

A Short History of Decay

Sculpture by **James Welty**



5 June – 8 August 2004

University of Virginia Art Museum
Charlottesville

Foreword

I have had the great pleasure of knowing James Welty and his work for the past five years. In the summer of 2000, he was one of twenty-four artists (others included Agnes Denes, Ann Hamilton, Dennis Oppenheim, and Lucio Pozzi) who participated in a special exhibition—*Hindsight/Fore-site: Art for the New Millennium*—organized by the Museum, which placed site-specific work inspired by Thomas Jefferson’s legacy throughout the Charlottesville area. His totemic *A Short History of Decay* (also on view in this exhibition) referenced Jefferson’s fascination with the natural world. Soon after we began discussions about a solo exhibition of his work in the Museum, which has now happily come to pass.

I am indebted to Jean-Noël Herlin for his insightful and beautifully crafted essay on Welty’s work. His examination of the artist’s working method and often obscure literary and visual references, as well as his recognition of the core tensions inherent in the works themselves, is both thought provoking and helpful in appreciating this unusual body of work. Whether or not we are familiar with many of the authors whose titles Welty has appropriated, we recognize the intellectual milieu in which the artist finds sustenance.

Born and raised in Chicago, Welty arrived in New York directly out of art school to work with Frank Stella and remained a full-time collaborator and master printer from 1975 to 1987. During this period he was also developing and showing his own artwork, among other design activities associated with dance and the theater. Although Welty’s pieces are immobile, they seem merely caught in the act of movement or transformation, a quality that points back to his costume and set designs with Joann Jansen Dance Co. at the Kitchen, in New York, and with the Dan Wagoner Dance Company, as well as his ten-year history of architectural installations.

For the design of this handsome publication I thank Anne Chesnut. Also essential to the installation of the exhibition and production of the catalogue were Rusty Smith, the Museum’s preparator and photographer, and Tom Cogill and Richard Robinson, professional free-lance photographers in Charlottesville. I am honored to have had the opportunity to work with James Welty and to share his majestic vision with our visitors.

Jill Hartz, Director

Covers
Detail of *Hungry Ghost*
Hypothesis, 2004
Copper; 41" × 46 7/8" × 3 1/8"
Collection of the artist



Forms of the Nameless

Jean-Noël Herlin

James Welty is one of the few contemporary American sculptors to work in copper, his elected medium since 1989. His current studio in Afton, Virginia, a 30-minute car ride from Charlottesville due west, stands on a platform carved about one-third the way down into a steep wooded hill. Far off in the distance, above the treetops, the cobalt mass of the Blue Ridge Mountains with their wooly outline stretches across half the horizon. On the mid-January day I visited Welty the light was a subdued white, the air still and crisp. Inside the studio, two works in progress hung on two separate walls. The long and ultrathin sheets of copper, 36 x 96 x 0.04 inches, which, with coils of ¼-inch strips and ½- to ⅝-inch tubing, constitute his working materials, rested sideways along a third wall.

Beginning a sculpture from rudimentary sketches, Welty works with intent and precision in almost uninterrupted sequences of motions. As if drawing into the metal with electric sheer, he cuts from a sheet of copper pieces of generally small dimensions. Having accumulated a sufficient quantity, he shapes each of these primary elements one by one, annealing the metal with an oxyacetylene torch and pounding it with a rubber mallet or hammer. He then sutures these modeled fragments to one another by fusion with brazing rods. Incrementally, he composes the ground—one might say the skin or the shell of the work.

Separately, assembling copper pieces, strips, and tubes in different combinations, he fabricates objects, which, most often, he subjects to an onslaught of distorting blows and lacerations. These components, incorporated with the prepared ground, some fused or hammered in, others movable, give Welty's wall pieces the appearance of evolving from an undistinguishable center, while contributing a formal counterbalance to the verticality of his freestanding sculptures. Finally, oxidation with variable intensities of heat brings lustrous accents of color to specific areas.



In his exhibition James Welty presents a body of works from 1998 to 2004: six wall pieces, including a recently completed 45-foot long scroll, and five freestanding sculptures. The wall works rest on steel brackets; the freestanding pieces slide over a steel rod screwed to the 3/8-inch steel plate that supports them.

A first contact with the small to medium scale wall works can be startling. Their colliding volumes, turbulent surfaces, interlocking planes, and abundant details will induce disorientation and perplexity. These organic abstractions, however, are richly evocative. The “brutalist” gestures (bending, curling, folding, twisting, smashing, puncturing, slitting, gouging, perforating, and encrusting) and quasi-painterly additive process of their building method, the recurrence of similar shapes and volumes (primal chemical soup, aquatic and earthly floral and faunal motifs, tectonic convulsions, fractures, crevices, orifices, cavities, anatomical parts, bulges, pods, inflated and deflated spheres, and a motley of objects defying definition), and touches of incandescence act in concert to create works teeming with intimation of life forms, functions, and situations, while the alternation of outer and inner spaces confers to their visual polyphony an air of mystery.

In One of Earth's Attics, 2000

Copper, 21 x 17 x 9"

Private collection



Above
A Short History of Decay, 2001
 Copper, 123 × 55 × 37"
 Collection of the artist

Opposite
My King, 2001
 Copper, 121 × 41 × 35
 Collection of the artist

Spanning 45 feet with two 6-inch caesurae, Welty's 2004 scroll is his most expansive wall work to date. Set in a spatio-temporal dimension, it is a masterfully crafted syntactic articulation of the sculptor's gestures and motives—a three-dimensional score to be interpreted by, and performed in, the viewer's imagination starting from either side. I am reminded here of the filmmaker Samuel Fuller's words about cinema in Jean-Luc Godard's *Pierrot le fou*: "[...] a battleground: love... hate... action... violence... death... In one word, emotion."

It would be perilous to attempt a detailed and authoritative exegesis of Welty's private language. Nonetheless, I will propose some of the associations these sculptures might inspire: beauty and ugliness; harmony and incongruity; familiarity and alienness; birth and breath; ingestion-digestion-excretion and flatulence; tumescence and exhaustion; fertility and noxiousness; burial and excavation; decay and renewal; shelter, hideout and trap; seen and unseen. The clusters of these associations suggest simultaneously a dynamic pulse of vital energy and a resistance to one single cohesive apprehension. Indeed, their polarity signals that it is precisely the uncertainty, shiftiness or contrariness of the meaning of physical reality and existential situations that lie at the core of, and are conveyed by, these wall works, unmoored from empirical evidence.



If Welty's wall works set us adrift in an alien sea of obscure purposes and dubious meanings with imagination as our only compass, his freestanding sculptures provide an arresting and disquieting encounter with otherness of a different kind. They consist of five figures, all made in 2001. Using the repertoire of gestures and signs and assembling method described earlier, Welty has created works of utter strangeness. Twelve feet high and some 400 pounds heavy, improbably balanced on rounded or soft-looking ends, they tower in gravity-defying erection. Evolutionary dead ends or future biological aberrations, their incongruity, Ubuesque pomposity, salaciousness, monstrosity or truculence, as the case may be, elicit repulsion and attraction, hilarity and consternation, rejection and compassion. One thinks, of course, of tales of beasts and beauties.

Flanked by "acolytes," to use Welty's word, they are elegantly *mise en scènes* on the round stage that places them virtually on the same plane as the viewer. This device confers to their presence a physical immediacy, which, as it accentuates their imposing stature, gives them an air of familiarity: meeting them on a street corner or on a walk in the woods is a distinct possibility. They are endearing on their own terms, even in their most unrestrained countenance. I will venture to say that, in their preposterous appearance, these sculptures stand as provocative invitations to acknowledge otherness when and where it manifests itself, in elephant men and women as well as within ourselves, if I may stretch the point in Hannah Arendt's direction.

With one exception, most of the titles of the sculptures in this exhibition refer to, or are taken from, literary works. Thus, from Rabelais *Isle of Wild Sausages*, conjuring up his jovial giants' insatiable appetite for foods, wines, and love-makings; from Kafka, *The Burrow* and *Odradek*, the battered creature made of unidentifiable matter whose very inoffensiveness is





Above
House of Breath, 2001
 Copper; 117 × 49 × 35
 Private Collection

Top right
The Burrow, 2003
 Copper; 147 × 127 × 31
 Collection of the artist

Bottom right
Hungry Ghost Hypothesis, 2004
 Copper; 41" × 46 7/8" × 31"
 Collection of the artist

a source of anxiety; from the Belgian-born writer and artist Henri Michaux, explorer of some terrifying regions of the mind, *My King*, *The Emanglons*, and *Monster on the Stairs*; from Samuel Beckett, *Ping*, hopelessly entangled in an eccentric web of words; from the Romanian-born essayist E.M. Cioran, unblinking observer and implacable accountant of humankind's bankruptcies *In One of Earth's Attics* and *A Short History of Decay*; and from the title of William Goyen's 1950 novel, the fabulous foliaceous *House of Breath*; finally, a telling lowbrow counterpoint to the preceding titles, *Black Tooth*, which will bring to the mind of television viewers of the 1950s and '60s the grunting oversized canine character one never saw onscreen, except for the paws it agitated from behind a door on the set of the Soupy Sales Show, or even the clownish and pimply face of *Mad* magazine's Alfred E. Neuman.

Hungry Ghost Hypothesis alludes to the class of misshapen, diseased, and skeletal people, pauperized by wars and natural disasters, spurned and effectively relegated to invisibility by society, which are depicted, that is to say made visible, in rare 12th-century Japanese scrolls. These scrolls were drawing from earlier Indo-Chinese Buddhist literature in which bodily, but invisible, hungry ghosts inhabiting the realm located one stage above hell in the order of the six realms of beings intervene in the physical world to make sense of phenomena for which the people of the time had neither empirical nor rational explanation, for instance eating feces, explaining their decay, or lapping rain water, explaining evaporation. Given after a work's completion, Welty's titles are no more programmatic than the sculptures are descriptive. Rather, they are signposts of affinities in the realm of the imagination.



Fluid motions alternating with bursts of violent energy, Welty's sculptures are located at the confluence of surrealism and expressionism. Their temperament is theatrical. Their performing style ranges from gracefully choreographed to syncopated to jocular, guffaw, and ridiculous, with an exposed-nerve-endings effect.

In curvilinear contours and, in places, sharp or spiky edges, intricate massing of equivocally shaped volumes, billowing surfaces, manipulated spaces, luminosity and darkness, they mirror the process of their laborious making and display the potential for plastic and associative expression within the malleability, pliability, and indeed, conductivity of the element, which the ancient Chinese book *K'ao kung chi* calls the metal *par excellence*.

April 2004

Jean-Noël Herlin, French-born and a New York City resident, has been active in the art world since 1970. Between 1970 and 1990 he was the leading antiquarian bookseller in America of twentieth-century avant-garde publications in the visual and performing arts. In 1993 he curated the first survey on the design of American exhibition invitations since 1940 at Exit Art/The First World, New York. During the past twenty years he has appraised such important properties as The Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection, the archives of Robert Smithson, Experiments in Art and Technology, David Tudor, and, most recently, the abstract expressionist New York School's Eighth Street Club. His own on-going archiving project of international and intermedia ephemeral documents, begun in 1973, counts today more than 250,000 items.

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Biography

James Welty

- **Education**
BFA Summa Cum Laude, Phi Beta Kappa, Rochester Institute of Technology, 1974
Ruskin School of Drawing, Oxford, England, 1973
Chicago Art Institute, 1969
- **Employment**
Lithography instructor, Evanston Art Center, IL, 1975
Master printer and collaborator to Frank Stella, 1975–87
- **Selected Exhibitions**
John Davis Gallery, New York, 1986, 1987, 1989, 1990
Performance, A Short History of Mirrors, The Kitchen, New York, NY, 1992
C.I.T.E. Design, New York, NY, 1992–94
Sterne Foundation Solo Exhibition, East Hampton, NY, 1998, 2003
Hindsight/Fore-site: Art for the New Millennium, University of Virginia Art Museum, Charlottesville, 2000
Three Artists: James Welty, Steven Segiel, Gillian Jagger, Davis & Hall Gallery, Hudson, NY, 2001
- **Architectural Installations and Furniture Design**
C.I.T.E. Design, New York, NY, 1994
Gloucester House Restaurant, New York, NY, 1995
Delmonico Hotel Restaurant, New York, NY, 1996
American Craft Museum, New York, NY, 1999
Gallery of Functional Art, Los Angeles, CA, 1999
Hoffmiller Design (furniture exhibition), Denver, CO, 2000
- **Selected Bibliography**
Toepp, Wayne, "The Dissected Muse: James Welty's Recent Constructions," *Arts Magazine*, 1987
Raynor, Vivien, "Photos and Sculpture at the Aldrich," *The New York Times*, Nov. 27, 1989
Henry, Gerrit, "James Welty at John Davis," *Art in America*, March 1990
Tobias, Toby, "Speechless at the Kitchen," *Village Voice*, April 12, 1992
Siting Jefferson: Contemporary Artists Interpret Thomas Jefferson's Legacy, University of Virginia Art Museum, 2000
Smith, Emily, "The Shape of Things," *C'Ville Weekly*, Charlottesville, December 23, 2003
Brown, Sally, "Pavilion IX," *Virginia Living*, March 2004

Works in the exhibition

A Short History of Decay

Sculpture by James Welty

5 June – 8 August 2004

Unless indicated otherwise
dimensions are given in
inches, height x width x depth.

Black Tooth

2004. Copper, 129 x 135 x 31
Collection of the artist

Hungry Ghost Hypothesis

2004. Copper, 41" x 46'7" x 31"
Collection of the artist

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2003. Copper, 147 x 127 x 31
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Isle of Wild Sausage

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Ping

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2001. Copper, 123 x 55 x 37
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House of Breath

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My King

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Monster on the Stairs

2001. Copper, 143 x 51 x 31
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The Emanglons

2001. Copper, 145 x 51 x 37
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