



## JOHN EDGAR'S

work in stone is a powerful and compelling marker of deep transformations in Western understanding of the place of the human in the world of matter, energy and time.

Edgar's primary materials - (white) marble and (black) granite - resonate with the symbolic accumulations of Western thought. Spirit and matter, ideal and real, good and evil, life and death, purity and impurity, light and darkness, mind and body; binary pairs yoked together in material forms which also signify permanence, the slow time of stone always contrasted plangently with the fast time of organic being.

## RECALL

Read in these terms, Edgar's stone carvings in this exhibition invoke the memorial function of sculpture in the Western artistic tradition, most explicitly by their recollection of the form of the headstone. Even if it favours poetry (sculpted language) over stone memorials,

Shakespeare's Sonnet 55 locates this tradition exactly:

Not marble nor the gilded monuments  
Of princes shall outlive this powerful rhyme,  
But you shall shine more bright in these contents  
Than unswept stone, besmeared with sluttish time.  
When wasteful war shall statues overturn,  
And broils root out the work of masonry,  
Nor Mars his sword nor war's quick fire shall burn  
The living record of your memory.

The purpose of the poem, like the headstone or the sculpture, is to reiterate cultural values by preserving the identities of those who have exemplified those values. The memorial objectifies memory, serving human purposes and meeting human needs by lending its longevity, a material surface on which what is worth remembering can be written.

## REPRESENTING "NATURE"

Another fundamental tradition in Western art is representation of the real or material world. Several of the objects in this exhibition expressly invoke this tradition: Section, Vent, and Well invite responses as instances of landscape, made more vivid, more essential, by their being composed of the stuff which provides the "skeleton" of actual landscapes.

The achievement in artistic forms, principally visual, of likenesses of the natural world has also had a strong memorial dimension. As a record of what was once living, the landscape stands for the human participation in the common processes of living and dying, and the loss of value which those processes (as common and inevitable) bring about.

## INTERPENETRATIONS

These traditions, as also the binary structure of thinking on which they are based, work to make the non-human world "tell" of the human. The significance of stone or sky or water lies in their ability to represent what is not themselves - the self-consciousness, values and knowledge which are the decisive mark of the human.

By contrast, Edgar's writing with stone moves right away from the use of the stone as a surface on which to register and record knowledge

about the human situation. Each object is a secular icon; it both is what it represents - the material world in some of its various aspects - and it is a sign locating that knowledge which binds together as one the human and the non-human.

Each object defines a space in which the component parts interpenetrate along a zone of contact. This line (mostly a horizon) does not so much demarcate a separation as locate a tension; in Strata the granite seems to be pushing up into the marble, and the marble seems to be pressing down on to the granite. In Vent the red plug seems to be forcing the two black sections apart, while the rising of the black granite towards the centre seems to be constraining the expansion of the plug. In Well, the granite surface makes a space for water; the sculpture's name emphasises that the water has come from within the stone, "welling up" to the surface. To give these different parts symbolic values - like light and darkness, spirit and matter - does not take us from the object to a separate domain of knowledge but draws that knowledge into the dynamics of the contact zone. The purity of surface and utter precision of line in these works gives them the character of stone words or concepts, moments of knowledge achieved not by abstracting from the material world but by refining that world to its constitutive parts, much as speech is refined to written characters.

The names given to the objects seem simply to denote each thing, but the implied equivalence between name and thing is actually another instance of interpenetration. As signs, stone object and word interpret each other and point towards a principal issue in the whole exhibition: the laws and structures which are common to the material and the human worlds.

## ENERGY

When I saw Edgar's earlier exhibition, Making Amends, I felt an astonishing resonance between what excited and moved me about it and what also excited and moved me in the poetry of a contemporary American poet, A.R. Ammons. In his collection, Sumerian Vistas, Ammons writes of the memorial function of stone in human culture, but in a context of scientific thinking which produces the same awareness of interpenetration which I believe is of such importance in Edgar's work. In section 18 of the title poem in his collection,

Ammons writes:

stones, as if forms of intelligence,  
stir: concentrate light  
still and you have them:  
still, other durances exceed stones' -  
a pulse in one of earth's orbits  
beats once in four hundred thousand years:  
in certain orders of time  
stones blow by like the wind:  
starlight pricks them like bubbles

In this exhibition the horizon line, as a zone of contact, tension, energy, is made specific in one of its possible meanings as a pulse, a regular pattern in the flow of energy which, in its vivid red representation in jasper in Pulse and Vein, inevitably evokes the pulse of blood in organic life just as the red granite in Vent evokes the disruptive and yet life-generating power of heat energy in both the organic and inorganic orders of the material world.

## SECTION

As both a noun and a verb, "section" accurately identifies a decisive characteristic of Edgar's writing with stone. Each object is presented as the outcome of an action of "cutting through"; that outcome is also a representative part of a whole. In both ways, the action of sectioning is a primary move in an act of making knowledge, whether in science or art.

In the works which are framed in the sense that they are bounded by straight edges and take a rectangular shape, the pictorial section

of Western art is recollected; the moment captured in an image becomes a sign, a medium of communication between artist and viewer. The framing itself emphasises how what is represented within the frame is not a copy of the real world but has left the flow of time to become part of the flow of knowledge. What we see in these images are fundamentals, the world and our knowledge of it stripped back to primary relations.

In the works, like Well or Vein, where the irregular outlining of sculptured shape is recollected, the act of sectioning has another connotation. Not only cutting through, but cutting from, cutting out of; so that the large continuities of time and space from which these objects come are witnessed to not just in the horizon line and the contained verticals of each piece, but in the rough edges which testify to the shifting of the stone from its existence in the system of matter to participation as a sign in a system of meaning. Scale also influences a viewer's relation to the "scenes" represented by each object. Section makes this point most directly; to be in a position to see the width of a whole land mass is to be at a great distance from it, far enough, certainly, for the human form to be invisible.

The position from which one is invited to perceive these works is, conventionally, the position of science, the eye penetrating through the obstructions of matter to the universal laws beneath. But the eye of science is here brought into the realm of artistic production, its gaze penetrating and being captured by the frame of cultural knowledge.

## BINARY CODE

A pulse may be a regular pattern in the flow of blood or the motion of light, it may be the register of seismic forces (as in the sudden fracture of Fault) or of communication (as in Signal). Ultimately, as Datum affirms, pulse can be re-presented as an alternation, a binary code of black and white, one and zero. The flow of life, time, and information are here linked as instances of the same, the formation of knowledge and material order equally out of coded information. Datum marks a moment of cultural transition as significant as that marked by the title page illustration of Francis Bacon's Novum Organon (1620). The ship sailing between the Pillars of Hercules marks the transformation of European knowledge by the discovery of the New World of the Americas. The twin columns of Datum signal the equally profound transformation of human knowledge in the twentieth century.

We might then conclude, with Datum as our evidence, that the weaving together of time and knowledge on which human society and identity is based, which we call history and memory, is an instance of that larger weaving, which is the evolutionary order and organisation of being in the universe.

## WRITING WITH STONE

To go "Cross Country" is to engage with the chaotic, dynamically ordered diversity of the physical world, to experience one's own participation in it, to reconstitute the human as an instance of the orders and energies of that world.

To learn to think with these objects is to enter an order of perception in which the humanistic is neither displaced by nor displaces the scientific, but where the interpenetration of these modes of knowing is taken for granted.

John Edgar's sculptures are, as Ammons puts it, "forms of intelligence", objects which enact the interpenetration of consciousness and matter, announcing both the inclusion of the human with the non-human and yet the turning of matter from itself to symbolic and reflexive purposes in the creation of knowledge, which is perhaps humanity's distinctive role in the history of the universe.

BRIAN OPIE

## CURRICULUM VITAE

1950

Born Auckland, New Zealand.

1972

B.Sc. (Hons) ., Univ. N.S.W., Australia.

1976

Worked as Research Chemist, Christchurch.

1977

Established first stone-carving workshop, Auckland.

1979

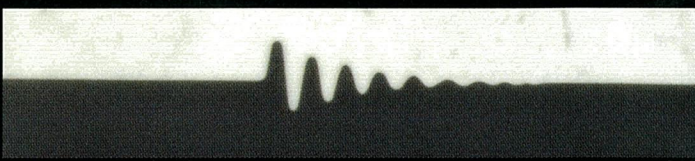
Prospecting trip to South Island.

1980

Travelled in South Island with Floating World Workshop.

1981

Established Relux Institute, Auckland.



1982

First constructions in stone, metal and glass.

1983

Established Enigma Studio, Auckland.

1984

Prospecting trip to South Island for argillite.

1985

Travelled to museums in N.Z. to research argillite artefacts.

Curated Pakohe for Dowse Art Museum.

1986

Attended First Stone Sculpture Symposium, Auckland.

Prospecting trip to Australia for Black Jade.

Travelled in China, Taiwan, Korea studying jade sources.

1987

Attended Second Stone Sculpture Symposium, Auckland.

Curated Bone Stone Shell Exhibition.

1988

Attended Third Stone Sculpture Symposium, Auckland.

Prospecting trip to South Island.

1989

Curated survey exhibition Stone Lines.

1990

Built workshops at Karekare.

1991

Attended opening of Bone Stone Shell, Kyoto, Japan.

1992

Worked with granite, glass and metal.

1993

Prospecting trip to South Island.

Curated N.Z. Tour of Making Amends.

1994

Prospecting trip to South Island.

Research trip to North Cape, New Zealand.

1995

Making Amends completes N.Z. Tour at Auckland Museum.

Started work in marble and granite for Cross Country.

1996

Curated On Form for Lopdell House Gallery.