moment of excitement, and then build a piece around that.

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CB I'm interested in the functional aspect of your work.

RP You mean the fact that certain parts work?

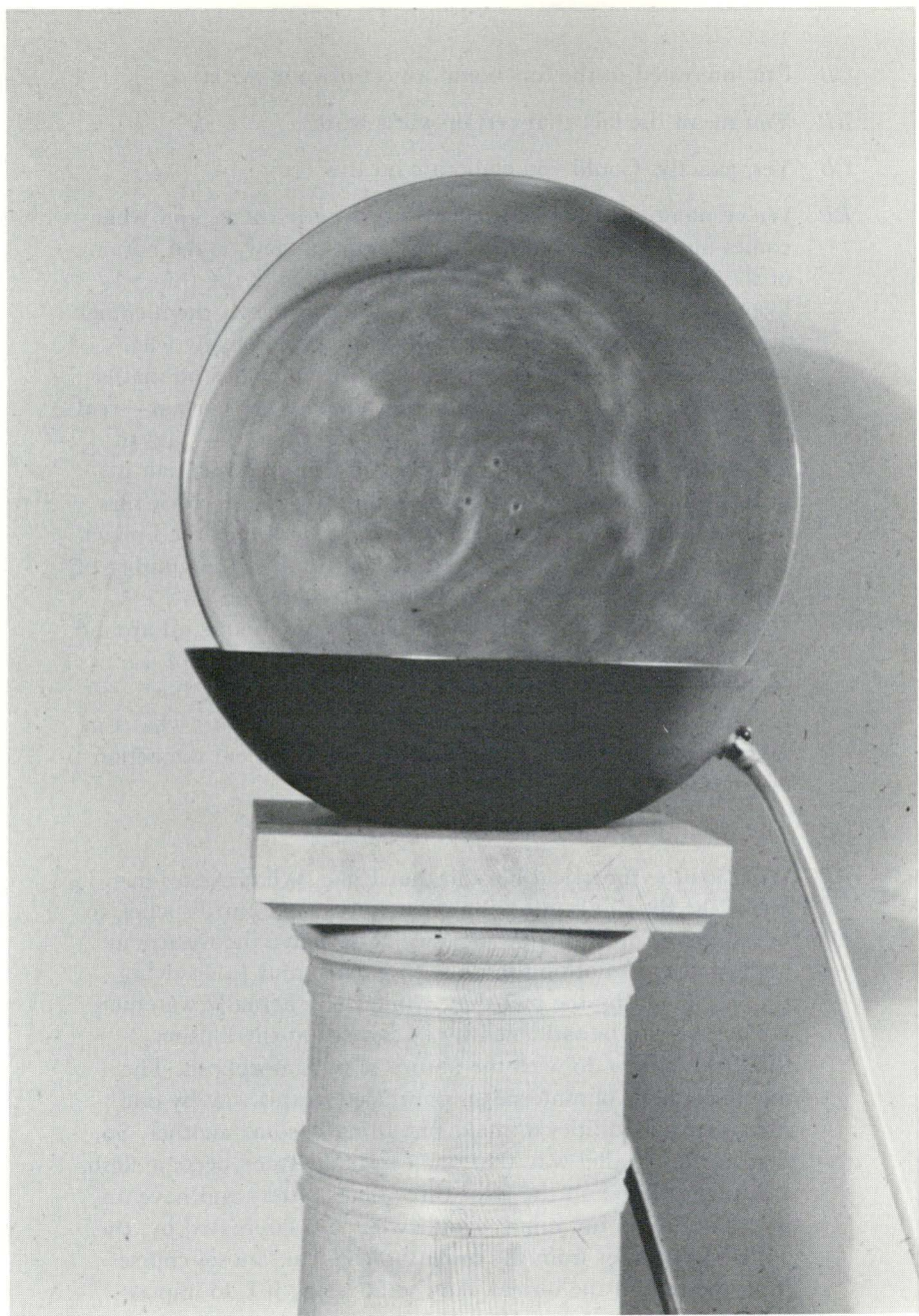
CB Yes, exactly. Could you elaborate on this?

RP We've mentioned Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* robot, and what comes out of that, from the artist's point of view, is the notion of the theatre. It has to do with illusion. One of the things I like about making the works move is that it makes them come alive for me. I know they come alive in a kind of silly way, sometimes—fish flapping their wings are ridiculous no matter how you look at it. But it's just that blend of the normal—real life—and the ridiculous—the surreal and the odd—that to me makes the notion of the mechanism working essential: it brings the whole piece to life. One thing I've accepted is that we live in the world of machines, and, second, that the impact of machinery on our lives is vast. If you think of the number of electric motors in the average middle-class kitchen in Vancouver, it's astounding. We have electric motors all around us all the time. I find it's part of our world, so why not use them? But I use them not just because they're there, but because they actually cause things to happen. That's what I'm saying by them. The theatrical happening is where the action of life starts.

CB The visual illusion?

RP Well, it's the theatrical illusion that I like. What excites me about the theatre is our willingness to suspend our disbelief, to watch actors on the stage, who we know leave the theatre at night and have nothing to do with Romeo and Juliet dying. I'm fascinated by the fact that, while we're actually watching a play, we can be saddened by it, can cry at the illusion. I think this has to do with the nature of metamorphosis. The metamorphosis of materials is paralleled in this way by our metaphorical abilities to make one thing become another. So that in the parallel way that one can make stone become flesh, I can see printed on the page three black letters and have an image of dog in my mind. That's what I'm fascinated by, the ability to transfer from the unreal to the real, and of course from the real to the unreal. And so at heart, if I do impose motors in the works, it's to bring that reality into question.

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CB Perhaps what we could do next is look at each piece individually and ask you to explain where it came from, what it's about. Let's start with *Ex Machina*.

RP I always think of the series as being in the order of literature, *Ex Machina* and *Tropic*, but that's perhaps only because I constructed them that way. Let's start with *Ex Machina*. The disc image is something that I've been playing with for many years and I like it because of its simplicity, its clarity, and the fact that it's such a nice basic image. As a disc form it has the ability to be fully three-dimensional. But the specific piece itself arises out of the notion of trying to get gold to flow from A to B and back again. You mentioned romantic literature—

BL Well, romantic literature, and more than that: I mean the fountain of youth, or the elixir of life, or alchemy.

RP That's right. If we go back to Henning Brandt, of course we move into alchemy. Another image of romance is the notion of the search for El Dorado, that mythical Golden Man of the New World, the man who annointed himself with gold every morning and dived into the sacred lake. And it's that kind of romantic image, Pizarro's search for El Dorado, or Ponce de Leon's search for the fountain of youth—the ultimate search for the holy grail, without religious connotations. Also, specific images. I remember watching, oddly enough, a television programme, PBS or the Knowledge Network perhaps, talking about the refining of gold in South Africa. There was one image of all this molten gold being poured into ingot forms. I saw all this beautiful molten gold flowing from one terraced ingot to the next terraced ingot down, until one would fill up, and overflow into the next one down—it was the most beautiful image—and at that moment, that's when I started conceiving this piece. Because, naturally, when you're thinking—the image of gold is there—the thoughts of El Dorado are fairly easy to dredge out of one's memory, but at that point I thought wouldn't it be incredible to have a river of molten gold flowing through your livingroom. And it starts with that simple, basic domestic thought.

BL And then you ask, "Can I make it?"

RP That's exactly what happens.

BL It's a modern day attempt to be an alchemist.

RP Well, an alchemist, or else just —

BL A magician, because it's all an illusion?

RP I like the idea of art as magic; that's an interesting way to look at it. But after that, it comes down to a functioning piece. I went to the workshop the next day. I knew I couldn't actually make the river of molten gold and had to find some substitute. As I was doing that, putting it together as an image, a number of source materials came to mind, which I used. One, for instance, is this image of the broken column, which is something I had seen in photographs of a museum in southern France, which intrigued me tremendously, because I like the notion of the column which can't support itself. It's kind of like revisionist history, perhaps, the notion of history as being something which is both reality and interpretative reality, or unreal reality. The cart on which the column is placed is similar, in a way, to the column. I actually like these carts and vehicles in the sculpture, because I like the notion of the instability and insecurity they provide for something you might think was extremely stable and heavy. It comes out as a fascination with the history of technology and transportation.

CB That recurs in literature as well.

RP Yes, the Rolling Scholars' desk is on a cart; it recurs in many earlier pieces, and in pieces being developed. The architectural entablature on which the gold column is posed is a kind of nice way to get back to the architectural reference which is implied in the column, and to help root the thing in both slightly artificial and romantic notions of classical architecture. But all of these pieces form an insecure architectural framework or support system for the action at heart. It's like the chemist's bench becoming the support for the experiment on top, the experiment with the gold. These become not only physical supports as in the chemist's bench, but also intellectual historical supports for the idea of the experiment in the first place. I think they'll all go together as one piece.

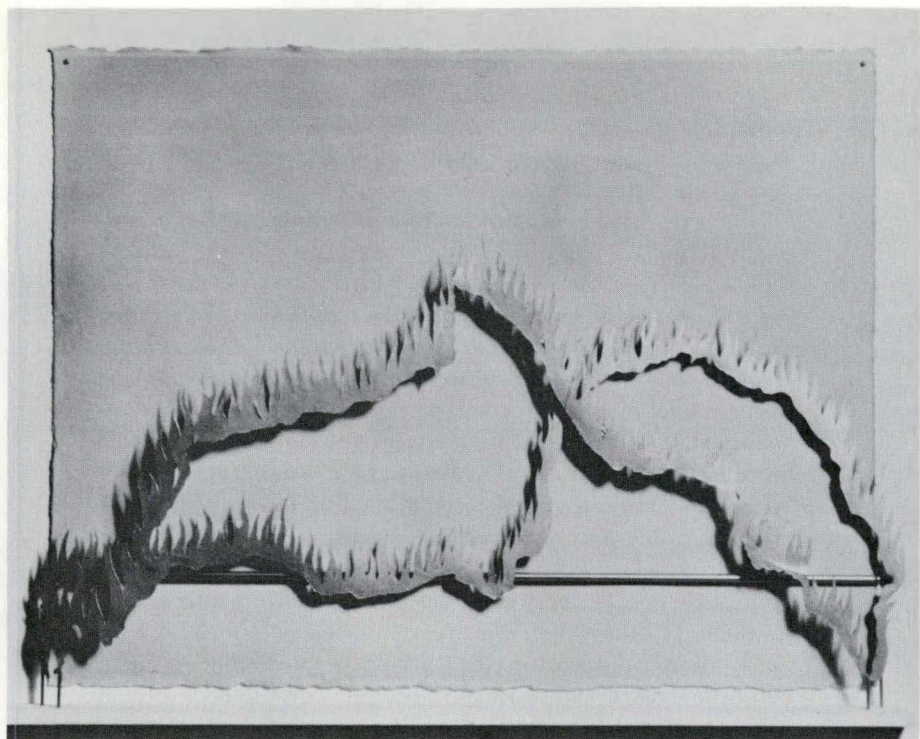
This is seen equally well, I think, in the piece called *Tropic*, or the mercury pump piece, where there's obviously a chemistry bench portrayed, in the style of the nineteenth or eighteenth century. I was in the Museum of Technology in Paris and saw Lavoisier's work bench there, on which he did initial experiments in gases and the theory of gases. The bench itself has a specific origin in a real chemist's bench, but it has an intense romantic association, that of the discovery of science itself. And of course of Lavoisier's sad end in the French Revolution.

BL It's difficult to tell whether you're a realist, or whether it is symbolism, or whether it is abstraction of reality. There's a strange combination of the functional aspect, the intellectual concepts that are behind it, and the romantic; it's very difficult to try to pin you down.

RP I don't think it's sensible to categorize me in some set way, and say, "He is a formalist," or "He is a minimalist," or anything like that. The fact is I produce each object to have meaning and they're not done innocently or naively. I intend them to have meaning. I don't necessarily demand that the viewer see in them exactly what I put into them. I want to present objects with a certain kind of potency, so that they can be interpreted by the viewer, so that they do have a visual life of their own. I'm not there to explain the pieces once I go. The only explanation the viewer might get is the title alone, and one would hope that the works themselves have enough visual impact to cause the viewer to question why they were made in this way, and to be able to search into his own mind or areas of interest to begin to understand the piece.

CB How does the burning coast of Africa come into the sculpture?

RP Well, one thing is that the world of the mind, which is what I believe the sculptures are all about, need not necessarily be descriptive. It's possible to have thoughts about one area of knowledge, and thoughts about another area of knowledge, and to be able to bring those together, perhaps in the old surrealist tradition, and hope that the impact of these two kinds of knowledge will produce poetic resonance. That's what I was hoping for, in this piece, which has certain realistic elements. For example, the flying fish. The fish come out of the Folk Art style tradition, which means that you're imposing on the work one level of resonance here, the notion of the simple object which imitates the real, and it's simplicity is very clearly and directly stated in the piece. There are other very simply directed images, for example the crude representation of the waves. There's a certain mechanistic elegance in the galvanized steel roof cladding being used in imitation of the waves, with the ripples of waves in the sand bars when the waves have passed by. All these become representations of the real thing. The burning coast of Africa connects to that theatrical representation of literature, the notion of reading. It's the one thing which, although it is a real element, with real fireplace-sized flame, is a direct response to the need to put another level of poetic resonance into the piece. Initially the flames had been conceived to be flat bars of flame, and if you look at the initial model of the piece you notice them this way. But the actual flames themselves, in the shape of the coast of Africa, came out of one of those serendipitous situations where I had phoned a friend and mentioned to him that I'd just completed making the ocean; he was chiding me in a humorous way for my arrogance in having attempted to make the sea, and he said, "What's next? the entire coast of Africa?" That's when I got the inspiration to change the flames from a flat bar of flame into one representing the shape of Africa as you see in on the map. It has actually both coasts of Africa, the east coast sitting in front of the west coast. You can see it on this side, it's basically from Algeria through to South Africa, and it was just a way of lightening the piece both visually and intellectually, which goes back to the thing you were talking about initially, a fascination for romantic literature. I don't think it's romantic literature in the literal



way: that is I'm not actually following the poems of Wordsworth, Browning and so on, but I am by nature a romantic, as I think I state in the catalogue. But it's a question of romantic inspiration in the best sense of romance—that which causes one to have reveries about the nature of real life. Out of a reverie about the idea of literature came the notion of trying to portray what it was like to read. It's a very hard thing to portray, the notion of literature.

I did actually conceive the piece as a unit, once I had made the first flying fish, and made the first flying fish flap its wings. It was a question of altering some of the pieces. This was done in the model-making process, through that serendipitous comment, and finally, at the end, by looking at the piece very hard and asking myself what had to be changed. Between the initial model and the final piece, there are quite a number of changes. Some were changed for reasons of visual design. But basically it was conceived as a unit. It was conceived on this large scale to talk about that aspect of literature which I enjoy so much. It's that when one opens a good book, a well-written book, all of a sudden the words that you see disappear, and you're presented with a series of images, and the book becomes as real as a real experience. Now in this case I used a theatrical model, because like a theatrical model it emphasizes the nature of our willingness to suspend disbelief, in these black marks on the page, and to begin to see those as the real image. That's what fascinates me. So this piece again parallels that theatrical suspension of disbelief and looks at the literary suspension of disbelief.

CB Is there any political statement at all?

RP No. And I'm not unaware of the situation in Africa—you can't open a newspaper without being aware of it. But it's not the Africa of the newspapers; it's the Africa of literature. The piece is literature, and the Africa of literature that I respond to is that notion of darkest Africa, that kind of Africa which resonates not in the flames as in the burning down of houses, or the "necklace" and the people in South Africa, but in the notion of the campfire around which one sits, in the notion of the story of Africa. I have at home a wonderful small book which I picked up at a second hand store once, and it's called—the title is written in green and the spine is gold—it's called *Stories by English Authors: Africa*. And it's all stories by

nineteenth century writers, stories of the Africa of my childhood reading. This is not a political Africa; it's a literary Africa. And it may be artificial. But oddly enough, it's as real as the real Africa. And that's what this piece states: that the reality of literature can be ascribed to the real world.

BL It seems that there's this conflict in you, though. There's this coolness in your art because of the materials and because of the machinery that propels the living imagery.

RP I don't believe that in visual art one has to get a physical tactile response to enjoy art. So I don't worry about that in my own pieces. I set them up and, yes, there is a certain kind of coolness and distance that I function with in my own work. But my primary enjoyment of them and other visual art is visual, so that is actually built into the nature of the pieces themselves. In the case of the pieces encased in acrylic boxes and so on, it's partly done for protection; it's partly done to enhance the precious nature of the objects, to give them that precious museum feel. But at the same time, I don't try, in the case of something in an acrylic box, to restrict the enjoyment of it, because as I say, the enjoyment I feel in sculpture is fundamentally visual and intellectual as opposed to tactile and intuitive.

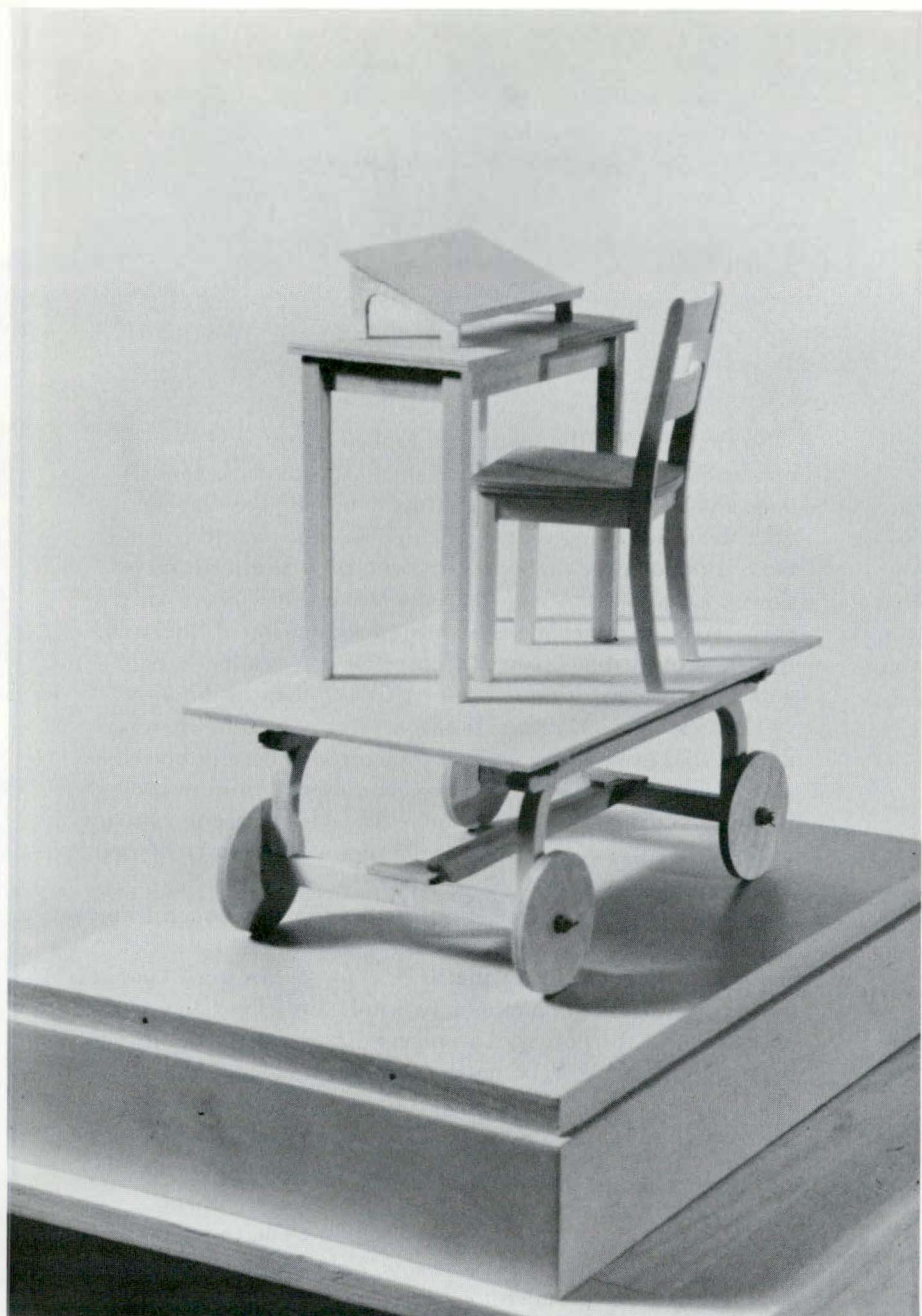
BL The piece *Literature* is broken into four different components. Your other pieces all seem to be attached, held together as one unique piece; this is the only one that I can think of where the work is broken up into four distinct pieces.

RP It has to do with the nature of scale, the nature of theatre, the intimacy of the piece. Although the piece is quite large, and the pieces have a physical separation between them, I knew they would be presented in a gallery context, and therefore would have the definition of being one piece by having sufficient space around them. I did not want to unify the pieces, for example, by putting them on some kind of other floor, or platform, because I think it would emphasize too much the theatrical nature of the work; in other words, it would cause the thing to be more about theatre than I wished.

While it sits on the floor, each of these pieces relates to the others, and yet also allows the viewer to relate to them directly, by being able to walk through and among the pieces, and to stand on the same floor on which the pieces stand. Now that also implies the notion of viewpoint, and I've been fairly careful to try to set it up in such a way that the viewpoint, which I intended to be the first viewpoint of the piece, follows the cart over the waves to the flying fish beyond. I've always set it up in galleries so that that's the initial viewpoint. And I think that because of our anthropomorphic notions of nature and beasts, and confronting other people and so on, that most of us would tend to feel that if I'm going to look at this, I want to face the fish, rather than face the fishes' tails.

BL Yet, just as in Lawrence Durrell's *Alexandria Quartet*, where there are four different people, and the books show each of their viewpoints, and there's an order to the books, so in your piece you can go from the scholar's chair, to the waves, to the burning coast of Africa, and you can go to the flying fish, and you can look at the story behind each one of those. They are four characters in a play, and there is distinct interplay between the four pieces, and yet at the same time they hold their individuality in their origins and in their space and form.

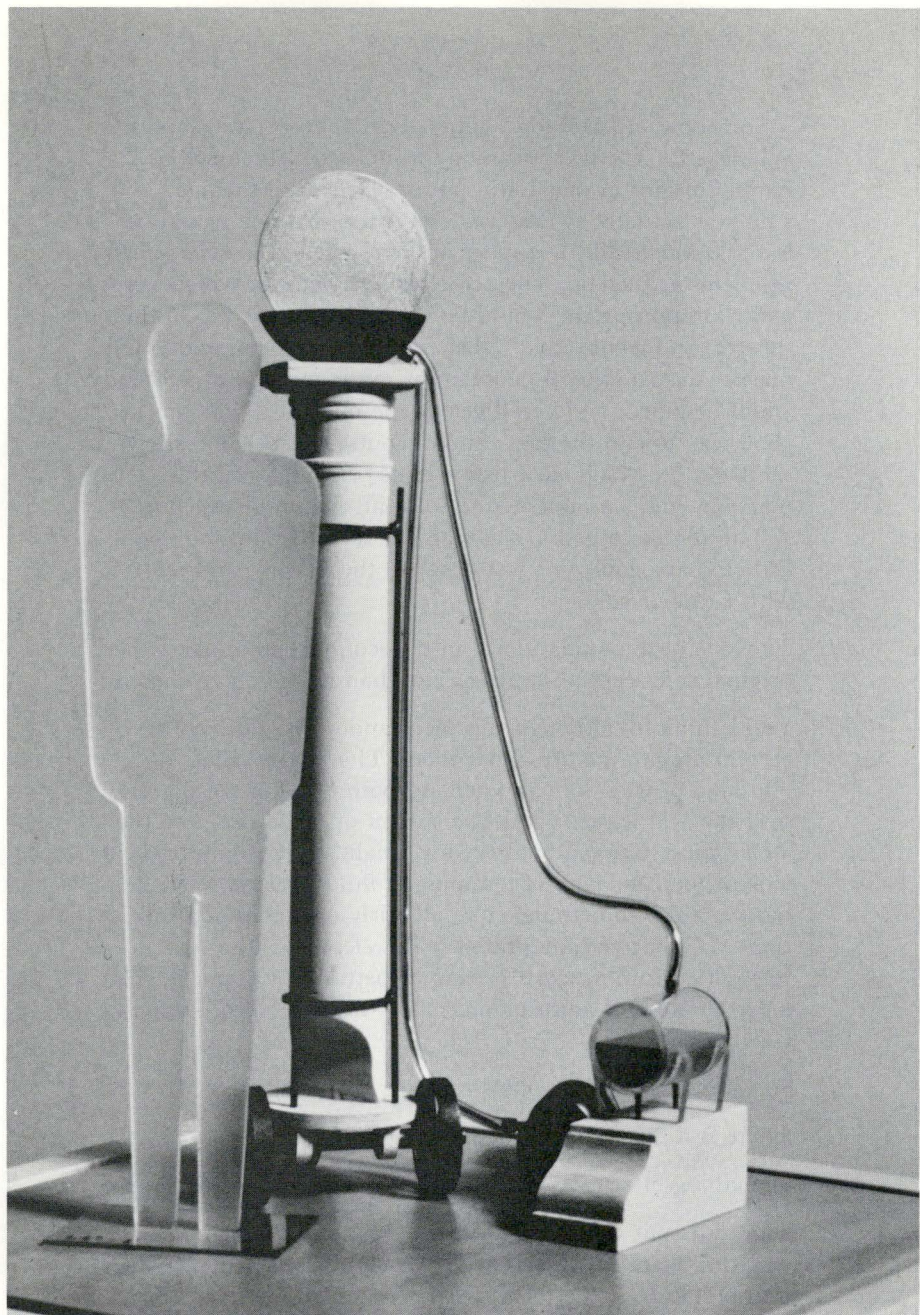
RP Yes, there are those separate elements, and each element is intended to be read as a particular thing; you have to make it very clear what's behind those objects by their representations. For example, the Rolling Scholar's desk, which I very precisely based on a library chair and a standard kind of table, so it would have a very sensible and immediate feel: almost anybody who looked at that would read it as being a standard library type chair, and then it was put on the Rolling Scholar's cart for very specific reasons. One is that it implies linearity, the same kind of linearity we have in reading a book; it also provides a temporal implication. It's interesting that you mention *The Alexandria Quartet*, because I didn't really understand that temporal implication until I'd gone to Egypt and had a chance to look at a lot of Egyptian sculpture, and to study Egyptian history, and realize that so often in Egyptian art the objects were placed on sleds to imply that movement through time, through life. In other words, that we're born, we live and then we die, that we go forward on some kind of a path.



So that sense of the temporal, implied by the cart as opposed to a sled, is very important to this piece, because it does involve itself, not only indirectly, but directly in time, with the slow pacing that the flying fish raise, counting out six beats a minute. Or the waves, moving back and forth very slowly. Like counting out the beats of the waves, there's a rhythmic aspect, so time is both implied and stated directly in the piece. And that's part and parcel of how reading a book, and literature, takes time. I hope that's evident in the piece.

The title of *Ex Machina* initially was "El Dorado." It was part of that original inspiration. I changed it because the title seemed inappropriate to the work. It didn't seem to imply what I wanted, which was a fairly theatrical device to raise up in an artificial way this disk of gold and allow it to be viewed as an object of wonder.

The piece has certain religious implications, although I don't think it's about religion as such. But certainly the notion of invoking awe in an object that is dear to you, or some kind of absolutely immediate aesthetic response, has its parallels in religion. And the notion of an object placed upon a column to raise it up, to make it be noticed, has religious parallels. I think of Venice, for example, and the two columns in the Piazzetta outside the Piazza San Marco, where St. Theodore conquers the crocodile, on one side, and on the other side sits the lion of St. Mark, on the top of his column. Political parallels exist in all the columns in which we have figures of victory, or of liberty, of Napoleon or Nelson standing on the top. So there are parallels for the use of the column and for the notion of religious or political theatre, which is how those things fit.



Somehow “El Dorado” didn’t seem appropriate to that. Whereas *Ex Machina*, meaning “from (or of) the machine,” implies origins in that Latin phrase, *Deus Ex Machina*. This was actually a theatrical chair device which would be lowered almost like a trapeze in Greek theatre to solve all the problems at the end. The actor playing Zeus, or whichever god was appropriate, would be lowered from the top of the theatre, and would say, “Okay, you’ll marry you, and you’ll marry you, and you’ll be unhappy, and you’ll go to jail, and you’ll be killed, and you’ll get all the money.” That was a good way to end the play, and of course this became known as the *Deus Ex Machina*. I like it in its original form, this machine-god coming down to solve all the problems! But calling the piece god in the machine seemed a bit too much, a little too arrogant, so I just dropped the “Deus” and was left with *Ex Machina*.

BL The lack of the human form in the sculpture also makes the original title seem less appropriate than what you’ve chosen.

RP Yes, I think so, although this piece and *Tropic* do have a certain human quality about them. They do parallel, in an odd kind of way, human size, and both of them are slightly over-life—at least *Ex Machina* is a bit over-life size, and the *Tropic* piece is actually about my height, so it’s about right to look at, but this kind of pumping of fluids from A to B and back again is something we’re all fairly conscious of at all times. It has a certain kind of body reference, a human reference. Humanized is perhaps a better way to put it, there’s a certain kind of anthropomorphic—not reference—but resonance.

BL So we’re back to the robots that are people again.

RP There is that robotic element to them.

BL Something of arteries, these fluids contained by machines.

RP That does put the robotic element back in, although I wouldn’t want to stress that too much as the single obvious interpretation of the piece, because it’s certainly not. But it’s one or more of these layers that one tries to build into the piece.

BL The important thing is that the scientific revolution did have a tremendous impact on your choice of subject matter.

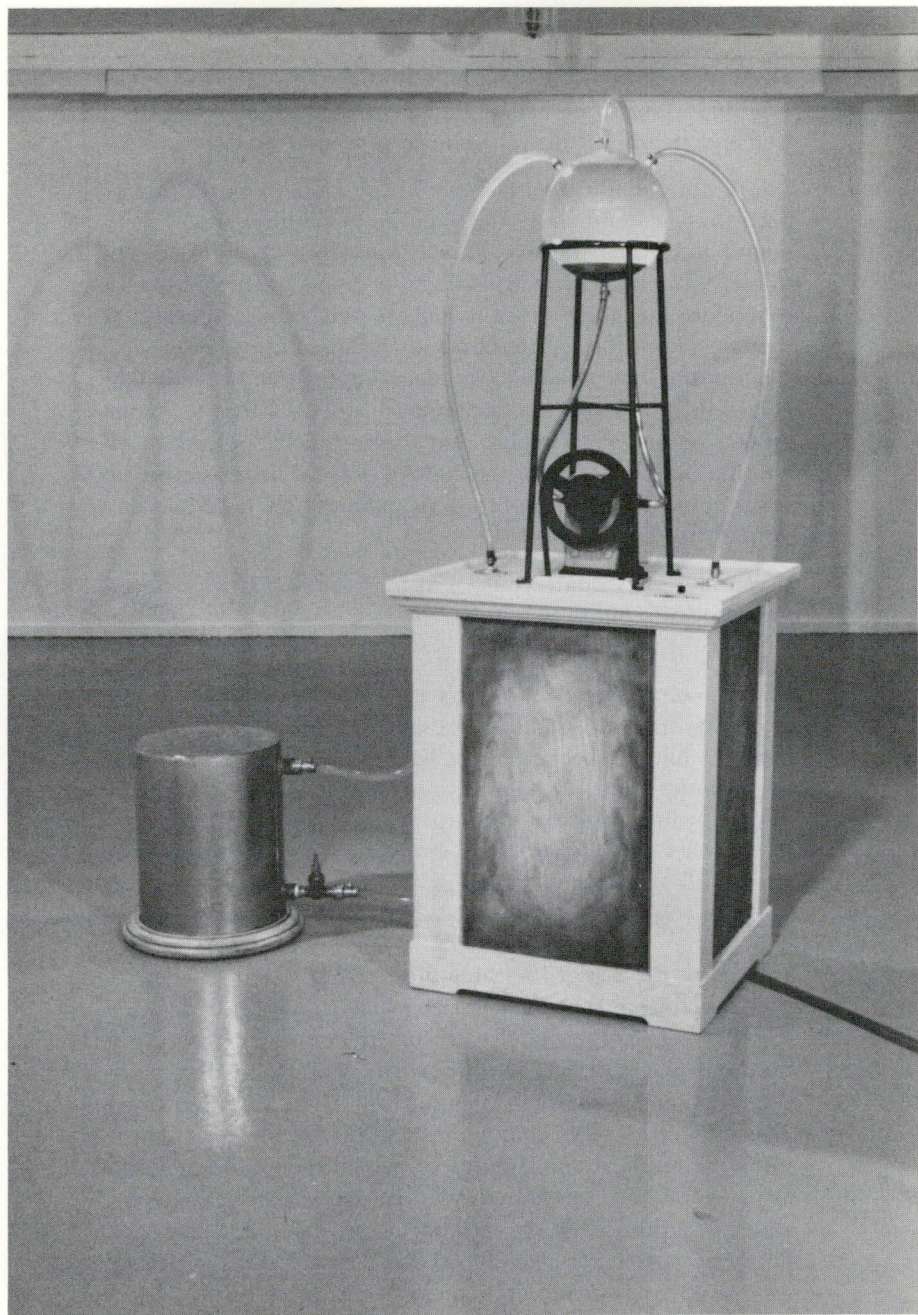
RP That's absolutely the case. I live in the modern world that's been shaped so much by the scientific revolution. You mentioned Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* as source material, and I think in an odd way it is. *Frankenstein* is one of the first pieces of modern literature. It's a model for much contemporary thought about the nature of our own humanity, of our relationship to technology, the deep implication of technology gone wild, the implications of our control over that technology. Of course, one of the things one always talks about, as a sculptor, is the nature of the control one has over a piece, both while constructing it, and to some extent, after letting it loose on the world.

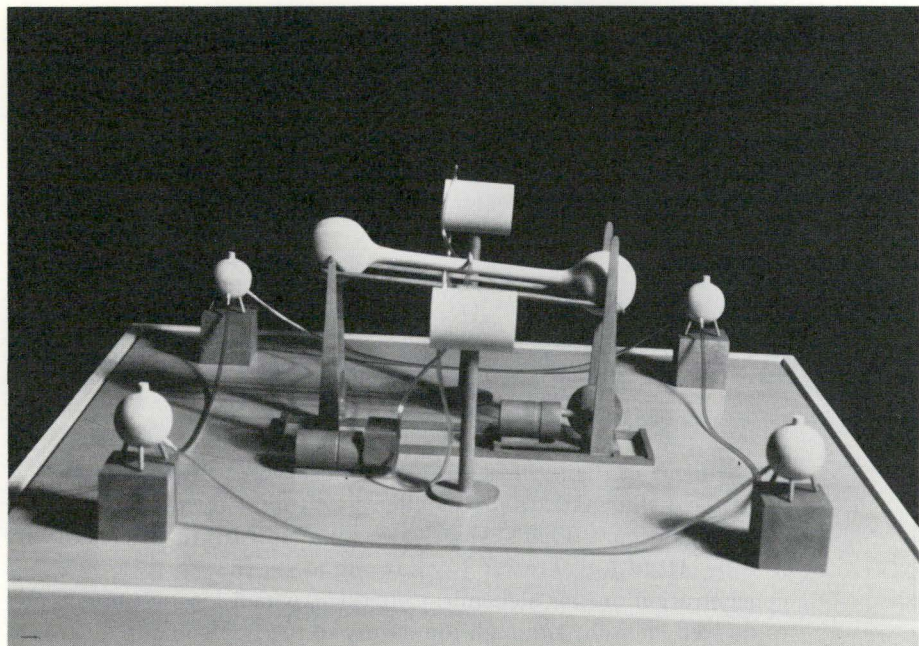
BL If you had to evaluate yourself as part of one particular group, or a type of sculptor —

RP Well, like everybody else, I'm a contemporary sculptor in a contemporary time. But I don't see myself as belonging to any particular group. I don't at the same time think of what I'm doing as unique, because there have been other sculptors in the twentieth century who have utilized machinery, and I'm just following in their fairly largish tradition. I can think of many other precedents, that I can get from the library books which talk about that.

CB How did you get the name for *Tropic*?

RP *Tropic* was the last of the three pieces constructed. It comes out very much from that image of Henning Brandt and the discovery of phosphorus. I used that image when I tried to set up the problem of how to support the glass globe. The construction is somewhat different from that, for visual reasons. The title of the piece comes out of wanting to give a slight romantic implication to the piece, which the notion of Tropic, as in Tropic of Cancer, links with geography and cosmology, which are implied by these things in the piece, and mercury pump because I felt it really needed a description of itself in a way *Ex Machina* didn't. The heart of this piece is this notion of pumping, of one material being moved to pump against the other all the time.





The heart of the piece is this glass globe, where this magic alchemical change takes place, where two things are mixed yet no change occurs. That's what it was all about. In the original, *Massing Model for "Tropic,"* I was trying to get the concentration on this alchemical interface, which I wasn't able to do well enough, although the nature of the fluids might have been clearer in the original model. But the nature of the point of interaction, which was critical to me, was not. That comes back to the image of Henning Brandt, where the entire focus of that sculpture is also the source of light, in this glowing chamber of phosphorus.

CB Does this ball light up?

RP No, the ball does not light up, no. It obviously is a very bright, attractive area; when the piece is lit, it's the piece that attracts all the light. It's also the piece that is in front of your eyes; it's evidently the focus of the action. When a viewer presses the button, all of sudden there's a cascade of silver bubbles falling through the water.

CB They look like air bubbles but it's actually mercury.

RP Mercury splashing through water. The other reason for the name "Tropic" is that I wanted a name that is non-specific for this piece, for I wanted the concentration to be more and more on the nature of the interaction itself, the physical response, rather than intellectual response.

The other implication of "Tropic," the one I hoped might connect, is that notion of the geographic one, the Tropic of Cancer, that is, the Tropic as a reality.

CB Does that fit in with the mercury pump?

RP Yes, because that's what it is. It is a mercury pump. Also, it implies the age of discovery. It's a very obscure thought, (or plot?) I must admit, and one of the things that we mentioned before is the notion of coolness. This work visually perhaps is cooler than all of the others. The colours are grey and white and black. It has no other colour involved in it at all. Graphically, or emotionally, it's a very cool piece. It takes this hot notion of tropics and cools it down to a much more abstract notion of geography as opposed to region. That's something I tend to do in a lot of pieces. I do impose a certain distance in all the work in that way. I see them as tools almost for meditation, tools for contemplation, as opposed to scientific instruments. None of these objects, despite their scientific look, in any way at all proves anything. They make no scientific experiments whatsoever, and they don't claim to do that. But they are all tools for contemplation.

CB And in the other pieces, do you talk about religion as contemplation?

RP I don't think contemplation is necessarily linked to religion.

CB Meditation?

RP Yes, but those are human actions and not necessarily religious.

BL There's no religious connotation in your work, is there?

RP No, I've never thought there was. I think there's human connotation.

BL And no political overtones?

RP They tend not to be political. I don't see them as political. Although some people do not see this — and see them as only political because of their own intense beliefs. But that's the nature of the object. The object goes out there and people will impose on it their own thoughts. I see nothing wrong with that. I can imagine that someone with a deep concern for ecological pollution might look at *Tropic (Mercury Pump)* and his first thoughts would be about the poisonous nature of mercury in water.

BL Were those your thoughts at the time you were making it?

RP One has to be extremely careful when working with mercury. But that's a practical consideration. I don't believe it plays a fundamental part in the sculpture. It's the notion of mercury as quicksilver, one of the materials discovered by the early alchemists, which in itself has visual and intellectual fascination, and historical connection to ideas of alchemy and to our own personal history. It's the fascination children feel when they first get to play with a little lump of mercury, which we've all done in school. The sculpture talks then not about science, but about wonderment. That's what I want the pieces to talk about. I want them to talk about wonderment and the ideas of excitement, of curiosity, of creativity, of commitment.

CB Do they follow the rules of science?

RP They follow the rules of technology but not science.

CB Are you learning from and experimenting with the tricks and illusions to —

RP To some extent I'm experimenting with illusions and I enjoy the process that implies for myself, but the objects themselves are sculptures, and sculptures are not scientific devices. They are aesthetic devices, philosophical devices. They are objects which imply an examination for intellectual and contemplative reasons and that's how I want these to function as well. So, although they may resemble objects of utility from another field, they are not. They are sculptures. That's why I show them in art galleries. They would never be shown in a science setting, because a scientist would look and say, "Well, what does it do?" And they don't do anything. But they do provoke thought. And I would hope also that the titles provoke thought, not only about the pieces themselves, but about the related areas that these pieces might refer to, which might be enhanced by their poetic resonance.

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- 26 *Study Model for Literature*, 1987, wood, steel, paint, paper, plastic, 11¼" x 20½" x 16½".
Courtesy Equinox Gallery, Vancouver, B.C.
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- 32 Joseph Wright of Derby (1734-1797), *Henning Brandt and the Discovery of Phosphorus*, 1795.
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- 49 *Massing Model for Tropic (First Version)*, 1987, wood, paint, brass, plastic, 14½" x 26½" x 26½"; scale 1:4.

Photography by Richard Prince.