

TONY BLOOM **LANDBUOYS**

Essay by Amy Gogarty



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Cover image

Priorsphere 2010 | From the exhibition *Landbuoys*. Photograph by Art Gallery of Grande Prairie


Inside back image

Liminal Husk 2013 | From the exhibition *Landbuoys*.
Photograph by Ken Lumbis / shot in the Kleskun Hills, north and east of Grande Prairie, Alberta

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Tony Bloom
CipherSphere 2013
aluminum

Tony Bloom's *Landbuoys*: Time, Space and the Instant of Actuality

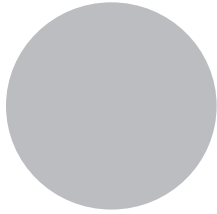
Living beings can survive, grow and multiply only through a constant flow of matter, energy, and information. It is, therefore, an absolute necessity for an organism to perceive its environment, or, at least, those aspects of its environment that are related to its life requirements.¹

François Jacob,
The Possible and the Actual

The modern world is one of hazards. Those we perceive are marked and noted, while those deceptively camouflaged in the everyday require more subtle means of detection. Tony Bloom's fourteen metal *Landbuoys* recall functional buoys found in open water, which warn of hazards such as hidden shoals, currents or pipelines. Bloom's sculptures, however, are found stranded on land, far from their expected habitat, and, as such, they pique our curiosity. Inspired by scientists working with underwater buoys and power generation, the *Landbuoys* extend the artist's long-standing interest in sculptures with "round or curved bottoms, [that] are balanced, pivoted, or gimbaled, and that have the capacity or implication of movement."² The sculptures suggest scientific instruments, calling to mind the natural environment and our place in it.

Bloom grew up in Tokyo, Paris and Washington DC, encountering a wide range of influences and world cultures. He studied physics and first worked as a physicist, but when he discovered the Canadian Rockies, his life altered. In 1974, he helped found Stonecrop Studios, a communal ceramic studio in Canmore, Alberta. Here he worked with fellow potters producing functional and sculptural wares. As a ceramist, he participated in numerous local, national and international exhibitions. Eventually, he gravitated towards metal and began to win competitions for large public commissions. Working





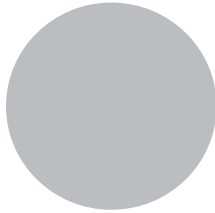
Tony Bloom
Calligraphall 2013
stainless steel

with landscape architects, engineers and metal fabricators, he created interactive sculptures for a variety of public spaces across North America. Enabling him to operate on a large scale, the public commissions also fostered his ongoing personal research with works such as *Landbuoys*.

Constructed from aluminum, stainless or carbon steel, the *Landbuoys* are beautiful and carefully crafted. Most are hemispherical, with a portion sectioned out and displaced upwards to give the sculptures a complex contour. They measure between 1.2 and 1.8 metres in diameter and stand approximately waist-high to an adult, a scale the artist finds imposing but not intimidating. The aluminum ones gleam brightly, their silvery metal little affected by the oxygen that rusts carbon steel to brick red. Their surfaces have been worked with grinders and other tools into intricate patterns that recall wave action or rock strata, a sort of secret notation that begs to be deciphered. *Calligraphall*, a stainless steel column that rolls down the wall like a waterfall, is marked with filigree resembling raindrops. Several carbon steel sculptures are covered in mill scale, which temporarily halts the rust. Their blackness is profound and palpable, lending their spare forms an aura of primitive antiquity.

Within the darkened gallery, the sculptures rest in pools of light. They are encircled by steel rings, or hoops, which are integral to the forms. These function, as the artist comments, “as horizon lines, or event horizons ... as a physical limit.” In her much-cited essay “Sculpture in the Expanded Field,” Rosalind Krauss notes that a traditional sculpture or monument “sits in a particular place and speaks in a symbolical tongue about the meaning or use of that place.”³ Essential to such a work is the pedestal, which mediates between the “actual site and representational sign.” By the late nineteenth century, sculpture came to operate within a “kind of sitelessness, or homelessness, an absolute loss of place.”⁴ Modernist sculpture





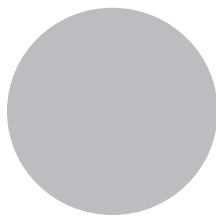
Tony Bloom
Silver Seed 2013
aluminum

incorporated the pedestal into itself as it moved away from commemoration and the specifics of place to assert its autonomy. In the case of Bloom's *Landbuoys*, the rings operate as a sort of pedestal, symbolically marking a territory or habitat within which the sculptures have presence. However, in their nomadic restlessness, they also intimate a "loss of place."

Although the sculptures in the gallery are not individually titled, the artist has names for them. Several suggest measuring, pointing or marking in some fashion, as do working buoys. For example, *Alidad*, a planar construction of folded aluminum disks, sports a long copper projection that points upward towards distant stars. The word *Alidad* derives from Arabic and refers to the revolving radius of a circle. In Medieval Latin, it came to mean a sighting rod, an indicator on a sextant used to make angular measurements. *Gnomon*, another planar form, takes its name from the raised part of a sundial that casts a shadow. The circular disks comprising this work are crisply folded so that the work resembles an auger, its edges sharp and lethal. Some titles are more lyrical, such as *Silver Seed at the Edge of the World* or *Xarisma*, which features a cauldron-like hemisphere lined with fossil forms and filled with water. Others describe natural phenomena, such as *StormBuoy* and *WindBuoy*. The latter rocks back and forth on a footed disk, which has been precisely shaped to fit the form. Appended to this device is an upright disk, which, were the sculpture out-of-doors, would catch and spin with the wind. In the gallery, this movement is stilled, raising again questions as to the sculptures' natural place.

Bloom has taken a number of the works outside to be photographed in the natural environment, where they interact with wind and weather. Out-of-doors, the sculptures are more easily read as natural forms, glacial erratics broken free from their parent rock, carried by rivers of ice and deposited at a distance as that ice melted. Out-of-doors, they are more





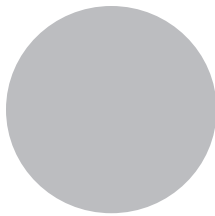
Tony Bloom
Priorsphere 2010
steel

likely to connote meteors arrived from deep space, or perhaps spaceships themselves. Some, particularly those constructed from aluminum, appear futuristic, high-tech instruments or signals of unknown purpose, while others—those of rusted or blackened steel—suggest something ancient, a religious icon or astronomical device. The capacity for these sculptures to encompass great stretches of time and space reflects the artist's background in physics and geology and his fascination with imaginative narratives engaging these subjects.

Bloom's early studies in physics secured for him an appreciation for the intricacies of science. Living in Canmore, he hikes avidly and comes in constant contact with the geology of the Rocky Mountains, with their fossil-laden limestone and radically folded and uplifted strata. References to these strata can be seen in the linear patterns marking the planar surfaces of his works, the long, sinuous patterns that streak the gallery walls and on *Calligraphall*, the stainless steel wall piece. Yet countering this sober, scientific mindset is an intelligence that delights in speculative thinking, playing with scientific facts to imagine events far distant in time. He points to novels such as H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine* (1898),⁵ in which the author imagines travel to the ancient past, "the abysses of the Cretaceous Sea," and the future, thirty million years hence, after humans have become extinct and the earth has sunk in to a cold and lifeless state. What interests Bloom is not the accuracy (or inaccuracy) of Wells' scenarios but his capacity to imagine and animate such an audacious vision, especially at the end of the nineteenth century, when the Western World reveled in its imagined stability.

Another book of interest is Alan Weisman's *The World Without Us* (2007),⁶ which collates a broad array of scientific data to project a future based on humanity's sudden demise. Buildings succumb to the weather; engineering marvels collapse and unleash long-dammed rivers, and the biology of the earth





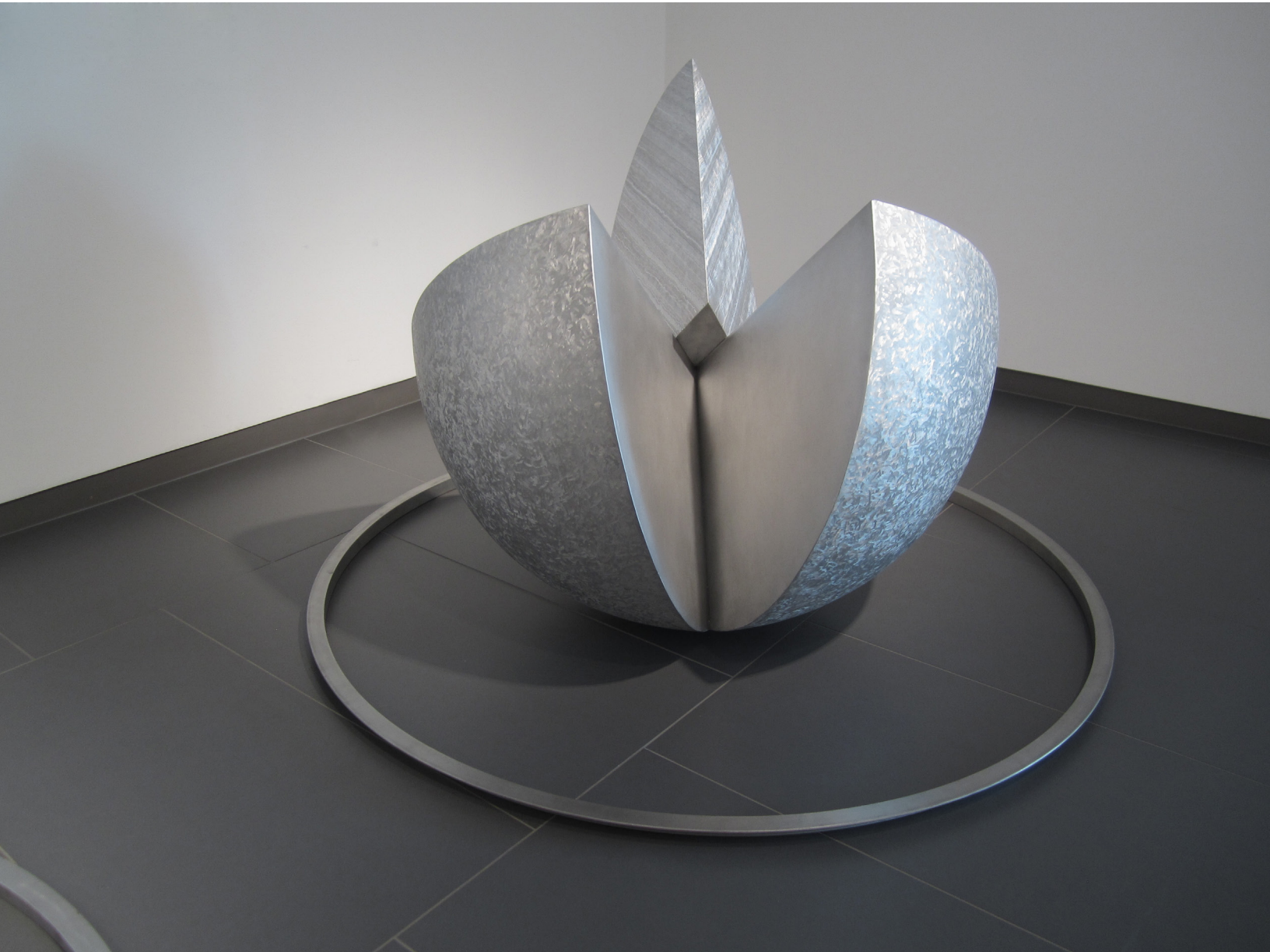
Tony Bloom
Cortex 2012
aluminum

alters radically in the absence of domesticated animals and farming. Curiously, because they are carved from granite, the faces on Mount Rushmore will still be recognizable in several million years. Bloom speculates that his metal sculptures will also endure long into the future, and, in the absence of total annihilation, humans encountering his pieces will question their origin and purpose, much as we debate the origin and purpose of Egyptian or Mayan pyramids.

Imagination is central to Bloom; it animates and transports his sculptures beyond their state as objects of vision. The individual works suggest game pieces, transforming the gallery into a giant game board. Bloom has made a number of sculptures and public works based on imaginary games, a format that combines his interests in measurement, viewer interaction and play. On an exchange with other ceramists in Crete, he discovered an object in the Heraklion Museum he was sure was a game, and the idea of reaching across thousands of years to the individual who made and played this game intrigued him. In the gallery, Bloom invites viewers to interact with his work, to touch and rock and play with his pieces. In so doing, he violates conventional gallery etiquette but engages his public.

As he developed the series, Bloom wrote about his interest in “vestigial movement” and “ambient energy sources” such as wind, water, magnetism and random human interaction. In some cases, the movement is the natural outcome of the round-bottomed sculpture’s placement on the flat floor of the gallery. Set in motion by rocking, the works respond to gravity and aspire towards equilibrium and rest. As the resulting dynamic is central to experiencing the work, Bloom elaborates a typology of movement:

When motion is one of the aesthetic components, the search will turn to determining what kind of motion: does it oscillate, rotate, tremble, tip and return, tip and stay? Does it move



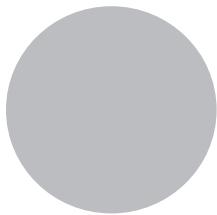
fast or ponderously, regularly or randomly? Should there be an audible aspect?

Bloom still considers himself a potter, and, indeed, one could regard these *Landbuoys* as forms of vessels. The spherical form derives from pinch pots, simple vessels that begin as flat disks, which are pinched upward, added to with coils and further pinching to become fully rounded pots. Working in clay honed his sensibility to surface, something that is obvious in the articulation of the sculptures' surfaces. Pottery is prized for its haptic qualities, and its scale lends itself to handling. Awareness of scale runs throughout Bloom's creative production, from functional pottery to building-sized public works. The original maquettes for these sculptures are tiny, almost haphazard constructions of Styrofoam and pins, which, despite their inelegance, are charming in their provisionality. They give immediate access to the artist's thinking and demonstrate formal considerations that have been realized with such sophistication in the full-scale versions.

When first working with clay, Bloom found he was more interested in sculptural ceramics than functional pots, and his work generally took the form of wall pieces. He comments:

I realized it was the empty cavity I didn't like about ceramic sculpture. That led me to an exploration of pieces that had no "inside" or enclosed space, comprising flat slabs, rods, cantilevers etc. In the *Landbuoy* series, *Alidad*, *Gnomon*, and *WindBuoy* are examples of this structural approach. But working with clay you run into a brittleness and strength issue when building sculpture on that scale--especially sculpture with kinetic and acoustic properties--that would make no sense in my practice, which values the enduring aspect.

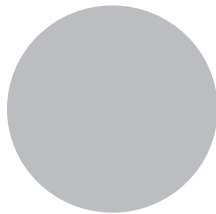
Ironically, when he began to work in metal, he returned to the vessel, exploring exterior surface and interior space. Interior space can be filled with sound, and sound is a powerful, if



Tony Bloom
Sentinel Rising 2013
aluminum



Tony and Steve Bloom playing
on *Sentinel Rising* at the Art
Gallery of Grande Prairie during
installation – June 2014
aluminum

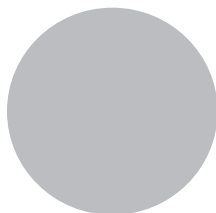


latent, component of the *Landbuoys*. Bloom comes from a musical family. His father was an accomplished pianist, and, when he was a child, Tony invented a musical notation of squiggles and dots, which his father pretended to play. Bloom often performs as a percussionist, appearing in cultural events such as poetry readings, dance classes and performances, and he briefly studied composition at the Banff Centre. He made clay flutes and curated an exhibition of artist-made musical instruments. For the opening to *Landbuoys*, he and his brother Steve Bloom, a professional percussionist, performed *The Song of the Sculpture*, a twelve-minute-long structured but improvised composition. The performance was recorded and edited, allowing Bloom to explain how the timbre produced by striking the sculptures is modified by the internal construction, curvature or flatness of the section hit and by the material, aluminum or steel.⁷ The acoustic environment in the gallery was further modified for the duration of the exhibition by a soundscape designed by Rob Bertola, which combines sounds of rain, wind, water and other natural and electronic elements on a continuous loop. This ambient sound suggests a primordial world in which the sculptures lie abandoned, far from their original source.

The use of sound in visual art can be traced to Dada and Futurism, which often used loud noises to disrupt and agitate viewers. More recently, philosophical critiques of vision's centrality in Western thought emphasized the importance of other senses. Within the context of sculpture, sound is considered "physical stuff," something "tectonic," which generates "a sense of architectural structure."⁸ Unlike vision, which is discrete and directional, sound is durational and omnidirectional. It reverberates within the body and within a given space. Bloom has commented on the way in which certain *Landbuoys* resonate when he claps his hands. The reverberations stitch together gallery, sculptures and viewers, creating a total work of art.



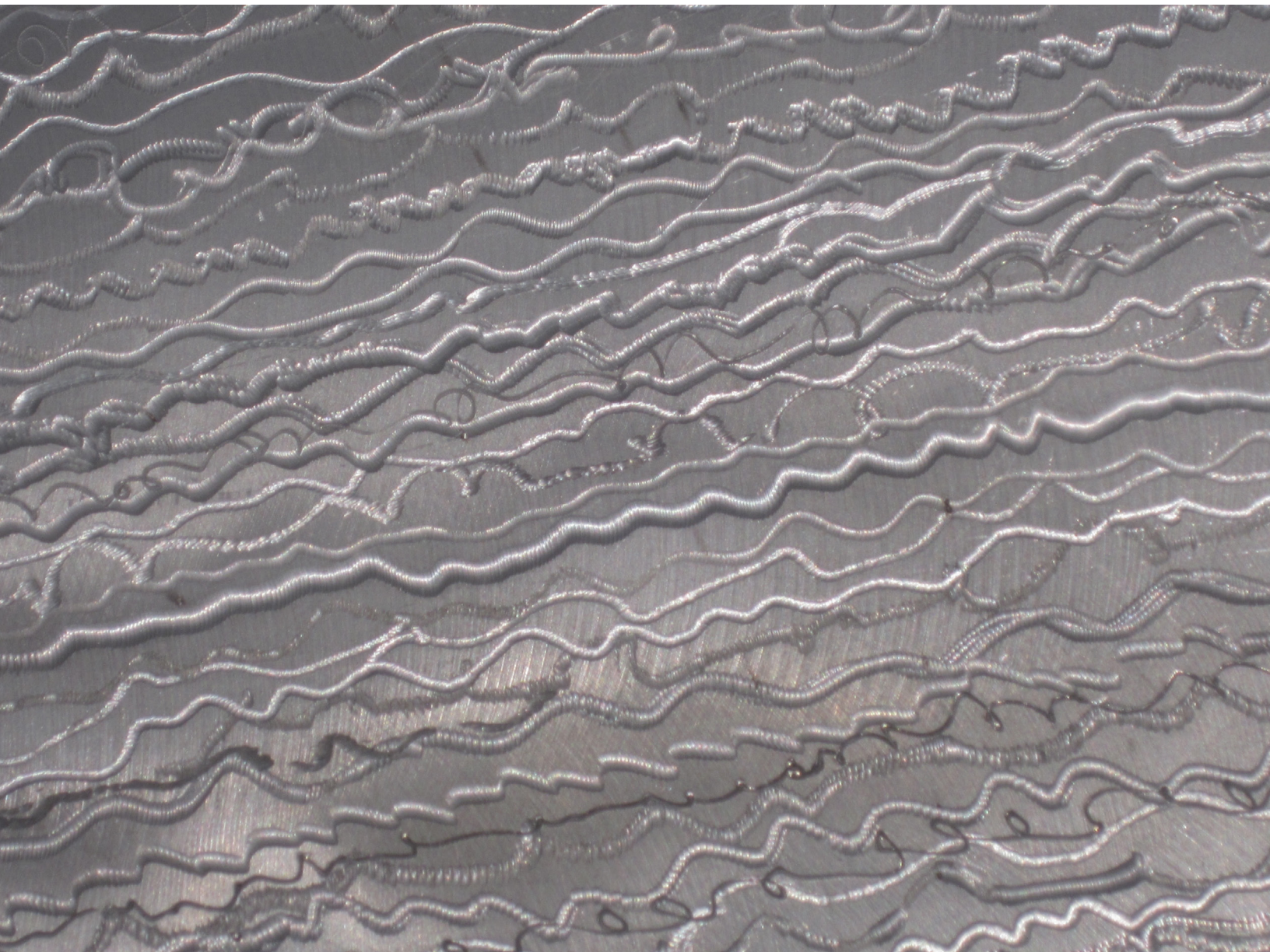
Tony Bloom
Static Erratic 2013
steel
Outside the restored Heritage
doors at Art Gallery of Grande
Prairie - 2014



Mimetic sounds, as are used in the soundscape, create a “reality effect,” making things “appear to be present.” The musician John Cage recommended we pay attention to all sounds, natural and man-made, a suggestion that encouraged many artists to leave the gallery and concert hall for the outside environment.⁹ Although the sculptures are installed within a gallery context, the ambient soundscape and invitation to viewers to interact with the work relates them conceptually to land artists such as Walter de Maria or Michael Heizer. Coincidentally, de Maria was himself a drummer who played with the Velvet Underground and recorded an album of himself drumming to the sounds of crickets and the ocean.¹⁰

Bloom has always been drawn to industrial processes and materials, preferring industrial areas in cities to more culturally upscale shopping or tourist districts. He has developed professional associations with highly skilled metal fabricators and considers industrial workshops to be extensions of his home studio. He welcomes opportunities to create large-scale public sculptures precisely because budgets and work schedules make collaboration essential, and this forces him to expand his vision. He prefers to work with ready-made industrial materials—sheet metal and HSS, or hollow structural sections—because they are readily available, easily worked and recognizable. *Prior Sphere* and *Static Erratic*, which is displayed outside the gallery, are particularly good examples of this use. Both integrate steel spheres, rusted to the colour of India rubber balls and held within curving loops of HSS. *Static Erratic* is, as its name suggests, stationary, but *Prior Sphere* incorporates a playful movement. As one pushes or walks the work along the gallery floor, the sphere resting between two tracks rolls as well. Gradually, the tracks converge, shifting the ball suddenly to the other side with a loud, surprising thump.

Bloom’s attraction to industrial materials grows out of a unique personal experience. When he was four years old and living in Tokyo, he was diagnosed with a hip ailment, which required



evacuation to the US mainland for treatment. The Korean War was about to start, and people were leaving on whatever ships were available. Travelling with his grandmother aboard the USS Funston, a Liberty ship, he recalls not only the trauma of leaving his family but also the immensity of the metal ship with its great streaks of rust running down from the hawsers. One can imagine this traumatic and chaotic event leaving an indelible impression, one that in his case happily gave rise to creative rather than destructive impulses.

Landbuoys is a remarkable series of sculptures, which exist fully in the present, yet, in their restlessness, they evoke both the primordial past and the unknowable future. Ranging across the gallery in pools of light, the sculptures suggest their proper home is out-of-doors, open to the effects of wind and weather. Occupying a middle ground in terms of scale, they conjure up the infinitesimally small—atoms, molecules, specks of cosmic dust—and the immense. While they lie still in the gallery, they invite interaction with viewers, who can set them rocking or strike them so they fill the gallery with resonant sound. Tony Bloom's sculptures anchor us in the fleeting present, as articulated by the great historian of art and material culture, George Kubler:

Yet the instant of actuality is all we ever can know directly. The rest of time emerges only in signals relayed to us at this instant by innumerable stages and by unexpected bearers. These signals are like kinetic energy stored until the moment of notice when the mass descends along some portion of its path to the centre of the gravitational system....In any event, the present instant is the plane upon which the signals of all being are projected. No other plane of duration gathers us up universally into the same instant of becoming.¹¹

Tony Bloom
detail – *Liminal Husk* 2013
aluminum

And it is from this plane, the present, that we imagine infinity.

Amy Gogarty 2014



End notes

- ¹. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), 55.
- ². All quotes and references to comments by the artist derive from unpublished notes and proposals lent to the writer, and from interviews and emails conducted during the period 11 May to 11 June, 2014.
- ³. In *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991): 279.
- ⁴. Krauss, 280.
- ⁵. H.G. Wells, *The Time Machine*, 1898, (Project Gutenberg, 2004), <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/35>, accessed 25 May, 2014.
- ⁶. Alan Weisman, *The World Without Us* (Scarborough: Harper Collins, 2007), EPUB File.
- ⁷. *Landbuoys*, edited video recording of opening performance at the Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies, 6 April, 2013, videographer Will Schmidt, plus additional material, Sky-Light-Pictures.com. <http://www.tonybloom.ca/Tony-Bloom-Video.html>; accessed 14 May, 2014.
- ⁸. Polly Ullrich, “Making Worlds: Chicago Sound as Sculpture,” *Sculpture* 30.4 (May 2011): 36.
- ⁹. Alan Licht, “Sound and Space,” *Modern Painters* (November 2007): 75.
- ¹⁰. Licht, 76.
- ¹¹. George Kubler, *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1962), 17.

Acknowledgements

When working on a project the scope and scale of the *Landbuoys* exhibition it is necessarily a team effort.

The people that have contributed to the realization of the *Landbuoys* project include:

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Jamie Fukushima, Valley Engineering | engineering

Lukas Peet and Thomas Dahlgren | visualizing

Tyler Goin and Stephen Nachtigall | studio assist and execution

&

in *The Song of the Sculpture* component of the *Landbuoys* exhibition and *Landbuoys* video:

Steve Bloom | principal percussion

William Bloom, Milo Bloom, Tyler Goin | auxillary percussion

Will Schmidt | videographer

Rob Bertola | sound designer

