

Review/Art

Introducing Swiss Sculptors to U.S. and Vice Versa

By MICHAEL BRENSON

Although "Sculpture: Material and Abstraction" was presented in museum spaces in Aarau and Lausanne, Switzerland, it is not a museum show. Its approach to its subject, post-Minimalism in Switzerland and the United States, is schematic and vague. Any show partly conceived to introduce five American sculptors to Switzerland and five Swiss sculptors to the United States is not going to make much of a statement about anything.

In the final stop on its tour, at the City Gallery and the Swiss Institute, the show serves a clear political and economic function. Presenting unknown Swiss artists in the company of such familiar American artists as Martin Puryear and Robert Therrien insures the Swiss sculptors — and probably Swiss sculpture in general — something of an American audience.

Nevertheless the show is informative. The Swiss organizer, Corinne Diserens, who has been appointed curator at the new museum of modern art in Valencia, Spain, has an eye, and the quality of the art she selected is generally high. All the Swiss artists are of some distinction. Douglas Beer, Andreas Gehr, Carmen Perrin, Vaclav Pozarek and Jürg Stäuble are more conceptual than the Americans, Mr. Puryear, Mr. Therrien, Tom But-

ter, Robin Hill and Steve Wood. Their work is also more edgy and provision-

al. Mr. Pozarek, who was born in Czechoslovakia in 1940, is the guiding Swiss spirit. His work is skeptical and sly. The building blocks of his wood sculpture called "Simplex" are constructivist in feeling, but they are not utopian; each compartment is like a trap. His "American Sculptures" are, in fact, illustrations of comfortable rooms that the artist cut out of a book. Then he cut geometric shapes of banisters, lamps or book cases out of the illustrations. Mr. Pozarek does not want to make geometric objects that will be at home in these environments; he wants geometry to disrupt a sense of luxury and ease.

Mr. Beer is 15 years younger than Mr. Pozarek, he was born in Algiers, and his work, though quizzical, is not as disabused. "Brunex Oben," which is 79 inches tall and 79 inches wide, is made with polyester, Masonite and plywood. Using shapes as clean as those in a carpentry shop, Mr. Beer has assembled an elegant construction that is upright yet tilted. Nothing in the work is quite what it seems to be, yet the equilibrium argues for the possibility of using these kinds of artificial materials to extend the constructivist tradition in which he clearly believes.

The other Swiss artists are more involved with objects. In Mr. Gehr's "Dead," a sheet of glass leaning against a wall supports a thin bar of steel, and the glass and steel together seem to be walking a tightrope. Miss Perrin works with shapes suggestive of the human body or the home, and then asks questions about them

through her choice of materials. Her black relief is woven like a basket, the material is rubber, and it seems warped like wood. It has a provocative blend of rationalism and irrationality that defines the Swiss sculpture as a whole.

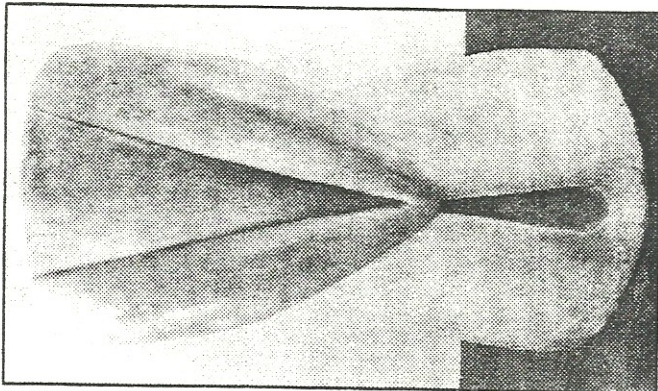
The American sculptors have a more sensual feeling for texture and shape, and their works are more easy and active in space. The sculptures of Mr. Puryear, Mr. Wood and Ms. Hill have multiple points of view. Mr. Puryear is as much a guiding spirit for the Americans as Mr. Pozarek is for the Swiss. He is a model in his sculptural sophistication: his unlit wood sculpture is at the same time about gravity and flight. He is also a model in the breadth of his references. The sculpture is part bird, part dog and part throne. It also resembles the crowns of Japanese emperors.

Mr. Wood's sculptures have changed. His eroded sculptural skins are sealed now, his surfaces polished and clean. His new vertical sculptures, made of wood, Fiberglas and bonded aluminum, shift in ways that are quite stunning. As we move around them, they change from silhouettes that flatten space into rounded volumes that billow and swell. Each point of view is integrated and distinct.

Ms. Hill's "Partner" also seems to be in constant transformation. It is wax but it seems as heavy as marble. It looks like a fountain, but it also suggests an oversized head or a monk in a robe, leaning forward, hands folded, his head and shoulders lopped off. Or it could be a headless woman in a billowy skirt. Or, like Mr. Wood's "Junction," it could be a caryatid, waiting, to be assigned a structure to support

This associational richness is a real freedom, and post-Minimal American sculpture has it.

• Sculpture: "Material and Abstraction" continues at the City Gallery, 2 Columbus Circle, and at the Swiss Institute, 35 West 67th Street, through Feb. 10.



"Partner," 1988 wax over mixed-media construction, by Robin Hill at the City Gallery.