

William Tucker The American Decade 1978–88

Storm King Art Center

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Storm King Art Center Mountainville New York 1988

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Introduction

William Tucker: The American Decade, 1978–88 examines more than 35 key works of the artist's last decade: sculpture in aluminum, bronze, concrete, steel, and wood, along with large-scale charcoal and oilstick drawings.

As throughout his career, William Tucker remains concerned with the presence of objects. His work explores the relationship between the internal, physical nature of sculpture and the external, perceived qualities. In the 1970s, while living in Great Britain, he assembled or altered existing parts such as steel beams or weathered, massive timbers into triangular, rectilinear, and round shapes. Later he made castings of these abstract forms in plaster and concrete, giving greater emphasis to the weight and verticality of forms. Pieces showed a resistance to gravity, striving upward. The resulting sculptures were architectural with strong linear and planar elements, but also suggested a human presence.

With his move to New York in 1978, Tucker began to make sculpture that was larger in scale and more boldly geometric, tactile, and massive. An important transition followed, in part due to his new appreciation of the great sculptor Auguste Rodin (1840–1917), who sought to understand the world through the human form—its internal system, mass, and spiritual being. Tucker stopped constructing sculpture by welding or other assemblage techniques and turned to modelling. He discarded his old visual and conceptual framework—his concern with frontality, geometric clarity, linear and planar structure, and distancing—and focused on bodily weight and dynamics. The resulting torsos, dating from the 1980s, many cast in bronze, explore the interior substance and outward, expressive character of the human figure.

Professor Andrew Forge looks at William Tucker's development and guides us in an appreciation of *Ouranos* and other recent sculptures. His insight gives viewers a greater understanding of Tucker's remarkable achievements.

David R. Collens
Director

Acknowledgements

It is with great pleasure that Storm King Art Center presents *William Tucker: The American Decade, 1978–88*. Significant in the field as an important sculptor as well as writer and teacher, Tucker has been the recipient of many awards including Guggenheim and National Endowment for the Arts fellowships.

I would like to acknowledge with gratitude those individuals whose work has been essential to the exhibition. David Collens, Director of the Art Center, curated and installed the exhibition. Advice and support came from Cynthia Hazen Polsky, Vice-President of the Board of Trustees. Andrew Forge, Professor of Art at Yale University, has contributed an insightful and compelling essay. Greer Allen carefully designed this publication. And thanks to the entire staff at Storm King Art Center who were involved in all aspects of the exhibition.

This exhibition has been realized through the generosity of the artist and lenders. I am grateful for the cooperation and support of William Tucker, Pamela Avril, Edward R. Broida, David McKee, Jerald Ordovery, Carla Panicali, and Arnold A. Saltzman.

H. Peter Stern

President

As Many Dimensions as We Have Muscles

The Sculpture of William Tucker

I shall take the sculpture called *Ouranos* as my subject, picturing it as the representative of Tucker's recent work and as the heir to what has gone before it, not just of the American decade but of the twenty-five years of effort that preceded its making in 1985.

The first sighting of *Ouranos* is of a lump, a mass of material, something rudimentary, inchoate, but not inert. For even in this first glimpse it shows itself responsive to the power of gravity. It will appear to spread under its own weight, to bear down on the floor as if pressing upon it; but it will also appear to rear up away from the floor. This is the first of a series of perceptions that we will come upon that seem to contradict each other symmetrically. The heavy, downward, dumped aspect cannot be isolated. It is one with its opposite, the upward-thrusting energy of the form that soon one will begin to associate with nameable imagery.

In no time, it seems, we will begin to find names for aspects of this unnameable lump. The transition is mysterious and no amount of introspection helps me to be clear as to whether what I am talking about happens in fractions of a second or in minutes. Is it a flash or a gradual making out, as through darkness? I do not know. But at a certain point I am calling this lump from a certain point of view a fist. The work leads me at once to a double understanding: a clenched fist and a fist clenching, the outside of a fist and its inside. At a distance, the form is nubbled and knuckled at its top like a closed fist; and the form seen as a whole is waisted like a vast clumsy dumbbell that I can imagine my fist closing around. As I circle around the form, moving clockwise, I discover another name: it has turned into a tremendous foot, foreshortened, pointing towards me. I move further; the form splits and joins again, reasserting its verticality and its clenched summit—fist, penis—names I find or that force themselves upon me in the face of this silent cone of matter.

Here I pause. Something very strange is happening. As I get to know the topography of the piece—in the sense that I might claim to know the topography of a place—I am learning its wholeness. Each aspect augments what has come before. Although the surprise of each transition remains and changes of profile—the opening out of planes, the continual modulations of scale—lose none of their fire, still the presence of the whole becomes stronger and stronger. At the same time, the apprehension of different aspects is like an elaboration of naming, and what is named are *parts*. The two processes unfold simultaneously. I gain the freestanding whole even as I split it into parts; and the two incompatible processes augment each other.

To say that this double action is like a heartbeat is to risk sentimentality; but some organic image of that kind is needed, an image that draws attention to the way that the piece gives itself up rhythmically, as in an effortless and vital expansion and contraction that carries with it the tone of life. From closer to, at a distance where I can almost touch its surface, the beat quickens. Now, from the frontal aspect, looking up and down its seven-foot height, it is 'clearly' a torso, the lower part dividing into thighs, its summit dividing into massive pectorals and hunched shoulders, while still maintaining the strong upward gesture that had earlier, from further back, drawn out the word fist. It is a torso but not a fragment. There is no sense of truncation or lost limbs. Its edge as it meets the ground is incisive telling everything about the section of the mass, terminating it at its junction with the floor in final clarity.

The sense of bodily identification is overwhelming. Drawn toward it as if into a mirror, I am aware of searching for an exact orientation. The reading as torso is frontal. It faces me vertically but as I move to the left, following the movement outward of the left thigh, the axis seems to change, inclining to my right. Now a further transformation occurs. The lower part of the mass swells, the upper part that I see as the thorax becomes slender. Now Ouranos, the mutilated father of the Titans, glides into womanhood. The form that had suggested foot becomes a massively swelling hip. Further again the form divides and I can entertain the idea that there are two figures here, back to back, so close. Another step and singleness is restored.

It is not unusual in ordinary life to wonder about what it is that we are seeing. We hypothesize and when we get it right, our previous guesses are forgotten. Is that dark mass at the end of the road a barn or a clump of trees? It is an either/or question and as the dark mass resolves into a building, the 'trees' vanish. If, idly, we want to bring them back, we will have to work at it quite hard. But in aesthetic contemplation we are continually faced by questions that do not resolve themselves in this way. Not either/or but both/and is the order of the day. The sculpture is both an object and an image, both thing and representation. The modern movement stretched the alternatives, pushing them apart and imposing preemptory demands on the viewer's ability to hold them together. Objecthood is brought into the foreground and with this emphasis the activity of reading becomes strenuous and reflexive. We have no choice but to watch how we construe our perceptions.

There were sculptures that Tucker made in the 1960s, when he was working in a purely abstract idiom, that were like formal propositions of an almost dogmatic clarity. They presented themselves for what they were, structures on the floor, in the same space and on the same scale as the viewer, in an open, lucid, daylight encounter. In a catalog note that I wrote at the time of his exhibition in the British Pavilion of the 1972 Venice Biennale, I compared looking at these pieces with following "a closely argued exposition . . . completely self-contained and developed out of premises that the eye could take in at first glance . . . The idea dominated and the mystery of the work (its very clarity was mysterious) had something to do with the feeling that it had arrived there out of the blue, was all of a piece, and that in one's encounter with it, no energy needed to be split in following or completing an artistic process."

These early pieces were made out of neutral materials such as steel, fiberglass, or resin. One had the impression that it did not much matter what so long as the result was clear. But there came a point when Tucker began to accept found materials in all their particularity. The first occasion as far as I know was when he salvaged some leftover remains of the roof of a small shed that he had demolished and kept them in his studio to look at and rearrange and draw. After some time he realized that these frames made of crudely jointed standard lumber had become important to him. He began to make definitive arrangements that he exhibited—the *Shuttler* series.

It was a crucial step. An ideal division had been crossed, an imaginary line that divided sculpture from the rest of the world. I would guess that the most important aspect of the experience was that it caused him to be increasingly aware of the act of looking and of the ingredient of fantasy by which looking is invariably complicated. In any case, this moment was clearly the first move in an exploration that took him into deeper and darker regions than he had known about in the years of his intellectual inventions, brilliant and precocious though they were. It was the beginning of his passage towards fullness as an artist, a maturation whose grand consequences we are witnessing now.

In his book, *Imagery in Scientific Thought*, Arthur I. Miller describes the speculations of the great nineteenth-century French mathematician Poincaré on the origins of geometry. Miller paraphrases Poincaré on the very first conceptions of space: "During the initial

period of groping about the world we live in, we develop the notion of representative space that has 'a triple form—visual, tactile and motor.' This space is not isotropic, homogeneous or infinite and it can have *as many dimensions as we have muscles*." The phrase that I have italicized could be the motto for Tucker's work of the last ten years.

The first New York pieces were fabricated, some out of found material like the blackened beams of *The House of the Hanged Man*, others built in new wood or plaster over a wooden armature, later to be rebuilt in metal or concrete. They are consistent with his work of the previous decade in that they are open forms. What has changed is the way in which they come across to us as images. They stand in a certain way, with a certain insistent presence. They enclose space on their own terms, as if annexing it, clamping it between teeth like sawed-off rungs of a ladder or enclosing it within a solemn and forbidding triangle. They are not neutral at all in their tone, but dark and aggressive and in some cases fearsome.

The very large drawings associated with these pieces are unprecedented in Tucker's work. The opposite of diagrams, these heavily worked drawings in charcoal or black oilstick have an intensity and an emotional power that is completely new. The structures that he draws are clearly projected in perspective. Everything is clear-cut and the viewing-point is brought out with the utmost insistence, but the image is modelled in light that floods across the imagined surfaces, thrusting its planes forward, and back into a deep and often agitated ocean of darkness.

Earlier, Tucker's titles had been playful and noncommittal, often referring to the structural idea: *Shuttler*, *Cat's Cradle*, *Fugue* and so on. Some of the New York titles direct us rather precisely toward states of mind or feeling: *Justice*, *Fear*, *The Prisoner*, *The Hostage*. Among these are two that connect with artists: *Portrait of K* and *The House of the Hanged Man*—Kafka and Cézanne, both men whose work amounted to a terrible and costly victory over anxiety. In both cases it was a victory whose voice and instrument was a continuous perception of the world through the body. "He wanted to touch the world of substance . . . with an intuitive touch," D. H. Lawrence wrote of Cézanne, and he went on "The intuitive apperception of the apple is so *tangibly* aware of the apple that it is aware of it *all around*, not just of the front . . . Intuition needs all-roundedness and instinct needs insidedness. The true imagination is forever curving round to the other side, to the back of presented appearances."

Tucker's move toward a single form stands for infinitely more than a shift in studio strategy. No amount of forethought could have anticipated what would happen when he embraced substance as a becoming; when he allowed himself to move between the poles of fusion and separateness that are symbolized by the actions of modelling and carving, anymore than forethought could possibly have devised the complexities of imagery that I have begun to name in my description of *Ouranos*. For what has been put into words so far represents the tip of things—that thin rind in the encounter with the work where what one sees falls easily into language. The content of *Ouranos* lies deep in its carnal presence, its energy, its stillness and its unending plasticity. It is in how it takes the light—that is to say, how it offers itself to our eyes. It is in how it stands and shows itself to be standing—that is to say, how it offers itself to our standing and our center. It is in how it unfolds as we move around it—that is to say, how we carry our own bodies over into it, and into the world.

Andrew Forge

BIOGRAPHY

1935

Born in Cairo, Egypt, to parents stationed with the British army.

1958

Graduates from Oxford University, England, with degree in modern history.

1959–60

Studies with Anthony Caro at St. Martin's School of Art, London. Fellow students include Isaac Witkin, David Annesley, and Philip King.

1974

Publishes his book, *The Language of Sculpture* (Thames and Hudson, London), which is released in the United States as *Early Modern Sculpture* (Oxford University Press, New York).

1978

Moves to the United States and resides in New York.

1980–81

Awarded a Guggenheim fellowship.

1986

Awarded a National Endowment for the Arts fellowship. Becomes an American citizen.

1988

Lives and works in New York City and upstate New York.

SELECTED TEACHING POSITIONS

1978–81

Assistant Professor, School of the Arts, Division of Painting and Sculpture, Columbia University, New York City.

1978–82

Instructor, New York Studio School of Drawing, Painting, and Sculpture, New York City.

1986–continuing

Instructor, Graduate Program, School of Visual Arts, New York City.

1988

Milton Avery Professor of Art, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York.

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

Note: Each exhibition listed here included a catalogue.

1977–78

William Tucker, Sculpture, Arts Council of Great Britain, London. Opened at Fruit Market Gallery, Edinburgh, and traveled in Great Britain.

1979

Contemporary Sculpture, The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

1980

Contemporary British Painting and Sculpture, National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo, Japan.

1981–82

British Sculpture in the 20th Century, Whitechapel Art Gallery, London.

1984

Drawings 1974–84, The Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

1985–86

Working in Brooklyn, Sculpture, The Brooklyn Museum, New York.

Transformations in Sculpture: Four Decades of American and European Art, The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.

1987

William Tucker, Gods: Five Recent Sculptures, The Tate Gallery, London.

William Tucker, Recent Sculptures and Monotypes, Annely Juda Fine Art, London.

William Tucker, David McKee Gallery, New York.

1988

The Biennale of Sydney, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia, and National Gallery of Victoria, Australia.

SELECTED PUBLICATIONS

Note: Exhibition catalogues are not listed here.

Ashton, Dore. "William Tucker's Gyre," *Arts Magazine* (June 1979): 128–129.

Ashton, Dore. "William Tucker: New Sculpture," *Arts Magazine* (Summer 1987): 84–85.

Baker, Kenneth. "William Tucker at David McKee," *Art in America* (October 1984): 204.

Baker, Kenneth. "William Tucker: Meaning Vs. Matter," *Art in America* (November–December 1977): 102–103.

Brenson, Michael. "William Tucker and His Greek Titans," *New York Times*, 2 October 1987.

Gibson, Erik. "Two Sculptors," *New Criterion* (January 1986): 57–60.

Megged, Matti. "The Sculpture of William Tucker," *Arts Magazine* (September 1982): 104–105.

Rilke, Rainer Maria. *Rodin and Other Prose Pieces*. Translated by G. Craig Houston with Introduction by William Tucker. London: Quartet Books, 1987.

Russell, John. "Art: New Sculptures by William Tucker," *New York Times*, 15 November 1985.

Shuebrook, Ron. "William Tucker," *Artscribe* (August 1982): 35–43.

Tucker, William. "The Gonzales Exhibition," *New Criterion* (May 1983): 45–49.

Checklist

Note: Numbers 8, 9, 10, 11, and 17 are installed outdoors in the sculpture park. The remaining works are on view indoors.

SCULPTURE

- 1 **Justice** 1978
Wood
138 x 84 x 84 in.
Lent by David McKee Gallery, New York
- 2 **The Contract** 1978
Wood
84 x 70 x 22 in.
Lent by David McKee Gallery, New York
- 3 **The Mirror** 1979
Steel
126 x 115 x 34 in.
Lent by David McKee Gallery, New York
- 4 **The House of the Hanged Man** 1981
Wood
135 x 238 x 34 in.
Lent by The Edward R. Broida Trust, Los Angeles
- 5 **The Prisoner** 1981
Concrete
115 x 81 x 16 in.
Lent by David McKee Gallery, New York
- 6 **The Hostage** 1981–82
Plaster
99 x 61 x 14 in.
Lent by David McKee Gallery, New York
- 7 **Guardian III** 1984
Bronze
90½ x 27⅞ x 31¼ in.
Lent by Carla Panicali, Art for Architecture, New York
- 8 **Gymnast I** 1984
Bronze, edition of 3
84 x 73 x 31 in.
Lent by Carla Panicali, Art for Architecture, New York
- 9 **Witness** 1984
Aluminum
74 x 24¾ x 31⅞ in.
Lent by Carla Panicali, Art for Architecture, New York
- 10 **Ouranos** 1985
Bronze, edition of 3
77 x 83 x 47 in.
Lent by David McKee Gallery, New York
- 11 **Tethys** 1985
Bronze, edition of 3
78 x 58 x 44 in.
Lent by David McKee Gallery, New York
- 12 **Horse I** 1986
Bronze, edition of 6
23 x 14 x 26 in.
Lent by David McKee Gallery, New York
- 13 **Horse IV** 1986
Bronze, edition of 6
34¾ x 24 x 15 in.
Lent by David McKee Gallery, New York
- 14 **Horse X** 1986
Bronze, Edition of 6
35 x 36 x 21 in.
Lent by David McKee Gallery, New York
- 15 **Daktyl I** 1987
Plaster
35 x 21 x 24 in.
Lent by the artist
- 16 **Daktyl II** 1987
Plaster
24 x 33 x 35 in.
Lent by the artist
- 17 **Okeanos** 1987–88
Plaster
151 x 116 x 79 in.
Lent by the artist, courtesy Scripps Clinic and Research Foundation, La Jolla, California

DRAWINGS

- 18 **Study for the Rim** 1979
Charcoal on paper
35½ x 35 ½ in.
Lent by Pamela Avril
- 19 **Prisoner** 1981
Charcoal on paper
56⅞ x 42 in.
Lent by Carla Panicali, Art for Architecture, New York

- 20 **Untitled #4** 1981
Charcoal on paper
42 x 45 in.
Lent by Carla Panicali, Art for
Architecture, New York
- 21 **Untitled #6** 1981
Charcoal on paper
46 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 42 in.
Lent by Carla Panicali, Art
for Architecture, New York
- 22 **Untitled #7** 1981
Charcoal on paper
37 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 47 $\frac{1}{2}$ in.
Lent by Carla Panicali, Art for
Architecture, New York
- 23 **Untitled** 1981-82
Charcoal on paper
60 x 77 $\frac{3}{4}$ in.
Lent by Carla Panicali, Art for Archi-
tecture, New York
- 24 **Law** 1983
Charcoal on paper
28 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 39 $\frac{1}{16}$ in.
Lent by Carla Panicali, Art for Archi-
tecture, New York
- 25 **Sun** 1983
Charcoal on paper
29 $\frac{5}{8}$ x 38 $\frac{3}{4}$ in.
Lent by Carla Panicali, Art for Archi-
tecture, New York
- 26 **Study for Guardian III** 1983-84
Oilstick on paper
60 $\frac{3}{16}$ x 42 $\frac{1}{8}$ in.
Lent by the artist
- 27 **Study for Gymnast IV** 1985
Oilstick on paper
57 x 44 $\frac{3}{4}$ in.
Lent by David McKee Gallery, New
York
- 28 **Study for Gymnast IV** 1985
Oilstick on paper
58 x 51 in.
Lent by David McKee Gallery, New
York
- 29 **Study for Ouranos** 1985
Oilstick on paper
16 x 18 in.
Lent by the artist
- 30 **Study for Gaia** 1985
Oilstick on paper
30 x 24 in.
Lent by the artist
- 31 **Study for Gaia** 1985
Oilstick on paper
30 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 24 in.
Lent by the artist
- 32 **Study for Tethys** 1985
Charcoal on paper
30 x 26 $\frac{1}{2}$ in.
Lent by the artist
- 33 **Study for Tethys** 1985
Charcoal on paper
30 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 26 $\frac{1}{2}$ in.
Lent by the artist
- 34 **Study for Okeanos** 1986
Charcoal on paper
60 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 45 in.
Lent by the artist
- 35 **Study for Okeanos** 1987
Oilstick on paper
60 x 51 in.
Lent by Jerald Ordoover
- 36 **Study for Daktyl IV** 1988
Charcoal
60 x 47 in.
Lent by the artist



