

Art

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Graphite Piece

“Bill Bollinger: The Retrospective”

A once-forgotten pioneer of late-'60s Postminimalism is remembered. By **Joseph R. Wolin**



SculptureCenter, through July 30 (see Elsewhere)

In the past few years, New York has been awash in exhibitions dedicated to nearly forgotten figures of the late 1960s and early 1970s—not all that surprising, considering how much today’s artists owe to that seminal era of impassioned experimentation. The latest such stab at historical revision, SculptureCenter’s survey of the work of Bill Bollinger, covers only four years—1966 to 1970—of the sculptor’s remarkably brief career, but it masterfully conveys the radicality of his pared-down approach to form and materials.

Emerging on the New York scene just as the grip of Minimalism began to loosen, Bollinger, along with artists such as Richard Serra and Eva Hesse, rejected that movement’s clinical geometries and machined perfection, in favor of objects and actions that allowed for the organic and foregrounded the artist’s creative process. Bollinger’s self-evident manipulations of readily available

industrial materials made a splash in this Postminimalist milieu, and he was included in all the right exhibitions during the second half of the 1960s, in both the United States and Europe. Yet after his last show in 1974, he vanished, dying upstate in 1988 at age 48.

When Bollinger is remembered at all, it’s usually for the work at the heart

of SculptureCenter’s exhibition, the signature *Cyclone Fence* from 1968, a 50-foot length of chain-link fencing lying flat on the floor, except in the middle, where it rises up to eye level and twists over, forming a sort of Möbius strip. Different from every angle, the piece transforms the stuff of the everyday into a poetic gesture without losing its quotidian nature—a slight yet indelible shift that Gedi Sibony must dream about at night.

Other works help to place Bollinger squarely in the context of his times. In *Graphite Piece* (1969), matte, dark-gray powder covers half the floor of a room, smudging the lower part of the walls. It recalls a less ponderous, more

ephemeral—if not ethereal—version of Serra’s metal slabs or molten lead flung into a corner. In *Rope Piece [VW]* (1967), two sharp angles made of rough rope and turnbuckles extend from floor to wall, outlining a pair of virtual planes like a more muscular version of a Fred Sandback work.

Untitled (1970) simply comprises a brace of wheelbarrows filled with water. As the water evaporates, it leaves lime deposits like bathtub rings, a portable souvenir of the natural processes we associate with Robert Smithson’s *Spiral Jetty*.

Bollinger, in fact, used water as just another sculptural medium, and he deployed it in as deceptively uncomplicated and literal a manner as he did Cyclone fencing, rope, two-by-fours or plumbing pipes. In *Shelter Rock Road* (1970), a long, clear plastic tube sits in a circle on the floor. Filled with water, its ends resting one atop the other like a pair of crossed arms to prevent the contents from pouring out, it doubles up on an evocatively immaterial transparency, yet remains

perfectly—obdurately—ordinary. *Boston Common* (1970) features six steel oil drums clustered around a seventh. All are filled with brackish water, and are connected by black rubber hoses. While the straightforward arrangement evokes a certain truth to materials—like a science-fair demonstration, the siphoning action of the hoses keeps an even water level in all of the drums—it somehow suggests a model of a brain, circulating liquid thought.

Bollinger made a single film, the recently rediscovered *Movie* (1970), which shows the artist outdoors, trying to set a tall wooden log on its end. He fails more often than not, watching it fall of its own accord. When he succeeds, however, he knocks it back down himself. When not in motion, the log becomes a Minimalist back line—vertical or horizontal—in the landscape. Film, performance, sculpture and earthwork all at once, the balancing act of *Movie* represents Bollinger’s art at its best: a simple concept executed in commonplace materials that, despite (or, perhaps, because of) its stubborn refusal to read as anything else, manages to produce a ripple effect of meaning. Lots of artists pursue similar strategies now, with results that are often both precious and bombastic. (The exhibition of Lara Favaretto’s work, just down the road at MoMA PS1, overflows with examples.) Indeed, as seen in *Movie*, wearing jeans, T-shirt and beard, Bollinger could pass for any young hipster of the present. But even after all this time, his art still feels fresh—unstudied, unpretentious and resolutely uncommercial. That’s a past worth rediscovering.

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