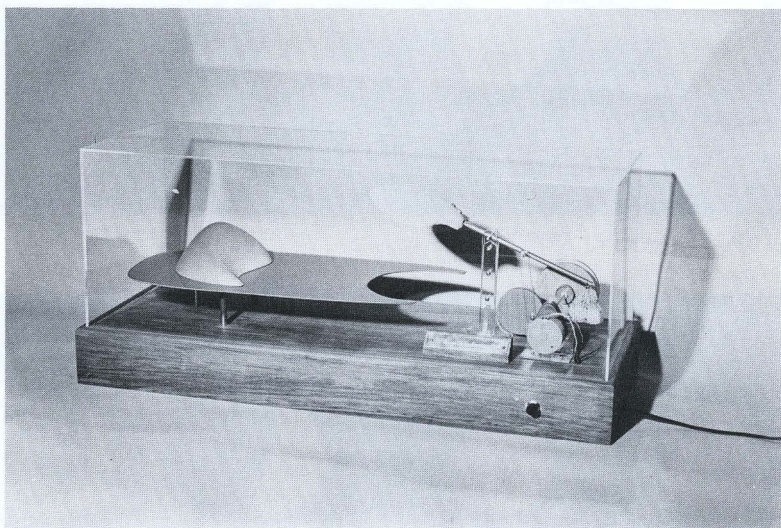


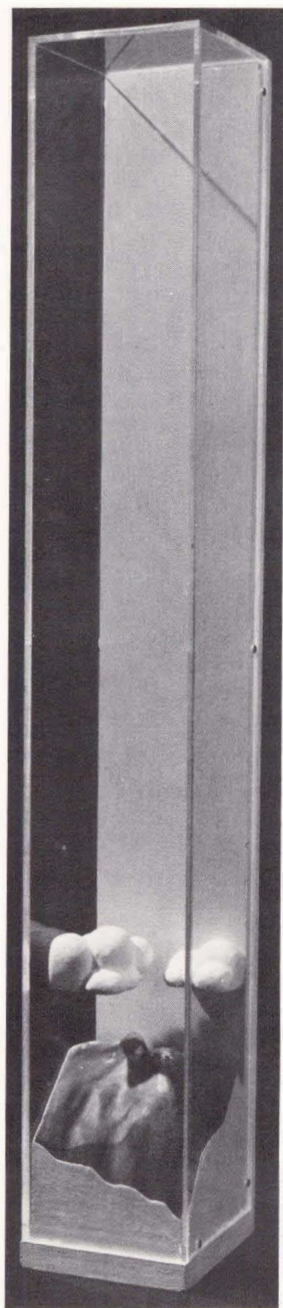
Richard Prince / STATEMENT



Richard Prince was interviewed at his home in Vancouver on July 8, 1980 by Lois Redman. The following statement has been abridged and rearranged for publication from that interview.

Most of the things I did for the first three years had enclosures around them of one kind or another.¹ I'm still very interested in that idea, but for the last three or four years I haven't often been working with it. I've been doing all kinds of other things, although I'm still very aware of the power of putting enclosures around objects, thereby making them mysterious, powerful, altar-like and relic-like. It's the power of seeing things in cases: it removes them from your world.

Right now I'm more interested in working in a direct scale. I used to work in a small scale because it was easier for me to do that. If you want to keep someone away from a small-scale thing, you've got to get some kind of a barrier in there. I don't understand things very much through the tactile sense: I look at things more, and try to encourage the viewer of my works to look at them. I guess I was putting things in cases in order to promote the "looking" as opposed to the "feeling." I'm making things now which are on a larger scale and which, by their own nature and scale, tend to keep the viewer at a distance. That's just an accident of the production of the work.



In the early works the "story" was just excitement, just excitements about where you live, what you see, and how you relate to where you are. It's a question of trying to locate oneself in that physical sense, and I think those early works are all about that:

"Where am I physically located?"

"What do I like about where I'm located?" or merely, "What do I see?"

I open my eyes and look around Vancouver and I was raised in and live in particular kinds of environments, so I'm just reflecting those influences. I don't feel that landscape needed commenting upon except in the personal sense that I had to say something about it.

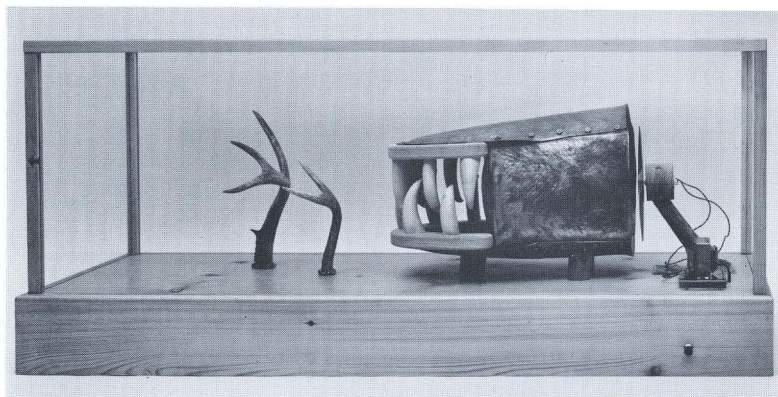
In the electronic pieces² I wasn't using a technical language so much as a personal language. It may have been a touch obscure for some people when I was making electronic machines which would imply the landscape, but, to an electronics person, it would be an absolutely dead-simple apparatus. It was a question of how I could interpret them and get particular excitements out of them by making them in other kinds of concepts or exploring them in other ways.



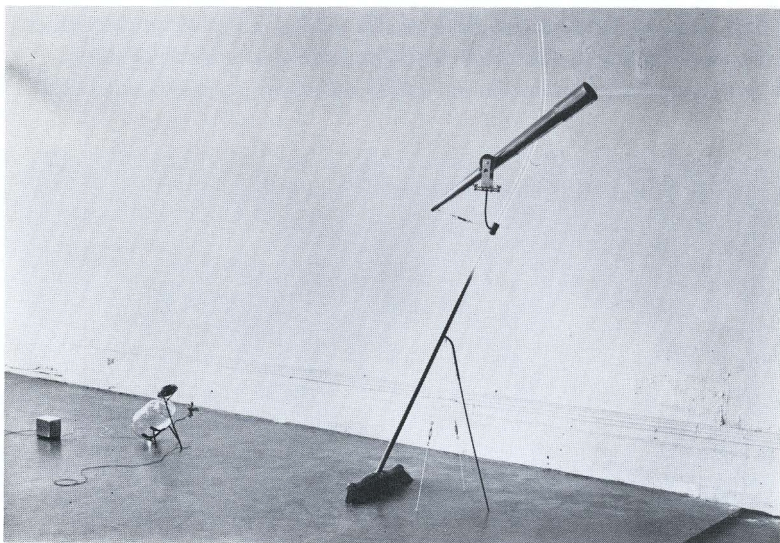
I did quite a number of wind machines. One, for a particular client, made a duplication inside his house of the wind that was outside.³ The wind was a big excitement because it had an ephemeral and transient nature. Also, I was very interested in taking a grand event and reducing it, so that there was almost a ridiculous comparison between the immense event which is the wind and this small, almost “hokey” kind of presentation of it. In one sense, that, to me, was the magic of the transformation — taking a grand event, translating it to a small event and ending up with something which deepens a particular kind of power. It’s re-interpreted for the individual in new terms, and those terms are the terms of diminished things without the real thing having been diminished.

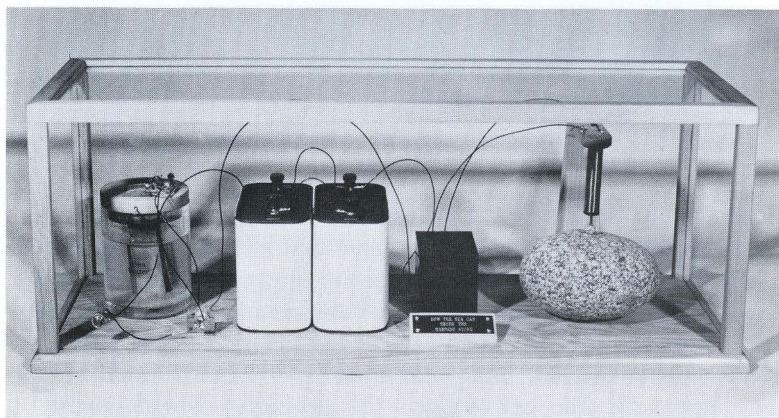
I think that what was often interpreted by others as whimsy was for me what I would like to think of as using things which didn't necessarily have a built-in problematic bias as a theme and not being interested in bringing to bear on them any kind of morose or dolorous sentiments. I don't necessarily have that kind of tragic point of view and I was interested in looking at things from the point of view that I saw things.

I can present objects in a particular configuration, but it's the viewer who actually brings them to life. I just present them in the sense that they *can* be brought to life. However, I'm sure that there are many viewers to whom you could show these and the works would have no life whatsoever because they either don't relate to the viewers' culture, or the way they have to live, or the way they think, or a number of other reasons. When I present an object to myself I can see it as having a certain life and metaphorical nature. "Metaphorical nature" is the way I would describe it because it does have to do with the implication of one thing becoming another, and that's how objects function, I think. Look at Gathie Falk presenting her teacups. She presents them in the sense that they become mystical. A very domestic object becomes cosmic by its removal from context, or its isolation, or by the fact that she's pointed her finger at it. I think that's what a sculptor does. A sculptor takes a particular material and puts it through some kind of transformation — whether it's just altering its space or context or whatever. If you want to take another case in point, look at someone like Bernini. He takes a lump of marble which everyone in Italy at that time would've known as a lump of stone from a particular mountain or nearby mountain, or may have been



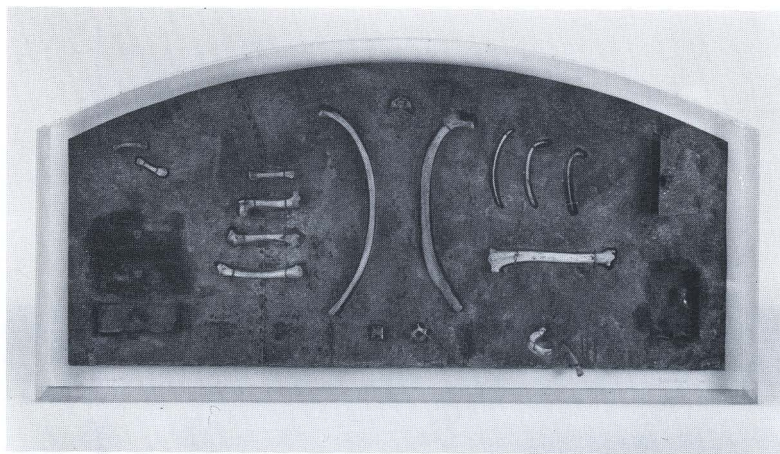
familiar with it as a building material and may or may not have been familiar with it being wrested out of the ground, and he transforms it into a living human being in a particular emotional state or being prepared for some kind of emotional conflict. It's the transformation of stone to simulacrum of something else that's really exciting. The metamorphosis there is profound. I present certain things, objects and materials, in a particular form so that they carry with them a certain power and story — a unified power and story — which is convincing, understandable and meaningful to the viewer.





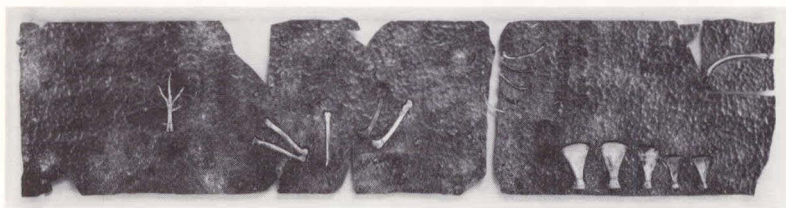
In some cases, for example, in the later *Ancient Language* series, my titles directly refer to the fact that I'm talking in a larger sense about language and that the things look ancient. They just happen to push the direction of the piece a little farther and a little faster in that way. Other works, however, are much more obviously explanatory by the title. . . . I think *How the Sea Can Erode the Hardest Stone* is one. The title is directly descriptive of the function. If you didn't have the title, you probably couldn't understand the piece, or you would understand it in a different way. I want people to understand in a certain way.

For some pieces the title has come first, say, for example, I'll be reading, or a particular phrase will pop to mind. Well, that happened the other week. I was watching a movie and one of the subtitles said, "Several years have passed." That's interesting, I'm sitting there, and all of a sudden several years have passed. All of a sudden, BANG, there was this set of words which implied something quite large and grand.



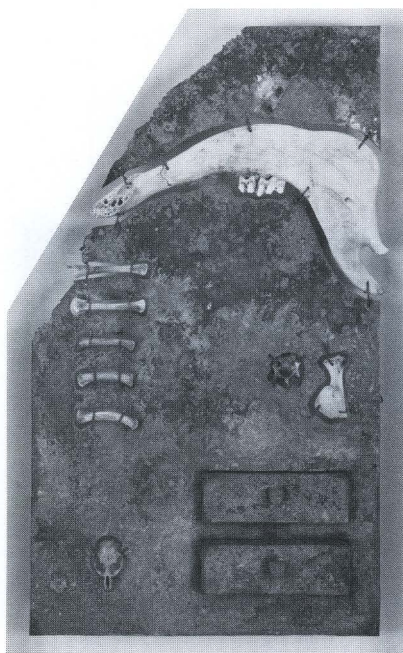
Beginning in 1976 or 1977, I did the *Ancient Language* series, a series of works that were on sheet copper that had been pounded with a hammer. I would take a perfect, pristine, gorgeous copper sheet and I would pound it to make it look older and anonymous, make it look like a more raw material. Next I would cut shapes into it in which bones could be inserted, hung with rawhide, and then I would treat the copper with chemicals to give it that greenish-yellowish-blueish tint that copper becomes when it's exposed to the elements. Last April [1979] I did *The Planets*, which was the last work in that series.

I think there are certain parallel relationships between the earlier enclosed works and the *Ancient Language* series, such as the interest in history and things being shifted or removed in terms of time and chronology, and the interest in the landscape, but, beyond those larger points of which I was constantly aware, I don't think there's any kind of hidden relationship between the early landscape-oriented works and the landscape-process works and the copper and bone pieces, which have a tremendously archaeological and anthropological flavour. There was certainly a progression, but it wasn't conscious, and, at the same time, it wasn't unconscious. It's just something that happened as I began to get more excited about certain ideas and could replace one idea with another. I think that one thing which is constant through those changes has been the fact that they're interested in the nature of materials in themselves. I'm very conscious of the choices of materials I make.



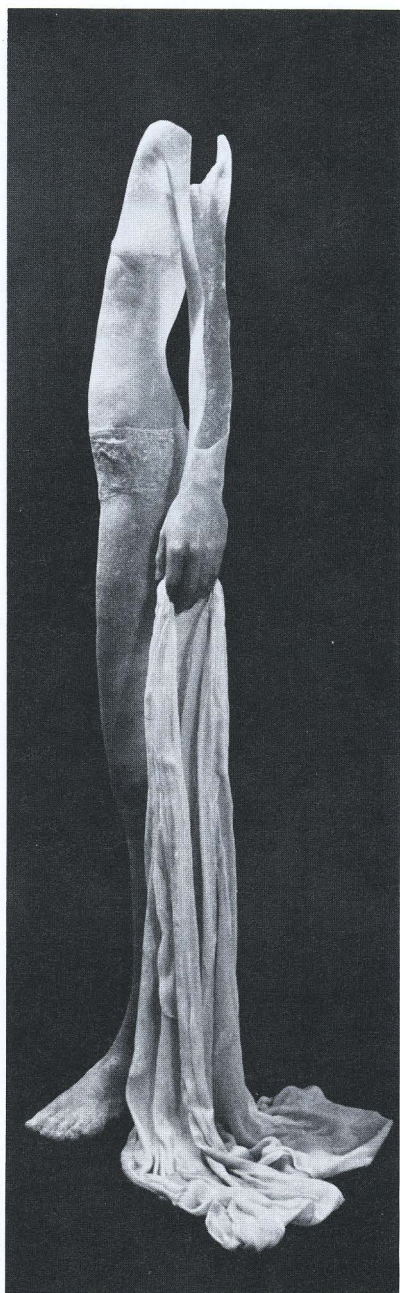
I think I was interested in implying principles and patterns and bits of language — not in any kind of linguistic way, but looking at the nature of language in terms of the way one can classify things, or analyze things, or point out differences and make numerical kinds of inferences and so on. I was just using bones as the vehicle for doing that. I think there's a larger language of objects such that each of the things we look at has a certain implication of history and context. Each thing can have whatever kind of story one wishes it to have, depending on the object and the individual examining it. I use objects which, to me, have associative power and I hope they have associative power to other people.

I present an object and that can be the touchstone for a tremendous number of expansions and developments of ideas using that object in context with another one, and what that can imply in the realm of meaning, all the sets of meanings and the intersection of those sets of meanings, and so on. That's where the excitement comes in art: you can present one thing and get so many more things out of it. It doesn't stop at any point. Although I was using bones as a non-living thing, the fact is that virtually everything has some kind of a history brought with it — bones are a little more exciting because we always keep thinking of our own deaths, whereas, say, a spoon might not at first seem quite as interesting.



The concept of history in the *Ancient Language* series is very complex because it has to do with history directly and history indirectly. I was making obvious “museum pieces” — things that looked as though you could find them in a museum — yet, at the same time, I was very conscious of the fact that I was doing it in an art context, which is different from the historical, museum context. I was playing a game with that — you know, the point at which one actually sits to look at objects is the historical point of view one takes on things. I wasn’t making a piece from just one chronological framework, but kept shifting the frameworks. I could see myself

as the person actually making something like that, and was aware of the techniques which might have been used at that time. Nevertheless, I also realized that I’m a person living in the twentieth century who can buy sheets of copper which were mined in B.C., and probably processed somewhere in eastern Canada, perhaps, or the States, and sold by a Swedish firm. There are all those kinds of global inter-relationships which occur the minute you buy a sheet of copper. I can sit in my basement in middle-class Vancouver and cut the copper with tinsnips, and I’m quite aware of the fact that there was an historical chronology applied to the thing which was different than what the pieces directly suggest. They suggest someone who’s trying to retreat himself into the past, and that’s not it at all. It was just that I wanted to make my own museum.



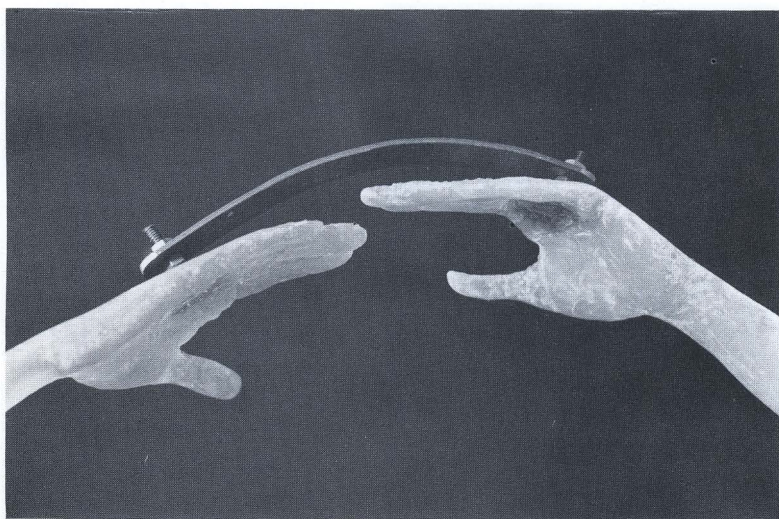
Structural Analysis with the Figure was the first title of the Burnaby Art Gallery show,⁴ but I shortened it to *Figure Structures* because it was so much easier and I suddenly realized that what I was doing was making sculptures in fibreglass which had allusions to architectural references but really didn't analyze the architecture, and I don't think they really analyzed the figure — certainly in no anatomical way. I was presenting the surfaces of figures because I was excited by the shapes and surfaces I could get and the implications of structure that they brought with them.

I think those figure structure works were very different from the works I'd done previously.

They were fully constructed out of raw materials as opposed to using found materials, and they didn't look like my early works, or the works I'd done previously — the copper works and so on — and they were, to

some extent, a kind of self-imposed formal exercise. In another sense, they were just a response to making something which I had an opportunity to make in a particular context,⁵

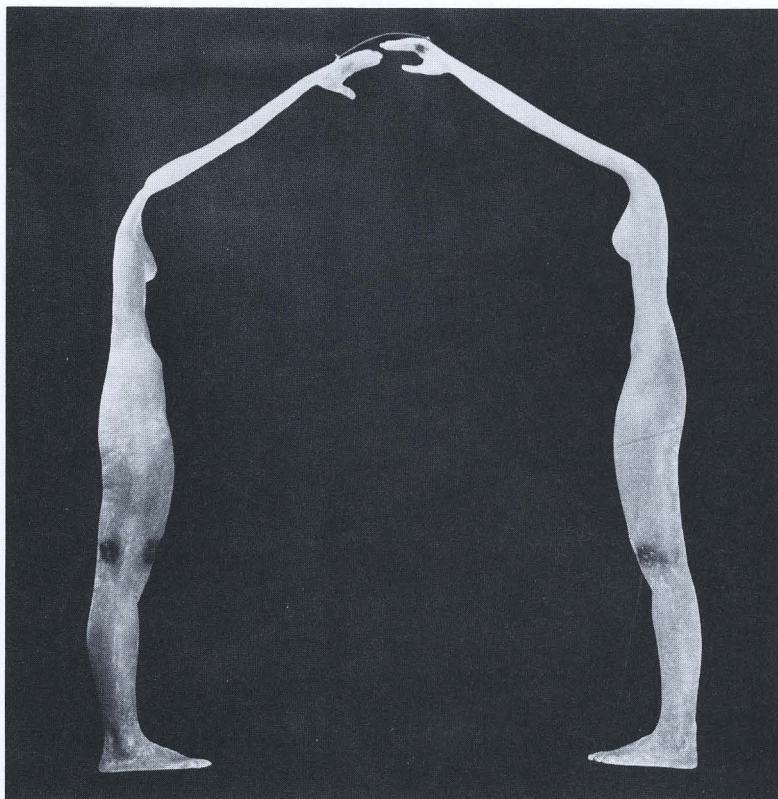
and which I continued to make and develop because I got interested in them. I'm still very interested in them.



I would pose the models in a way that would seem to refer to an architectural form without necessarily depending on the actual physical principles of some of those structures. For example, when I did the *Mother and Daughter Arch*, a true arch would have demanded real compression of structure through the entire length of the arm. Now, there obviously was a certain amount, but, at the same time, there wasn't. I'm not really making an arch; I'm implying an arch and talking about arches in a more remote sense. The look of things — I'm interested in the look of things, and what they might mean.

I think the descriptions of them as being “shells”⁶ and “husks”⁷ are very appropriate. To me those words always imply that their substance has left the objects and, in one sense, the physical substance had left the objects that I made. I would have a particular individual stand in a place and I would make a shell from her, then she would leave and I would be able to work with that shell. I was making just the shells, but I was hoping that they would imply the rest of the form as well.

They were allusions — that one form can look somewhat like another. There are certain things that we all forget about. If you do any studying or reading in physics you realize that those obscure rules you learn have real application to your daily life, for example, the fact that your legs really do function like columns. There are a lot of



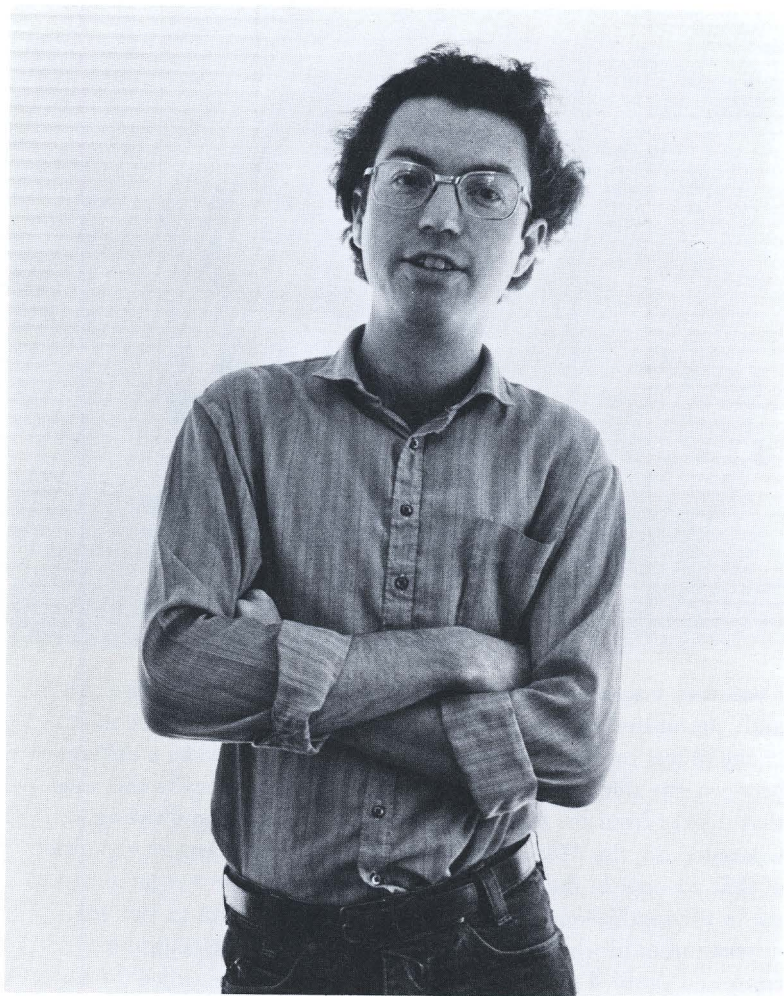
those similarities between things we look at as being pure structural form and “out there” that actually do have a relationship to our own selves. There is a relationship and it’s absolutely direct. I think that’s, in one sense, the way the figure structures came into play. I just happened to choose particularly obvious architectural references which everyone in Art History has to learn about. For example, “Palladian” comes directly out of Palladio.





I was very interested in that sense of similarity and difference. An arch, no matter how perfectly you make it, cannot be a true mirror image unless you're a wondrous builder. There has to be a difference between one side and the other. At the same time, they're the same in that they're from the same artisan's hand, or the same drawing, or whatever. So, the *Mother and Daughter Arch* was just an expansion of that concept in the wonderful opportunity which was presented to me in the mother and daughter models. I then began to look for opportunities in which that similarity and difference could be expressed again. I made the Palladian window piece called *The Twins — A Palladian Window*, in which there was even a more direct relationship than in the final piece in that series called *The Sisters*,⁸ which utilized two sisters as its basis.

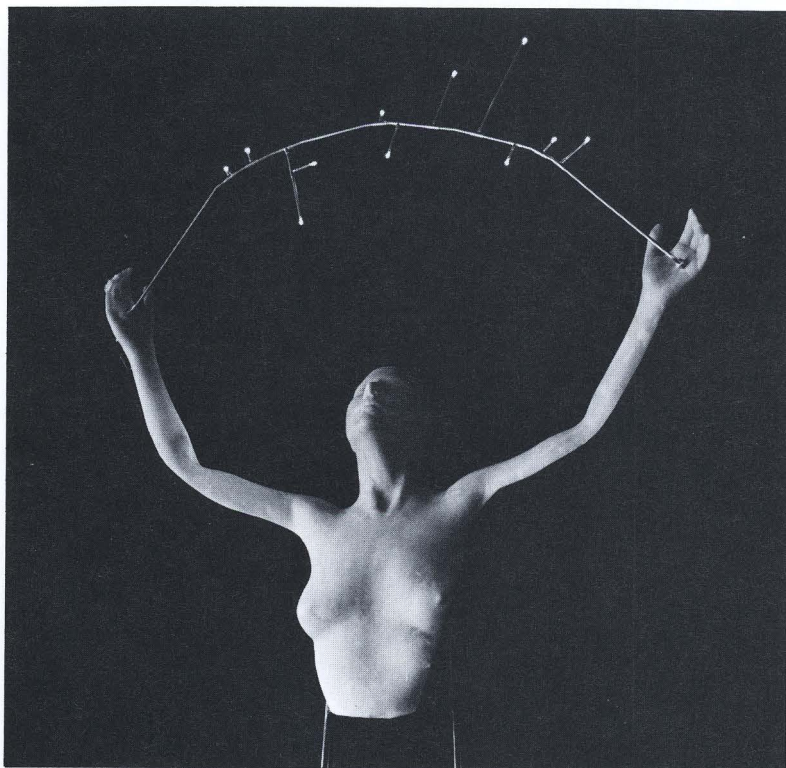
The Sisters does have the faces completing the figures in order to give the sculpture an appropriate visual balance. The other pieces somehow didn't seem to need faces. For example, in *The Twins* I'm not interested in depicting the psychology or the attitudes of two twins as might be expressed through their faces. I was really interested in just the minimum description of form that I would need to imply the window and to imply the twins: nothing more than that.



“Translating,” “transforming,” “re-making,” “reproducing,” or “selecting” — all these words are appropriate to what I do. The things that first excited me to make things still excite me. I find myself continually reworking the same themes in new ways, new materials, and new statements. I think if I could make some kind of statement at this point about what I feel I’m interested in, it would be “depicting what I see or what I think I would like to see” — things that seem real to me. They are always things “out there.” I’m not basically an inwardly-directed person. I’m reinterpreting, through

a personal bias, things that are actually visible in the real world or were at one time visible.

I'm doing a series of works right now that are based on the idea of the northern lights. Actually, I've never seen the northern lights. Other people have, and they've told me about them and I read about them, and so one, so I know they're there. They seem, at this point, a wonderful symbol to use and to make real for me. The fact that I haven't seen the northern lights doesn't mean that I can't make them. They just seem to be a wonderful phenomenon. I'm not trying to make a scientific representation of it or to analyze it in any technical way. I'm interested in the notion of phenomena and the "awesome-ness of awe" — stepping beyond the thing itself and going directly to the excitement. I'm using a physical phenomenon as a touchstone to responses which have to do with the relationship between the way a person sees and the way he or she thinks.



Richard Prince / IMAGES

The Moon Boxes, (image is repeated), 1970, wood, aluminum and cloth, 7.6 x 14 x 14 cm. Collection: Kathy Prince.

A Breeze on the Southern Isle, 1976, mixed media, 33.1 x 74.3 x 30.5 cm. Collection of the artist.

The Lions, 1972, plastic, wood and paint, 45.7 x 7.6 x 8.9 cm. Private collection, Vancouver.

Wind Machine, 1975, two-unit piece — inside and outside (inside pictured), inside unit dimensions, 50.8 x 55.9 x 50.8 cm. Collection: Ian Davidson.

Coastal Landscape — In the Teeth of the Gale, 1976, driftwood, wood, copper, whale's teeth, electrical devices, deer antler, 53.3 x 121.9 x 44.5 cm. Collection of the artist.

Star Trap with Lure, Camouflage Version, 1978, mixed media, broom height is 213.4 cm. Courtesy: The Equinox Gallery.

How the Sea can Erode the Hardest Stone, 1973, mixed media, 27.9 x 76.2 x 25.4 cm. Collection: The National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

Ancient Language No. IV, 1978, copper, bone, rawhide, etc., 83.8 x 162.6 x 12.7 cm. Private collection, Vancouver.

Ancient Language Scroll No. I, 1978, copper, bone, rawhide, wood, lead, glass bottle, plastic, 61 x 231.1 x 12.7 cm. Private collection. Calgary.

Ancient Language — Fragment No. V, 1978, copper, bone, lead, rawhide, plastic and wood case, 91.4 x 55.9 x 10.2 cm.

Standing Grecian Figure — Two Columns, 1979, fibreglass with cloth, life-size. Private collection, Vancouver.

Mother and Daughter Arch, detail.

Mother and Daughter Arch, 1979, fibreglass, steel, life-size. Private collection, Burnaby.

Installation view, Burnaby Art Gallery, September-October, 1979.

The Twins — A Palladian Window, 1979, fibreglass, steel, life-size.

Portrait of Richard Prince, Nathan Hohn, October 1980.

Casting the Constellations, No. 1, 1980, fibreglass, metal and electrical devices, life size. This work is part of a recent series.

Photography: With thanks to Robert Keziere and Jim Gorman of the Vancouver Art Gallery, Nathan Hohn, Tod Greenaway and Richard Prince.

NOTES:

- ¹ Prince is referring to the years 1971 to 1974. Some of the "enclosures" he has used have been wooden boxes, plexiglass cases, jars and drawers. Prince's first major exhibition was a two-man show, with Dean Ellis, entitled *New Directions* at the Vancouver Art Gallery in 1972.
- ² Some examples of Prince's earlier electrical pieces are pictured. In *A Breeze on the Southern Isle*, a gear motor running on house current operates the arm to which the seashell is attached, causing a fanning motion. *Coastal Landscape — In the Teeth of the Gale* also uses electricity in the operation of its fan. The *Wind Machine* is an example of an electronic piece.
- ³ The *Wind Machine* operates from an anemometer on the roof which generates a current which Prince has amplified to drive another motor inside the house. The wind vane on the exterior component of the sculpture points direction and rotates a matched slave system which enables it to duplicate the wind's motion on the interior unit.
- ⁴ *Figure Structures*, Richard Prince exhibition, The Burnaby Art Gallery, Burnaby, B.C., September 19 - October 21, 1979.
- ⁵ Prince, in the Burnaby Art Gallery catalogue, states that the series arose out of a class discussion and began as a demonstration of a sculptural technique.
- ⁶ Art Perry, "Prince grows away from puns," the *Province*, September 20, 1979, p. C1.
- ⁷ Andrew Scott, "It's a fantastic show and a joy to the eye," *Vancouver Sun*, September 21, 1979, p. C19.
- ⁸ *The Sisters*, 1979, fibreglass, steel and wood, life-size, is shown in the upper left of the gallery installation reproduction. Also shown are *Standing Grecian Figure — Two Columns*, upper right, and the large circular work, *Egyptian Arches*, 1979, fibreglass, steel, wood, life-size, foreground.

