

CAROLINE LEE IN THE NAME OF FREEDOM

For quite a while now, Caroline Lee has been a strongly feminine presence in a traditionally "masculine" role: that of sculptor and what is more using stainless steel and aluminium as her favoured materials.

Caroline Lee is grateful to her family environment for making her such a strong individual: "I grew up in a world where gender made no difference: nothing was impossible because I was a girl. Equal opportunities were there for the taking. An artist is intrinsically anthropomorphic, there is no need to tone down or emphasise one's masculine or feminine side". While still at school, her favourite subjects literature and poetry. "At the Chicago Art Institute an intellectual curiosity was almost considered a handicap: don't talk about it, just do it", she recalls. She took drawing classes and made figures in clay. But she adds: "Drawing was not easy, but painting was incredibly difficult. « This did not, however, prevent her from graduating as a painter, for which she eventually obtained a Fulbright scholarship to study in Paris. However, Caroline Lee had first come across Rodin's work in San Francisco, and decided that here was her true calling: "the day I saw Rodin's work, I knew I would be a sculptor."

When Caroline Lee first came to Paris with her scholarship in painting, she quite naturally went around all the galleries, museums and foundations dotted about the city. She quickly realised that Paris was the ideal place to grow as an artist: "I did not go back to Chicago for four years. I lived and moved in an entirely French world". Among the group of young, emerging French sculptors she met, she was especially intrigued by Germaine Richier and more especially César. "We hit it off immediately," she recalls, and he became one of her mentors, introducing her to André Susse who generously put a small atelier at her disposal. "I went every day to the Susse foundry", she adds, with the several tools she had brought from Chicago, sensing that her opportunity to develop her deep attraction to steel sculpture had come. "Steel pushes you in a certain direction", and she remained faithful to that material ever since, apart from one work in marble, *La Cavalière*, made for a symposium in Yugoslavia (1977).

Of her return to Chicago she now says: "I had grown up within a green, sheltered lifestyle, and the ugliness and reality of the city succeeded in wiping out everything else. I needed to search for an equivalent vocabulary: there were few metal workshops in Chicago. Steel is used for utilitarian objects. To be a sculptor is to engage with the life of your own times, I wanted to make industrial "bodies". Caroline Lee obtained another Fulbright scholarship, for sculpture this time; this enabled her to remain in Paris, ever since, becoming a leading figure in French and European sculpture.

Her adventurousness has led her to try her hand at many forms and materials, but her work is always instantly recognisably her own. There has been a gradual change over time, from rounded, organic, life affirming forms towards spikier, edgier, thrusting, almost aggressive shapes. Working with various people leads to new forms and a different approach: the images eventually appear as an almost collective work, embodying the experience that went into fashioning them.

Caroline Lee first experimented with lengths of steel wire, juxtaposed and soldered to create a dynamic movement. That was the time of the giant birds, free and soaring. "I have always been fascinated by movements to free oneself, the will to go beyond the confines, the restrictions, be they mental or physical..." Liberty, thy name is Caroline Lee! Freedom is an integral part of her work, her very own vernacular whether fashioned in abstract or almost figurative forms. There is always a mixture of poetry and life affirming force that belies the seeming aggression inherent in her choice of material.

As Caroline Lee's confidence in her material grew, so did her mastery over techniques. The metal became thicker, she moved onto larger and larger tubes, then to full sheets of metal. She mixed copper and steel to achieve new effects of colours and textures. She works the surface by hammering it, or "snarling" as it is known in the jargon.

In 1965, Caroline Lee had her first one-person exhibition in Paris and she reflected that the experience led to various changes in her own thinking. "People saw what they needed to see, but the contents as such went unnoticed. The more precious the material, the greater the peace of mind of the sculptor as well as that of the public. Because bronze is expensive, it is valued; it is the representation of what art should be.... Aluminium with its industrial origins, is valueless, weightless, cheaper, easy to move around, easy to cast and to work with, and it is seen in our everyday utensils and objects. It forces the spectator to make an effort to look at it and understand it as a work of art."

In order to eliminate all social, economic or cultural associations the artist has worked chiefly in stainless steel and aluminium. In order to obtain maximum effect from these materials, as well as to acquire an intimate working knowledge of them, Caroline Lee spent several months in a factory learning how to use machine tools. In fact, she modestly admits: "It was chiefly the tools that shaped me. The tool informs the work. At that time I wanted to get away from the handmade look; I wanted a handmade piece that looked as if it had been made by a machine". So she polished, and polished repeatedly, to achieve the perfection of texture she sought.

Caroline Lee has frequently been accused of making work which is almost aggressively phallic: this comes in part from her choice of material, and even more particularly because her shapes are generally dynamic, almost aerodynamic at times. These huge masses of metal which seem to hang in mid-air, thanks to her enormous technical skill, with their needle sharp points, their thrusting, questing stances do have a male oriented look to them.

Devoted to her craft in all and every form, Caroline Lee has made a great many public commissions, chiefly in France and the US, fountains, signals, figures floating above the common herd, and symbolic objects like the *Homage to the Resistance* in Montreuil (1982). She has also turned her hand to theatre work, and has for the past several years actively collaborated with the prestigious Théâtre du Soleil, where she devises strange and wonderful shapes that can be both musical instruments and parts of the overall stage settings.

The most essential ingredient in Caroline Lee's work is that it is always going forward, upwards, optimistically, soaring above common life. They are equally at home in an urban, glassed and concrete setting, as in open natural spaces. One of her first pieces which already announced these characteristics is *The Bird* (1958-59) which is poised for flight, currently in a town garden, but it would look equally at home in a forest glade. The mix of welded steel, with its many ramifications is still somewhat reminiscent of César's influence, but the pupil had already assimilated the master's lessons into her very own vernacular. The triumphantly *Pregnant Woman* (1959-65) also uses the welded steel approach to maximum effect, while the figure poised on one foot looks assured and victorious, ready to fly off with her burden. The pull of gravity seems to have no effect on her full-blown belly. This woman can face anything life cares to send her way, and is sure of overcoming every hazard.

By the mid sixties Caroline Lee had truly found her medium as evidenced by the many pieces in copper, brass, steel and aluminium which she produced at an impressive rate.

La Mouche (1965) is a good example of the elaborate shape and meticulous workmanship used by the artist: cast in bronze by Caroline Lee herself from Styrofoam, it is an intriguing mix of cut outs, carved and much worked over surfaces with a wealth of unexpected detailing. That same year 1965 was particularly fruitful when the striking piece *Le Gueulard (The Shouter)* was acquired by the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris: six pieces of bronze, cast by the artist, it is a hybrid creature with its flattened head, broad beamed buttocks and belly, the whole poised on a pair of ambiguous legs. It is certainly a powerful statement of noisy fury.

One of the artist's own favourites is *Dogman*, a squat silhouette, very strong and powerful, also made in 1965, of hammered iron, giving the appearance of a medieval warrior in an armour, its open arms which could be both welcoming and threatening, placed on a cross composed of rectangular steel tubes. "*Dogman* mirrors a brutal image, which is necessarily, the penile attachments were needed to master its decisiveness. The exploding is controlling reaction".

Caroline Lee made several monumental pieces in the Vaucluse dominating the lush landscape with its polished surfaces, and its trademark aspect of being ready to fly. Indeed that is the title, as a homage to James Joyce, *By these nets I shall fly*, a commission for a school in the Haute Saone in stainless steel and concrete, dominating the space with flying limbs, the head, arms and legs flowing almost freely in a very untraditional manner. "The elbow tubes and cones I used for the Joyce piece are to emphasise the human body's movements and also to recall the writer's own energy and power. They signify an interior energy."

Among the many public commissions Caroline Lee has executed for the French government one of the most prestigious is the *Hommage à la Résistance*, in stainless steel and black granite, 12.5 metres high, which is placed at a busy crossroads in Montreuil. The whole area has been designed to contain and exalt this piece, with a pedestrian square, in blue Breton granite, as well as concrete seats that are also used to light the monument.

In the US Caroline Lee's commissions include large pieces in New Britain (Connecticut) as well as two in Hartford, (Connecticut) and in 1990 in Chicago came *Eagle of the rising star* for the John Marshall Law School.

All in all, Caroline Lee's work has remained steadfast and very true to her own style and concepts. When she decided to give up using machine tools in favour of "elbow tubes", twisting the tubes at angles of 90° with torches, she reached a more figurative element. Each metal has its own characteristics: copper can be very sensual.

Even when she designed doorways and ornamental handles for elegant buildings, or "bases" for glass topped tables, each work was crafted as meticulously as any of her vast monumental projects. Her creed will not allow her to be slipshod no matter how apparently small the commission or the object.

She even worked in a sort of plasticine for a children's toys manufacturer which bore all the hallmarks of "grown-up" sculpture.

Her series of horses, made up of strands of steel or cast in bronze, have the unmistakable Caroline Lee touch of joyfulness and optimism, of flying forwards while solidly fixed to the reality of a heavy pedestal. No project is too complicated or time consuming: when working on the large fountain-basin, *La Mer Fendue* (1981) for the Cercle des Officiers Mariniers, in Toulon, Caroline Lee's working studio was very restricted in height so she carefully made numerous single pieces by hand and numbered them so as to assemble them into the vast sculpture we

see today. She compared it to pattern cutting and said she felt like a seamstress, who must not put any piece in the wrong way around. The result is flawless and seamless, an impressive 3m x 4,50m, showing the waves parting and upholding a frail vessel.

Hers is an intensely physical artform, where the body and mind must be totally engaged for the results to be credible and long lasting. With her works embedded as firmly in our subconscious as they are in the soil or the surrounding waters, Caroline Lee is a life affirming artist, who has reached total control over everything she turns her hand and her mind to.

Ann Cremin, Paris November 2001

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