

Caroline Lee was born in the United States: after graduating from the Art Institute of Chicago, she first came to Paris in 1958. The Fulbright grant she had obtained as a painter did not impose too many restrictions on her activities. In 1959, the young artist was awarded another grant, this time for sculpture.

Following World War II, many sculptors were made welcome in small steel and metal factories, particularly around Paris. Their owners generously shared their technical know-how with artists and provided them with small studio spaces where the apprenticeship conditions were excellent. The techniques in use at the time were both a source of inspiration and a means of expression.

"As for me, I was taken by César to his founder, André Susse in Arcueil, says Caroline, who gave me a workspace and welding tools. At the same time, I was introduced to the nearby Société Carboxyque Française, formerly the Oxhydrique Française in Malakoff, where I regularly received lots of practical advice. With the means at my disposal, I continued my apprenticeship in the Vallée de la Chevreuse throughout the summer. It was in the open air, on the edge of the forest, close to my colleague Philolaos. Then, thanks to someone from the Carboxyque, I was lucky enough to find a small studio right next door, where I spent seven years and was able to buy my first welder."

"With my assistant, Jean Westermeyer, we set up a small foundry in the Malakoff studio. We designed the plans and dug a hole in the ground to carry out my first casts. I regularly worked alongside my husband, the Yugoslavian sculptor Knez who was extremely inventive and dexterous. I was trained by the founder Walter Couffini, in all the techniques pertaining to "lost polystyrene". Before the war, Couffini was the first to develop these techniques, until he was forced to sell his patents to the Germans. A vivacious man, he had a great ability to communicate and transmit: he would have preferred it if a French founder had shown interest in these techniques. After two or three trial runs with him, we were able to carry on as a threesome. The foundry project occurred after the J. Arthur & Tiffen Company had awarded me a commission. Mr. Tiffen himself was so intrigued by the idea of the foundry that he sent a team of his workers to help prepare the earthen floor and dig the pit needed to contain the oven and the casts."

"Among ourselves, people master the techniques they need. We learn, we carry out, and then we move onto something else - which explains the specialisation and originality found among good artists. It's very interesting personally to undertake a project. I would start by accepting and would learn how to proceed only afterwards. " Without any kind of vanity, Caroline points out: "I like difficult problems. For every thing I undertook, I found a place and a means to carry it out."

"Well after the internship with my friend the sculptor James Metcalf, it was Westermeyer who taught me hammering. I had anvils, wooden blocks.... He corrected me and helped me understand how to elongate and restrain metal." Passionate about hammering, Caroline Lee added: "Through the physical sensation, the tool becomes a factor of knowledge. When two people work together, the sound of the hammer held by one informs the other."

"The king of metalwork tools is the blowtorch. Once you master that, you own the basis for everything else. It allows you to grasp metal's secret. Midway between hot and cold, it places man in the center, it provides a fine image on a universal scale. Being aware of the correct temperature is essential, for every type of soldering and many other operations."

"As for enlargement – the three point method – I learned how to drive the tip, when I carried out my only large sculpture in white marble, for a symposium in Arendjelovac in 1977, about 60kms from Belgrade, Serbia. The director of Russian automobile factory Zastava in Kragujevac, purchased my piece."

Unambiguously Caroline Lee asserts: "I want to address the sensitivity of the greatest possible number. Today, art is cut off from the people - when it shouldn't be. Each sculpture should catch the eye of the uninitiated - to be loved or rejected." "Marcel Duchamp opened up the gates of hell," she added. "Among sculptors, one finds the "recuperators", like Duchamp. As for me I am still a "manufacturer". Everything I ever salvaged was subject to an idea. I am an anti-conceptualist".

The artist lingered over some of her most significant works: "*Dogman* (1966) was a turning point in my work. With hard lines, corresponding to life's inexorable harshness, I wanted it to express a few very precise things and nothing more.

I wanted to control the expression and radiance of the idea, to eliminate any haphazard interpretation that was not my own. Technically, I wanted to avoid the little "accidents", all those digressions which are - even if they give the sculptor some pleasure - a kind of distraction for the viewer and even betray the main message. In itself, *Dogman* represents man's brutality, with his blinkers, his arrogance, and his inability to reflect. I found the world full of people like him. I love *Dogman*, acting as a foil, sending back an image that leads one to recover one's equilibrium."

In the same way, Caroline Lee explains her great interest in machine tools, and the vocabulary of the forms they help produce. First in Annecy in 1969 with sculptor and friend Henry Comby, she worked for two weeks on the lathes and milling machines, in Michel Tissot-Duponts' factory, famous for its eponymous cigarette lighters. She herself carried out the plans and models in polystyrene before handing over the making to the factory workers. Throughout the following years, she undertook a series of superb pieces, like characters from a fantasy world. The very discreet assembling of the manufactured machine-tooled pieces was obtained by means of self-blocking interlockings (*Couple IV*, 1972). "The machines have a certain nobility, explains Caroline, they should not be strictly limited to factories nor confined to utilitarian purposes. It is possible to divert them from their usual function to use them imaginatively".

In *Hommage à James Joyce* (1977), it is important to underline the interdependence of the organic parts. Those arms must emerge, have momentum, as though propelled by the forces inhabiting the sculpture itself. The tentacular tubes embody a simultaneously physical and cerebral energy. There were no preparatory sketches. The anatomical element was not the hardest to undertake because that work was done pleurably. It is rather the motion, the spacing, and the gesture's dynamics that were hard to represent.

"In Grenoble (*Expansion potentielle*, 1979), I analysed all the rays of the tubes' curvatures, section by section. I was working in a factory owned by the Société Neyrpic, with two workers I was assisting. I had to insist on some of the manipulations I wanted. I traced them directly on the floor."

"For this large sculpture *La Mer fendue*, a monumental fountain carried out for the Naval Officers' Club of the Marine Nationale in Toulon in 1980, I did everything from A to Z: hammering, soldering, surface treatment, research on the fountains, water circuits, installing

the jets etc. When I am working on-site, I seek out a balanced decision, between the work as such and the restraints inherent in the place itself.

As it is a monumental sculpture designed to be outdoors, I made everything in stainless steel. There is not a single piece in iron, neither in the framework nor in the foundations. These sculptures' underpinnings are also made of stainless steel, to avoid any oxidation and contamination."

Freed from the worries of representation, the artist spends a long time reflecting before acting. She immerses herself inside a dual reality, both visible and invisible. Her art consists in translating into shape what she went through as she gave birth to a third reality that will be more than the sum of the other two.

Using an anglicised form of words, Caroline Lee continued: "The sculpture must be loaded with emotion, and this feeling of vitality must be shared". In order to be understood, she uses the image of an electric cable on which the sculptor puts his hand in order to experience a sort of jolt, resulting from the shock of the encounter with the subject in question.

The artist looks approvingly at a work: "There is not one square millimetre of this sculpture that does not partake in the life of the whole." Or she is moved to a sign of disapproval: "This piece cannot abide an intimate contact. It was Brancusi's sculpture that provided me with that feeling."

"To settle down in space, put something where there was nothing". Such is how Caroline Lee defined the sculptor's basic gesture, as she has experienced it ... before adding: "Pleasure and necessity have informed my life as an artist."

Dominique Dalemont
(2012)