The Music of Metal

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Caroline Lee's world is that of metal.

This choice places her among those sculptors who, after 1945, turned to industrial tools, becoming blacksmiths or metal workers in order to access their creative language. In any vocation, the determination of the means is the predominant part of creativity.

Caroline Lee arrived in Paris from Chicago in 1958 with a Fulbright grant for painting, but carrying a hammer and a clamp in her luggage, for her destiny had already made itself clear. "I knew I would attack metal sculpture," she notes. Meeting César, the major metal sculptor in Paris at the time, strengthened her inner conviction that the world of metals was the basis of contemporary sculptural expression. It decisively reinforced her intention to abandon the use of classical sculptural materials.

Through César, she found a small studio in the Susse Foundry in Arceuil, on the outskirts of Paris. César had introduced her to André Susse when he took her there to show her the workings of a bronze foundry. Later, when the Susse Foundry decided to purchase an arc welder, she benefited from the welding lessons accompanying the purchase. All around Paris, small industries were willing to answer questions, demonstrate the capabilities of their machines, and respond to the curious sculptor who came to them filled with a will to learn from those who had achieved mastery of the techniques that she needed. This was an irreplaceable environment for learning that enabled her to acquire the technical foundation for her work. She was ready to fulfill her childhood conviction: "You can do but one thing in life, and do it well." The purchase of her own arc welder gave her full access to bringing her ideas forth from the limbo of mere intention. She could at last launch herself, "grab hold of the world."

Sculpture is also a question of encounters, of the transmission of knowledge in the same spirit as that of trade companionships. Her complicit cooperation with her husband Knez, also a sculptor, was strengthened by her training in the "lost styrofoam" method taught to her by Walter Couffini, the discoverer in France of this new technique. James Metcalf, the sculptor and friend whose studio was next to Constantin Brancusi's, introduced her to hammering brass. But it was with Jean Westermeyer, who became her assistant, from whom Caroline learned in depth the skills necessary for forming and assembling metal. He taught her hammering with tools whose secrets were revealed to her through their working together. The very gesture, the face-to-face engagement with the material, strengthened the skills needed for experimentation and inspiration. "Through the physical sensation, the tool is a means of knowledge. When you are working together, the sound of the hammer held by one provides information to the other," she says. Westermeyer introduced her to the lengthening

or the condensing of metal (as in *The Great White Lady*, page 47, and *The Shoulder*, page 48). This prolific exchange enabled her to give body to the role played by metal in our society. She notes that a whole vocabulary emerges from our daily contact with ordinary, useful objects—from irons to bridges—and is preparatory to sculpture itself. These raw objects cannot be of a spiritual nature, but they stimulate the creation of forms which implement the expression of "useless but vital things," the true domain of sculpture.

In the small foundry they set up in their Malakoff studio, Caroline, Knez, and Westermeyer carried out her first architectural commission. Caroline established a creative process that enabled her to accept commissions without yet knowing how they would be carried out. By giving herself the means to resolve new technical problems, she was able to explore and develop the new forms made possible by them (*Double Wing*, page 25).

Her first sculptures already showed an accomplished degree of mastery. She favored the themes of flight, symbol of the liberating movement to which the artist aspires. The tools guided her work. One notices how from the onset they ordered the sequences of her assemblages of steel bars, the acetylene torch giving them their organic unity (*The Swan*, page 23; *The Gargoyle*, page 26). The fine steel bars were succeeded by the use of ever larger bars and tubes (*The Flower of Evil*, page 24; *Sailing to Byzantium*, page 42), combining copper and steel (*Baby Bird*, page 28), and working surfaces over with hammering. The artisan-like castings of this period, carried out circa 1965 in the Malakoff studio, were in bronze until she adopted aluminum for all casts and mechanical assemblages (Maquette for *The Mastery of Evil*, page 35).

In hammered and welded steel and covered in an oven-baked varnish, *Dogman*, dated 1965 (page 27), represents a turning point. It is a kind of robot whose harsh lines correspond to the hardness of life, to the brutality of mankind. Nothing in its finish is allowed to reflect the pleasure involved in carrying out the piece. Its aggressive image bears no hint of sentimentality. Her search for smooth and perfect forms (*Femme Victoire*, page 32; *Angel In Hell*, page 33; and *Homage to Martin Luther King: Eyes on the Prize*, page 44) led her to eliminate welding as an expressive means and brought her to a T-shaped dovetailed assemblage system. This method had the advantage of achieving the clearly defined and unambiguous forms she sought. These pieces were easily dismantled and manipulated (*Thoughts*, page 34). *S 1-11* (page 30) was completely transformable thanks to its sliding component parts.

With the machine tools seen as the extension of the hand, she went one step further. She integrated the machine's properties with her sculptural language by experimenting with the potential offered by the milling machine, the ribbon saw, and the lathe (*Imprisoned Bird*, page 29; *Projectile*, page 31). She became intensely aware of the dialogue we carry on in our daily lives with objects that are close to works of art, their intrinsic beauty lying in their technological, industrial forms—be it a car or an airplane.

Caroline Lee finally possessed her own language. The hand, whose intervention is less that of creation than of execution, was supplanted by mental inventiveness, which became the exalting force of her creativity. As the hand became subservient to mental pre-figuration, realization of the sculpture was entirely entrusted to the machine, diverted from its usual work to be placed in the service of the imaginary.

Her new relationship with metal was celebrated in Paris at the *Salon de Mai*, in the *Salon de La Jeune Sculpture*, and with her first architectural commissions. In 1971, her first solo exhibition at Darthea Speyer's Paris gallery showed how machine

tools had allowed her to explore aluminum's visual volubility. The reversible and sliding shapes in the small aluminum sculptures leave a minimum amount of play but allow the image to exist as she intended. The works in stainless steel possess aerodynamic shapes linked to the concepts of speed, power, aggressivity, and poetic license. *Reves et Forces,* now permanently installed in Argenteuil near Paris, is the assemblage of unexpected segments, thrown into space in a precarious balance between two parts, held together with screws and threaded bars. The telescoping, interlocking parts, like those of *Hommage á Freud,* imply a permeability without altering the overall form. The priority was given to the metal itself, to its reflections, the contrasts between smooth and grainy surfaces, to the sharp edges of the forms, the precision of the planes, and finally, to the visual singularities of the sculpture.

The materialization of the work by the machine did not lead to conceptual art. In 1969, together with her friend the sculptor Henry Comby, Caroline spent two weeks working in Annecy in Michel Tissot-Dupont's factory that specialized in automated machine-tools where she acquired hands-on experience with a milling machine and a lathe. This enabled her to design her pieces specifically for these machines. Along with precise mechanical drawings of each element, she entrusted the styrofoam models to the factory workers for execution. Sculpturally, she was involved in carrying out structures that were not far from the old archetypes but were now simplified and pared down. The milling machines, the lathe, and the ribbon saws made possible the dovetailing of the forms. The crossbars and the scraps of "duralumin" (AU4G) were transformed into *Projectile* (page 31) and *Imprisoned Bird* (page 29), with its angular, feathery forms. They were thereby transposed into a male or female abbreviation. *Femme Victoire* (page 32) is an illustration of the artist's theme concerning sexuality with the consummate conclusion of these underlying forces being "the couple." Made up of personages taken from a fantastical world, *Couple IV* presents an assemblage of machined elements, held together by self-blocking interlockings. Their eroticism is dominated by thought which is a vision symbolically expressed through the bipolarity of certain parts, symmetrical and yet of a strangely virile mimetism, complex and ambiguous in its perception. It can be read as an aesthetic commitment wherein the artist's proposals are answers to the questions she asks of herself.

A monumental mindset is inherent in Caroline Lee's sculpture. This is obviously so in the large pieces like the fountain in Sarcelles, a commission she and Knez won in competition. Her monumentality is accompanied by a very personal multidirectional energy. Here, she shapes flight to express a brutal dynamism, characteristic of other commissions for which the models already embody intense force. The cutting, indeed threatening, edges of the *Monument to the Resistance* (page 41) at Montreuil-sous-Bois in 1982 transformed the surrounding space into a metaphor for the imaginary. Elsewhere, forms with arabesque cut-outs are elegantly part of the mechanical dialogue that the artist intends as an analogy to physiological and psychological interplay.

With *Don Quixote's Bird* (page 45), the suggested thrust calls forth an imbalance, the fall into emptiness. Yet the sculpture holds fast and sets up a genuine dialogue with its space and the idea of risk beyond normal constraints of mind or body. It is because the sculpture's inspiration comes from the symbol of Don Quixote, the only possibility for assembling and organizing the forms. Each large form thrusting out into space is compensated by smaller, similar forms with opposing tensions. The movement regains its equilibrium even as it stabilizes the thrust of the main element. For Caroline Lee, a work of art must favor reflection by means of evasion. So it is for the three monumental works carried out for the School of Medicine and Pharmacy in Clermont-Ferrand. The models for *The Mastery of Evil* (page 35),

The Inhabitant of the Volcano (page 37) and *Flower of the Volcano* (page 38) anticipate this fundamental gesture of the sculptor. Nothing is left to chance. The artist was involved in every part of the undertaking: the hammering, the welding, the surface treatment, always searching to preserve the balance between the work and the constraints of its environment. She used exclusively stainless steel because of its unique relationship with light, but also because it avoided problems of oxydation.

Her recent sculptures continue a head-on struggle with stainless steel from which she clearly expects the incarnation of what she describes as "an intimacy with becoming." Thus *The Great White Lady* (page 47) and *The Shoulder* (page 48) set up an ever stronger relationship with the sculptor's inner life, which is composed of quantities of lived-through impressions. Each element corresponds to an act, a multiplicity of fragments, until the reality of what had been glimpsed emerges.

Caroline Lee sees herself as a *transformer*, capturing the outer currents of the world and then merging them with her personal energies. Following her many public commissions, she says that she is continuing "to travel through the dark, interior seas, in order to serve perceptions conceived with a more conscious intelligence, directed with appetite towards the outside world."

She claims the social role of the sculptor, but she steadfastly expects sculpture to express the invisible. This mystery is that of an intense and incisive intuition, inseparable from skills—and she shows it in each new sculpture—that are indissociable from the materialization of a thought. Maturity now makes freedom from fake restraints possible. The mastery of her inner life provides a universal dimension to Caroline's life as a sculptor.