Peter Reginato, Hannibal, 1972.
Mild steel, 52 x 132 x 86".
Storm King Art Center.

THREE MUSICIANS AT THE HARLEQUIN'S CARNIVAL: PETER REGINATO'S NEW SCULPTURE

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As we contemplate Peter Reginato's sculptures, we are made to think of our humanity. That is no small accomplishment for abstract welded sculpture.

Look at from five to ten slides of work by each of over six hundred artists for a sculpture competition as I did recently. A visual feast? Hardly. While there are exceptions, what one generally finds are established artists drearily repeating themselves and hundreds of others copying them. Most discouraging are what seem like countless formalist exercises in steel that organize geometric configurations in unlimited but ultimately boring variation. Much contemporary sculpture, particularly the larger, more public variety, is like a stale marriage in which the participants, despite an occasional poignant moment, are content to go through the motions. Bland and safe, no doubt, but where is the freshness, the possibility for renewal, the excitement? Although one infrequently meets with these qualities, they may be found in abundance in the risky, exhilarating sculpture that Peter Reginato is now making.

Reginato's abstract welded sculpture is upbeat, off-beat, and frequently humorous. Forms intersect and climb over one another in a vertical profusion of shape and color. Flat planes, curved planes, angled planes and punched-out planes, defined by a variety of straight and organic contours interspersed with wrought metal bars, wriggle in space as if animated by the rhythms of a jouncy Latin dance. These pieces, despite occasional botanical connotations, are essentially anthropomorphic. Their lurching movements, lumbering gaits, and quirky gestures give them an idiosyncratic appearance and air of accessibility that is disarmingly empathetic. It is this sense of vitality and personality that makes Reginato's work absolutely original in the arena of contemporary sculpture. His new pieces certainly will not appeal to everyone, least of all the proponents of welded sculpture who have prevailed for the last two decades, but there are ample rewards, aesthetic as well as in plain good fun, for those who can get into the spirit of the work.

Fun? Yes, fun, and what's wrong with a little fun? It has a long and honorable tradition in the visual arts, although at the moment we are emerging from a period of dead seriousness. The recent past emphasis on self-referential abstraction and the cerebral served to suppress playfulness in art. Lest we forget, a number of modern masters, including Duchamp, Chagall, Klee, Miró, Calder, Picasso at times, and more recently Oldenburg, have demonstrated that humor and whimsy can be as significant as solemnity. Then there is the phenomenon known as Funk Art which had its genesis in the San Francisco-Bay Area during Reginato's formative years as an art student in the mid-'60s. While some of the work associated with this manifestation is bizarre bordering on the ugly, much of it is humorously absurd or downright funny. Among Reginato's teachers at the San Francisco Art Institute were two artists identified with Bay Area Funk, William Geis and Robert Hudson. Indeed, Reginato's new sculpture, although entirely different in character, may seem to have a passing relationship with Hudson's vertically piled Surrealist- and Pop Art-inspired conglomerations of highly polychromed metal. However, Reginato's work has had a relatively long and complicated development far removed from any art made in San Francisco twenty years ago.

For a couple of years after he moved to New York in 1966 Reginato made polychromed plywood sculpture composed of a number of disparate geometric elements. After turning to fiberglass in 1968 he continued to use color, experimenting with loose, brushy surfaces which after a long hiatus now have reappeared. However, by 1969 the fiberglass pieces had become monochromatic, and paint was completely abandoned when in that year he began to make welded steel sculpture. No longer subject to the immediacy of California colorism, Reginato's new restraint probably had a lot to do with Clement Greenberg's authoritative ideas on modernist purity that proved so persuasive on the East Coast. Over the next few years, his large, horizontal, dome-like constructions of discontinuous, interlocking steel plates maintained an essentially formal presence in keeping with the general practice of the time. However, the incorporation of curved planes, scalloped and zigzag contours, and an occasional kidney shape, while held in check by the hemispherical structure of these pieces, heralds the appearance of a personal vocabulary that marks all of Reginato's subsequent sculpture.

Although he enjoyed considerable success with the domical pieces, in the mid-'70s Reginato allowed his work to evolve in another direction, as has been his tendency. His sculpture began to assume a vertical orientation, and it became more open and linear. A number of these pieces were given a monochromatic glaze of paint to create the effect of a light patina, but for aesthetic and technical reasons this experimentation was short-lived. Gradually, standing upright on legs, the work took on the appearance of personages in a rather droll manner reminiscent of Julio González's figures. By 1978-80, complex clusters of geometric and organically shaped steel plates, which form the basis of the current work, were being elevated on tripod-like supports, giving a new weight and density to Reginato's sculpture. These pieces give the impression of some abstract variation on a top-heavy creature, all angles, humps, and masses above three spindly legs. Reginato had separated himself from the crowd by pur-

suing his own vision, investing his sculpture with a peculiar and whimsical sense of life.

In the early '80s Reginato experimented with cluster pieces low to the floor, but he decided that he preferred the figural suggestiveness that upright sculpture encourages. By maintaining verticality he continued to acknowledge his admiration of Picasso and González, whose collaborative efforts in welded metal between 1928 and 1931 revolutionized sculpture. A piece such as Picasso's *Women in a Garden* of 1929-30, which relied on González's technical assistance, and the latter's independent works made thereafter are not only vertical and figurative but contain elements of fantasy that are akin to Reginato's own sensibility. Furthermore, Picasso, who was foremost an artist of the human figure, always has been one of his heroes, not only as a sculptor, but even more as a painter. A painting student to begin with, Reginato also counts among his favorites two other painters who sculpted, Matisse and Miró. Add to the list Léger, who was preoccupied with the figure, and it is easy to understand why Reginato's grounding in modernist figuration could not be repressed. For the first time, in a development that began with occasional painted works in 1981, his concerns with three-dimensional form, painting, and figuration have been fully integrated in the new polychromed sculpture.

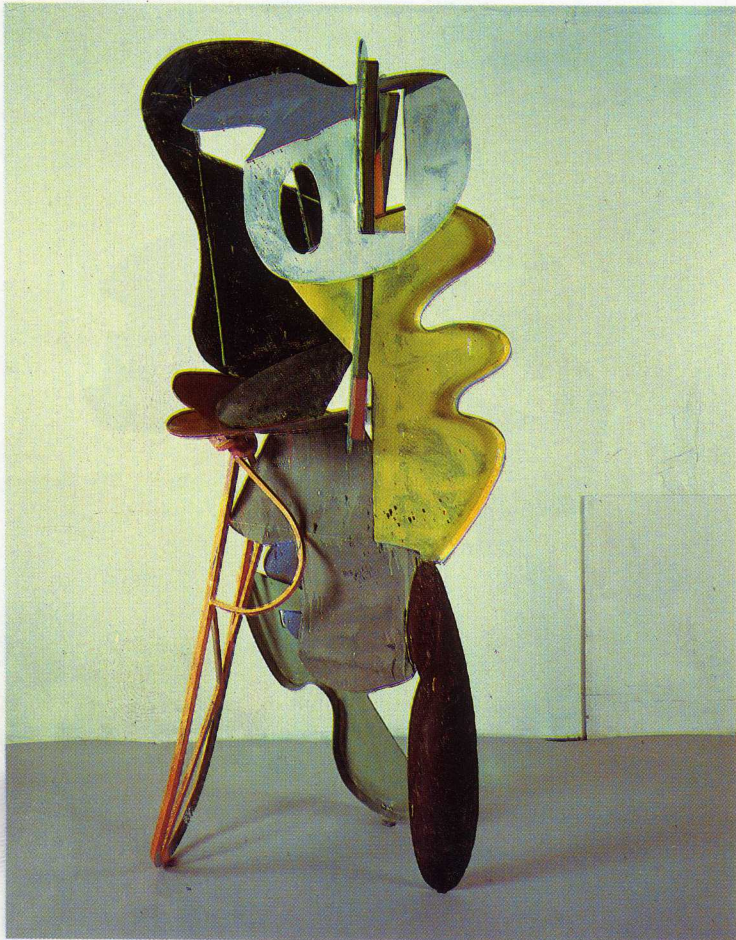
To begin a group of works like the current pieces, Reginato makes a variety of flat, concave and convex shapes in varying sizes without a preconception of how they will be employed. Some of them are geometric; others are the characteristic organic shapes that have obsessed him since the early '70s. A number of these shapes seem to him for one reason or another to need elaboration, either by cutting negative areas into them, by the addition of rims at edges, or by welding bars onto the steel plates for visual effect rather than for the purpose of reinforcement. Reginato then uses these pieces like found objects, joining them to discover a compositional logic dictated by the individual shapes and their interaction. In the nature of abstract, relational sculpture and his own aesthetic, he strives for a convincing interplay of straight and curved elements, convex and concave surfaces, solids and voids, lights and darks, and a rhythmic feeling of energy. As one shape builds upon another towards the completion of a piece, a constant mediation between visual impact and structural soundness must occur, although in the end both concerns are inseparable. After the pre-made shapes are welded together, Reginato, for compositional or technical reasons, sometimes cuts into the assemblage with a torch, a procedure that he likens to carving. This final step in the construction of the sculpture, when employed, is subtractive, but for the most part Reginato's method is accretive, and in general, it relies on the collage aesthetic that Picasso so munificently bestowed on twentieth-century art.

As a painter, Reginato works by intuition and impulse, much like he does as a sculptor. Typically, the first color applied to a piece is randomly selected and placed, functioning only to begin a dialogue. It rarely survives in the finished work as color relationships undergo continuous change. Rich, full surfaces are built up by repeated applications of acrylic urethane enamel. Evidence of successive layers of colors shows through in places, mingling with drips and splatters of paint. Painting well on a two-dimensional surface is hard enough, but painting inside, outside, and around is that much more difficult. Not only must colors and values work in combination with each other, they have to clarify the three-dimensional relationships of a piece and be appropriate to the shapes they help define. That is, Reginato uses color to both accentuate individual elements and reinforce compositional unity. His color sense is bold and imaginative. Along with black and grays, deep greens and purples, he trumpets the primaries in combination with pinks, ochres, and an array of other creamy colors. He wants the impact of his color to be strong, declarative, not decorative. Reginato thinks about polychromed sculpture in reference to Hans Hofmann's concept of push-pull: a dynamic balancing of part and whole, surface and volume, positive and negative. As concerned as he is with three-dimensional form, he can think like a painter, and his painting enhances his sculptural intentions. This is perhaps no more evident than in the way his seemingly offhand, spontaneously painted surfaces complement the fluid rhythms of the welded steel beneath them.

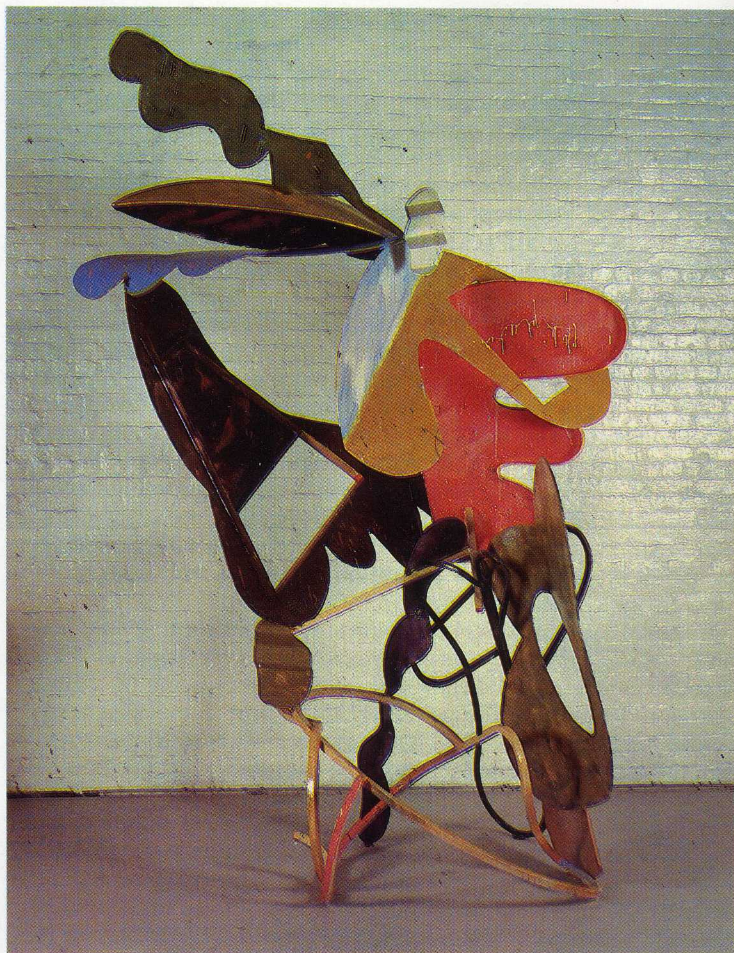
Peter Reginato, Loose Ends, 1978. *Mild steel, 81 x 59 x 50".*
Courtesy Sydney and Frances Lewis Foundation.

Reginato's pieces have affinities with the imagery of the two artists he most admires, Picasso and Miró. It is as though their painted images of the 1920s and '30s have been filtered through the subsequent history of modernism and put in real space. Direct-metal sculpture and the entire notion of assemblage depend of course upon Picasso's example, but the way Reginato's contrasting planes overlap and interpenetrate is reminiscent of Picasso's Synthetic Cubist painting. This is generally the case, but it is particularly true of the smaller sculptures. Not only are they more frontal; since they tend to reach out in space less, their lively silhouettes not withstanding, they also appear more contained. Position several of these pieces together in a plane and one might be reminded of Picasso's 1921 paintings of the *Three Musicians*. The similarity is found in an angular organization of solid and cut-out planes activated by intermittent diagonals and an alternation of straight and curved contours. Reginato underscores his appreciation of Picasso by naming one of his new pieces *Harlequin*, the comical character who appears prominently in both versions of the *Three Musicians* and a large number of other works by the great Spanish artist. Several of Reginato's devices, including the use of serrated planes, which he sometimes paints with stripes, and shapes that project from an armature like a car's side-view mirror, as well as his general conception of how forms go together, can be seen to have sources in Picasso's work, but the outcome is not the result of quotation as much as a matter of long-term familiarity and internalization of Picasso's oeuvre.

In the title of another new work Miró is paid homage by name. While parallels to Reginato's forms are found in works ranging from Arp's wood reliefs of 1916-17 to Gorky's paintings of the '40s, it is Miró with whom he most identifies. If Picasso's Synthetic Cubism

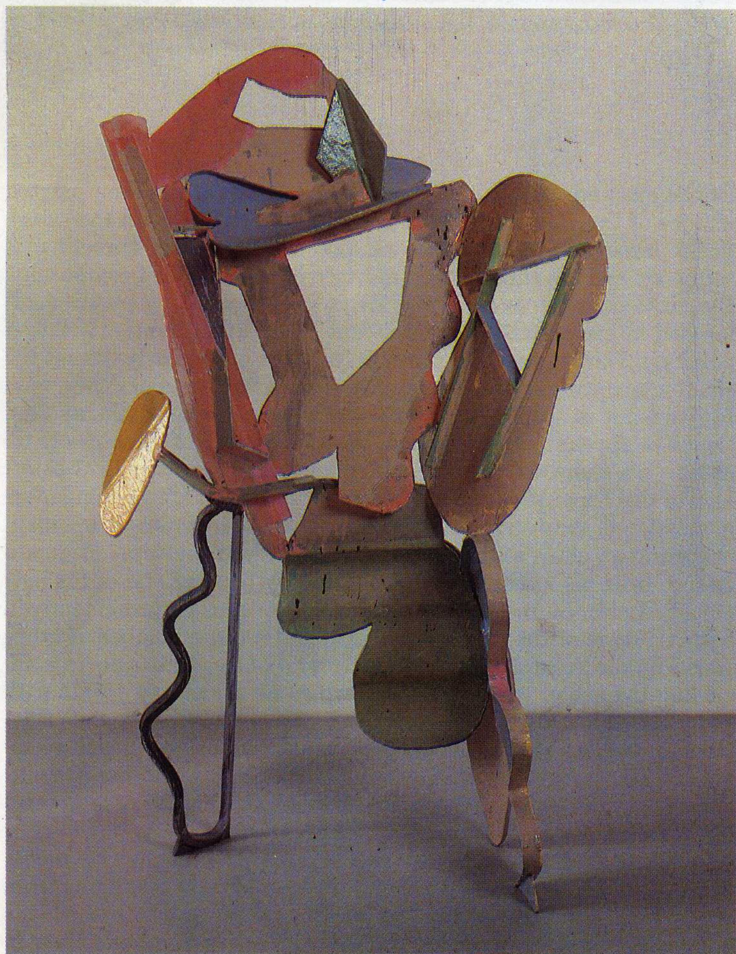


Peter Reginato, Felicia Fauve, 1984. *Acrylic urethane enamel on mild steel, 84 x 45 x 29".*

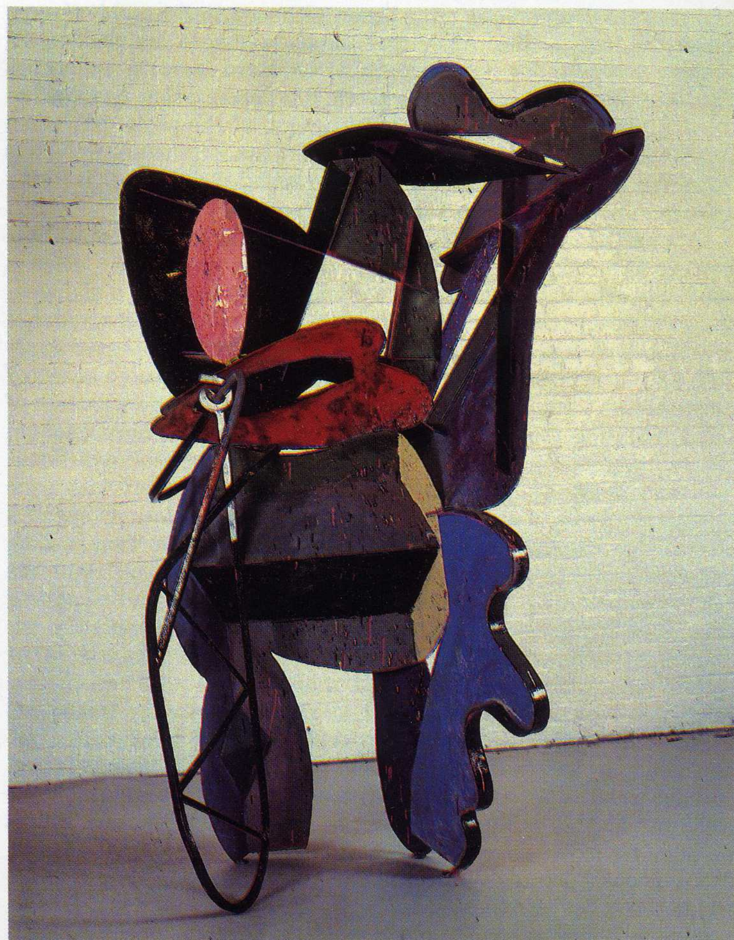


Peter Reginato, Casanova Brown, 1984. *Acrylic urethane enamel on mild steel, 111 x 80 x 57".*

Peter Reginato, Harlequin, 1984. *Acrylic urethane enamel on mild steel, 44 x 26 x 13".*



Peter Reginato, Midnight and Morning Rain Waiting for Miró, 1984. *Acrylic urethane enamel on mild steel, 93 x 58 x 41".*



provides the scaffolding for his sculpture, Miró's biomorphic progeny infuse it with life. Shapes swell, ripple, and thrust in space as natural forms do. They seem to grow, to draw energy from one another, and to respond to their environment. Much of Reginato's visual vocabulary can be located in Miró's teeming world of abstract-surrealist fantasy, *Harlequin's Carnival* of 1924-25. Miró's famous detached ear reappears without anatomical reference. His undulating lines are given a new existence in sinuous steel bars. A variety of ovoid and pseudopodial forms, without distinguishing features, are reunited in Reginato's sculpture. These forms of course have an existence of their own, independent of Miró, springing as they do from the protoplasmic impulses of life itself. While Miró's example has been an inspiration to Reginato, it is perhaps his infectious spirit of whimsy more than the morphological influences that has been most important.

Although there is considerable opinion to the contrary, the mother lode of modernism is far from exhausted. The incredibly inventive outpouring of art that occurred earlier in this century still can be mined to yield new riches when fused with a creative spirit. This process is not to be confused with recycling, which is rampant in art today. Rather, it is a matter of understanding the essential nature of one's sources and integrating them in a coherent whole. Even more, the result must be marked by the distinctive character of a new formulation. Picasso, Miró, occasional traces of Matisse's paper cutouts, these influences and others may be detected in Reginato's work, but they have been synthesized and transformed not only into the third dimension but into a fuller vision of what sculpture can be. By creating works that in themselves are convincing, Reginato reaffirms the continuing vitality of the modernist tradition.

His newest work appears at a time when complication seems desirable. The fascination for inert geometry has waned, and in its stead organic complexity and movement have been eagerly received. In this regard, Reginato once again finds himself more in the company of painters than sculptors. Two who come to mind are Elizabeth Murray and Frank Stella. Murray's segmented organic shapes pulled together by serpentine lines and Stella's energetic curvilinear compositions and loosely painted surfaces have counterparts in Reginato's sculpture, although in essence the three are very different artists whose similarities are only a function of the stylistic pendulum. Murray's paintings most often seem concerned with botanical and landscape references, while Stella's work, despite its ebullience, remains essentially without metaphorical content. But parallels between Stella and Reginato in particular are instructive. Both have traveled the route from reductiveness to visual extravagance. On the way, Stella has become more of a sculptor, Reginato more a painter. This hybridization represents a welcome retreat from the prescriptive Greenbergian dogmas on the true nature of modernism that held sway a decade or two ago. Their works, which along with Murray's share certain superficial resemblances, reflect a general development that favors richness, diversity, and vigor.

A significant aspect of Reginato's sculpture is what physically is not present. The spaces around and especially through planes appear as substantial shapes in their own right. In fact, when cleanly set off by a neutral background or a dark underlying color, the negative shapes can seem more positive than the polychromed steel. They repeat positive shapes or assert themselves as distinct compositional elements. The lengths of wrought metal bars that weave through the pieces also echo the edges of shapes and enclose spatial planes. The combination of precisely cut internal and external contours and Reginato's rhythmic drawing in space sets up a complex condition of shifting figure-ground relationships that is more frequently experienced in painting than sculpture. The interplay between illusory shape and solid plane has been an important ingredient in much modernist sculpture, but Reginato's accentuation of this conjunction provides one more demonstration of the rich possibilities inherent in the merger of two- and three-dimensional thinking.

In addition to the spatial effects and linear accents they create, the metal bars contribute another quality. When employed to support a piece of sculpture, they increase the feeling of buoyancy that biomorphic forms naturally impart. Those pieces that make extensive use of curved bars around their bases appear to spring off the floor. Movement is continued upward by the spirited interaction of shapes. It almost seems as though a number of animated conversations are taking place within the whole, a multi-voiced monologue as it were. Towards the top of some pieces the discussion veers off in a new direction as conversations often do. This shift, which functions something like contrapposto in traditional figurative sculpture, results not in instability so much as a slight disequilibrium that insures a dynamic engagement of space.

To elaborate further on the anthropomorphic character of Reginato's new pieces, like human figures, most of them have fronts and backs. The angle of the planes (which enhance the possibility for visual penetration) and the concomitant sense of bodily cavities make the fronts appear open and expansive. The backs, on the other hand, generally being more planar, have less depth and appear relatively closed. To reinforce this impression, Reginato tends to limit the number of colors on the backs, allowing one color to predominate. The treatment of the backs clearly assigns to them a subordinate position, although they are by no means lacking in sculptural significance. They have that same degree of visual interest relative to front views that one finds in realistic depictions of the human figure. Reginato is intrigued with the idea of a contrast between fronts and backs, and the element of surprise for those who discover the front of a piece after first encountering the back. His distinction between fronts and backs in abstract sculpture in the round is a daring formal concept which succeeds in intensifying the metaphorical potential of his work.

Among other things, Reginato's sculpture is an art of body language. His "figures" deport themselves in a range of postures and gestures that we have met before. One piece bustles with swaggering self-confidence; another seems at cross-purposes with itself. A third work appears delightfully flighty while still another gives the impression of klutzy bemusement. As we contemplate Reginato's pieces we are made to think of our own humanity. This is no small accomplishment for abstract welded sculpture.

Peter Reginato, Big Yellow, 1984. *Acrylic urethane enamel on mild steel, 90 x 84 x 53".*