

Modernism's Twisted Rectangular Volumes - The Sculpture of Clement Meadmore

Introducing Meadmore's work as an 'experience'

While strolling through the campus of New York's Columbia University there looms before one's sight an apparition in steel called 'Curl' which takes the mind back a long time ago into a vision of the primeval past when man had already linked movement to music, and dancing was born. So while the mind hums:

"When you do dance, I wish you
A wave o' the sea, which you might ever do
Nothing but that"

'Curl' seems ready to rend the air with a desire to animate itself so strong as if to begin to move any moment - and quite suddenly an enormous volume of the size of 12ft by 24ft by 11 ft has been transmogrified to "turn and move through space - freely, emphatically and expressive of character." At that point in time, 'Curl' which is actually a sculpture rendered by one of America's foremost Abstract Expressionists Clement Meadmore, could well have been a personification of America's modern dancer Alvin Ailey or British choreographer Siobhan Davies who believe that dancing is not just a noble language but "an agent that could in fact revitalise society." In other words, the language of art that draws its sensibilities from music, dance, painting, sculpture and such, has an important role to play because, for the artist, these works are meant to frame or capture a glimpse of the arriving society or the triumphs and the angst of the ones past. But in Meadmore's case, dancing could come to represent an even more elemental trigger going back to his childhood in Australia when his mother would instil in him an interest in the ballet, with concurrent exposures to Edgar Degas' seminal work on ballet dancers.

Sculpture and the built-environment

Alongside sculpture's relationship with the arts also arises the broader question of how sculpture informs architecture, and the relationship between architecture and design itself in the context of the sculpture - a relationship often misconstrued or ill-defined. Here, Meadmore lends touching articulation to the subject. He says that while a "building is part of the environment, a sculpture is a presence inhabiting (that) environment." Quite akin to the way that birds and beasts and man inhabit the environment where buildings and trees go to provide the necessary frame of reference for such inhabiting. Hence, for Meadmore, it becomes imperative that "when a sculpture meets the ground, it does not appear to sink into it like a tree or a building." Instead, "the conviction with which a sculpture makes contact with the ground

would itself represent a large part of its strength." It is also important to remember here that there is a certain 'spatial atmosphere' innate to the survival of the sculpture that immediately brings in the issue of size, as it inevitably does in the case of the building. Especially when a sculpture is large as most of Meadmore's sculptures are. In Meadmore's words - "a large sculpture stretches the limits of human scale in its overall dimensions, and if this scale is stretched to the breaking point one merely has a small architectural object." Its degree of enlargement in great measure, therefore, is a function of its purpose - if meant to be experienced at an "intimate scale", mere enlargement would "simply destroy the qualities" that it has set out to convey. While reflecting on the question of size, Meadmore echoes Henry Moore who had once said "every idea has a correct physical size." Meadmore gently extends this with his own thought that "size beyond that of idea is gratuitous." Apart from this shared thinking, there is another angle of companionship Meadmore enjoys with Moore - it is in the fact that 'Curl' on the lawns of Columbia resides alongside Henry Moore's.

Meadmore the Modernist: why especially Bauhaus, De Stijl and Futurism?

Meadmore's work finds definite berth under the broad hubris of Modernism, which for the visual arts would represent a new and revolutionary departure into an era of logic and method at the turn of the century, and one that would draw references from the modern sciences rather than from the archaic, the academic, the plagiarised and the classicism of Rome or Victorian England. While at the same time questioning the engendering consequences of the inconceivable and the seemingly limitless production capacities arising from the progressive discoveries of the Industrial Revolution.

The artist, who had been hailed by Time magazine as 'Solid Man' in April 1971, must have been the most solid Modernist for his time considering that the abstract expressionist wave on which his contemporary Modernists had already ridden on, was actually receding when this Australian-born artist arrived in the USA in 1963. But what is not often mentioned is that beginning with the late fifties to early sixties America seemed awakened to the 'astounding vitality' of design and crafts as part of the more defined framework of industrial design. And which came to be reflected in the increasing interest shown to the discipline by the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), as well as manifested in 'clear-cut forms' with 'lines and proportion taking precedence' in the prevailing material culture.

Since Meadmore's sculpture was already a prime example of work that was based on the organising principles of industrial logic, three conceptual categories of Modernism viz., the (largely Italian) Futurism, the (largely Dutch) De Stijl and the (largely

German) Bauhaus could hold great affinity to this genre of thinking, and provide us with just the right framework within which to view Meadmore's works. These are also categories that are directly rooted in our everyday modes of living such as in products and product-systems which also carry a certain immediacy about them by providing the constructs that drive our daily lives. Additionally, these influences have generally escaped critical attention, in the art world's preoccupation with the Abstract Expressionist stream of Modernism.

From this 'locus standi' arises first the aphorism of the Dutch De Stijl movement that 'the object of nature is man, the object of man is style'. Was it possible for the artist to escape the truths of a new consciousness that was being articulated by the Dutch De Stijl via their manifesto in 1918 while at the same point in time being put into actual practice by the Bauhaus - a design school from Germany in the inter-War period - and which said that the new consciousness was 'ready to be realized in everything, including the everyday things of life?' There is, indeed, a certain amount of poetic irony in the fact that Meadmore's birth in 1929 would coincide with Bauhaus' own ascendancy. And interestingly not too far down the line in 1948 Meadmore would choose to study industrial design and yet move on to making a profession out of sculpting. This is what makes it both tempting and legitimate to use these relatively unconventional coordinates as points of departure to understand the way Modernist industrial design has made its inroads into Meadmore's works of art as a happy amalgamation of art and design. And whether some of Modernism's most important lessons in sculpture drawn from Futurism could hold berth for Meadmore's works.

Very early on in life and barely out of his teens while still in Australia, Meadmore would have occasion to buy what he thinks must have been "the only copy of the writings of the De Stijl artist Piet Mondrian to ever reach Australia" - giving rise to what could conceivably have been the very first three dimensional abstractions of Mondrian's paintings, and which in the event, would also go to constitute the very first set of sculptures for Meadmore. What also endured out of this experience was the start of a geometric vocabulary that would come to mark the artist's oeuvre. And with continuing exploration, the real turn in its refinement triggering from a viewing of Barnett Newman's works in Japan in 1959. As a foremost Abstract Expressionist of his time, Newman would radically alter Meadmore's perception of the use of geometry by helping him internalise the precepts of geometry, so that the geometric feeling from the work itself could be eliminated rather than have "geometry dominate his work"; in addition to freeing the artist from being "religious about the verticals and the horizontals" as had come to happen in Meadmore's brush with Mondrian's works. Although it is equally

certain that without Mondrian there could have been none of the suggestions of the “expressive possibilities of geometry” for Meadmore. In that sense, Mondrian had set Meadmore on to the road to Modernism.

And then there was the abiding influence of Bauhaus to inform Meadmore’s work but generally not articulated directly in these terms. Behind the principal operatives that would make Bauhaus such a seminal influence for industrial design as well as for all related expressions (coming out of Bauhaus in the form of paintings, sculpture, theatre, jazz and such) remained gestalt perception, a touchstone of Bauhaus’ philosophy. And as it happens, Meadmore would place firm belief in gestalt perception, resulting in his conviction that the entire form of a sculpture must be deducible “from any single angle, otherwise one is only seeing half a sculpture at any given moment.” Propelled by this single principle was to emerge the quintessential Meadmore sculpture such as *Clench*, *Scronch*, *Out of there*, *Crscendo* and others. One also likes to believe that it was as an outgrowth of his training as an industrial designer that would hone to perfection Meadmore’s ability to reduce the conception of his sculpture to two basic elements of design viz., the cube and the half circle - giving rise to a feeling of ‘circling the square’ while watching Meadmore’s sculptures - as critic Jeanne Siegel would remark about Meadmore’s work. Looking backward in process, therefore, one clearly finds Meadmore’s mastery with abstracting mass into lines which could then move through space, and clearly the lines being used as a signifier of direction or as “an impulse of movement” as it were, in the words of Eric Gibson the author of ‘The Sculpture of Clement Meadmore’. Meadmore is one of few Modernist sculptors who has attained movement in space without the “denial of mass” as in Picasso’s sculptures; and achieved velocity of a drawn line to give an impression of mobility without resort to kinetics, as in the case of Alexander Calder’s works. This “physical experience of form moving easily through space” would surface largely through a measure of opticality brought about by the faceted forms of Meadmore’s sculptures that would allow for a play of light and shade across their surfaces. But it was also a matter of proportions - reducing width in relation to its length - so that when seen end-on the sculpture could appear in perspective. Additionally, the seeming reduction in bulk “while accelerating its journey through space” on the one hand, and the opposition between line and mass on the other, continue to reflect a certain sense of control over the basic elements of design and process. All of these underpinned by the admirable quality of clarity for structure and organisation that were undeniably traits inherited from the Bauhaus by the creative world. Little wonder then that Meadmore’s sculptures usually carry strong innate affinities in their treatments of lines with at least one of Bauhaus’ Masters of Form, Paul Klee.

Yet there is little doubt that at another level, Meadmore's works are a grand articulation of what the Futurists had dared to base their own work upon, at least half a century before Meadmore's own time. For them, the new perceptions and visions offered by science could no longer sustain the (notion of) the single object in static isolation from everything around it. To do so would be to deny the newly emerging principles of optics, even outside of amounting to a veritable 'fiction of the isolated object' which was a kind of absurdity since 'the object borrows its physical properties from the relations it maintains with all the others and certainly owes each of its determinations and consequently its very existence, to the place which it occupies in the universe as a whole'. Meadmore's works clearly reflect experimentations in a category of spatio-dynamism that were informed both by the Bauhaus as well as by Futurism. In any case, if these overlapping categories were to suggest any conflict between the two schools of influences, there were none because so much of Bauhaus' own locus would arrive from Futurism itself.

Meadmore: 'motion', method and spatial grammar in sculpture:

It is tempting to think, therefore, that all these very early seeds of Modernism, which were in any case imbued from Futurism, were also the very first intentions for Meadmore's own works. An inclination to draw inspiration from 'the miracles of contemporary life, a world continuously and splendidly transformed by Victorious Science' in a triumph of everything that is logical and transparent. For example, the Futurist's serious intent in the first decade of the 20th century to study motion in recognition of the recent discoveries towards 'persistence of vision' and which would motivate Marcel Duchamp to paint his 'Nude Descending a Staircase' (1911) or Balla to delve into an intensive study of movement that would, in turn, result in his 'Girl Running on a Balcony' (1912) and 'Abstract Speed' (1913); all of which would find subliminal applications in Meadmore's attempts to create movement in his own works. So, in deduction, what resulted from the Futurist's involvement with the technical mechanics of its time as a way of tracing 'complex webs of flights' across the canvas might have been the very early moorings of Meadmore's own attempts at achieving dynamism in his own work. Not to mention the much earlier influences of Degas' works instilled in the artist by his mother. The more mature Meadmore, both in his years as well as an artist, never quite failed to bring home the point about "the stresses and strains of bodily motion" conveyed through Degas' works. But there was a price to be paid for upholding one's own convictions of one's art. Because of his steadfast belief in 'motion' as a defining quality about object, Meadmore was cut out of 'Primary Structures' - the landmark Minimalist exhibition of sculpture at the Jewish Museum in New York in 1966 that would launch some of America's most profound sculptors. The curator Kynaston McShine would remark to Barnett Newman that Meadmore's sculptures amounted to being

'locomotive' which ironically has since been hailed as a triumph of achievement in the artist's works.

Meadmore in conclusion - personality and issues

Meadmore carries an almost 'Eastern' sense of affability about him - displaying in his manner of greeting his guests a wonderful blend of reserve and warmth that would belie his years in the USA. In a way he continues to carry his Australia within himself! Then there is the visage of his studio that would be a designer's delight - the unmistakable presence of a Charles Eames amidst the rest of the designer chairs. His sculptures beautifully mounted and lit for appropriate viewing - a privilege that is undoubtedly extended to just a few. The years sit well on him. Come Monday evenings - and the studio reverberates to the rhythms of jazz - an endearing passion with the artist that finds the deepest personal involvement with Meadmore himself at the drums. They say that 'Clench' in Japan and 'Out of there' at the Columbus Institute of Arts, Ohio spell pure music "with its easy and uniform continuities" intrinsic to musical rhythms, as Meadmore's official biographer Eric Gibson would attest to.

But in all that carefully delineated space aimed at reducing chaos to a minimum remain little shades of disorderliness. Perhaps these are the questions without the answers! The chink in the armour! As a Modernist abstract artist liberated from the paralysing effects of the past, Meadmore has perhaps a few issues that need resolving with the external world. Issues that would relate to the concept of liberation itself - the questions revolving around responsibilities that arise with the act of liberating. So that the connotations of 'liberating' oneself from the past would begin to carry at least one added dimension for the artist viz., of having to explicate whether this 'past' is also not made up of a set of antecedents nurtured in another country. The fact that Australia had seemed removed from the 'centres of art activities', thereby propelling him to have to move away from the Oceania to the USA not without leaving an inevitable trail of issues to simmer behind, issues amounting to whether he had not, in fact, abandoned his motherland - which would depict for many a different kind of a past? Certainly for an Indian who knows that the best of minds from here have a way of getting sucked into America's cultural 'black hole' - an irredeemable loss to any country that has tried to nurture its own.