# EYEHAND: The sculpture of Peter Shelton

*by Neil Goodman*

Over the past four decades, Peter Shelton (born 1951) has shown his work nationally and internationally, and his work has been the subject of numerous museum and gallery exhibitions as well as the recipient of public and private commissions. For many years he has also been represented by Los Angeles's premier gallery, L.A. Louver in Venice, California. His work was the subject of a one-person exhibition at the Arts Club in Chicago, and he received a large-scale public commission for the City of Indianapolis.

As the tides and valleys of the artworld shift quickly, Peter has persistently and consistently maintained his vision as well as challenged himself in both scale and subject. He is also a consummate craftsman, working in wood, concrete, iron, bronze, glass, and fiberglass. Peter's work varies from large-scale installations to more succinct individual objects. In an overview of his work over the years, there is an amazing variation in style and a sensibility distinctively his that is at the core of his sculpture.

Some works stay with you and others leave quickly. My interest in writing about Peter's work dates to 1988 when I first saw his monumental installation *floatinghouse DEADMAN* at the Indianapolis Center for Contemporary Art. Whether serendipity or happenstance, I was visiting the center in preparation for an exhibition I was planning there the following year. At the time, Peter and Robert Roman, the curator at the ICCA, had recently relocated from LA. As they had been connected geographically, Robert was both aware of Peter's work and blossoming career and instrumental in arranging both the transportation and installation of *floatinghouseDEADMAN*.

Occupying most of the gallery and the focal point of the exhibition was a large elevated floating house. With its combination of both wood and paper paneled corridors and rotunda, the structure seemed to be equally inspired by early American craftsman architecture and a traditional Japanese tea house. The house was held aloft by a series of cables and pulleys connected to fourteen

*floatinghouse*, 1985–86. Wood and paper, 8.5 x 39 x 35 feet. "floating-houseDEADMAN," Wight Art Gallery, UCLA, Los Angeles, CA (catalogue), 1987 and "floatinghouseDEADMAN," Louver Gallery, New York (catalogue), 1990.

*sixtyslippers*, 1997. L.A. Louver Gallery, Venice, CA (1997–98). Travelled: Berkeley Art Museum (1998), Madison Art Center (currently Madison Museum of Contemporary Art), Madison, WI (1999), and Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston (1999).

heavy sculptures in the surrounding space. These shapes acted pragmatically in providing the anchored weight for the house's suspension, as well as poetically introducing Peter's rich vocabulary of forms. As the structure was intended for walking through, the elevated and swaying house was both enticing and alarming: we were both viewer and subject. Considering that more than three decades have passed since I first saw *floatinghouseDEADMAN*, the work is still very much alive in both impact and memory.

If several earlier works focused on large installations, the later works seem more singularly composed. Vessel forms mutate into lungs and hearts, and evocatively suggest figures, cocoons, shells, amphorae, inner tubes, and boulders. His sculptures seem equally familiar yet reconfigured as they fluidly cross boundaries and organically evolve and metamorphize. Orifices inhabit the sculptures; they are highly sexualized large bulbous forms with a beguiling intimacy that is at once prurient and evocative. The imposing scale inhabits our physical space inconveniently. The lurking forms are like animals in respite, of which we are equally curious and wary. We both want to touch them and remain at a distance. Like a magician, he reveals the secret life of objects, and through his forms as a sculptor, reinvents a world that we both know and imagine.

**Neil: Who did you study with at UCLA and were they major influences in the development of your work?**

**Peter:** Honestly, I went to UCLA mostly to have space and equipment. Making sculpture of any scale is impossible when you start off. I certainly did receive support there from Gary Lloyd, Lee Mullican, Bill Brice, and a few others, but my undergraduate experience was more important. I started as a premed student at Pomona College but the antiwar moment of 1969–1970 drove most of us out onto the street. In the fall of 1970, I lived in Eastern Kentucky up in the coal mining hollers. I switched to anthropology then, later theater, and finally art after taking art classes all the way through college. There, my teachers were Mowry Baden, Guy Williams, David Gray, Michael Brewster, and Jim Turrell.

**Neil: Did you ever consider living in NYC?**

**Peter:** After college, I went to Hobart School of Welding Technology in the town where I was born, Troy, Ohio. This experience and the work as a welder afterwards in Ohio and Michigan were probably as important as Pomona to my art training. As I was about to leave Ohio, I considered whether to move to New York or back to LA. In 1974, New York, at least in the galleries, was filled with "miniature art" and "photo realism," etc. Making sculptures in New York or at least in Manhattan seemed out of reach logistically.

I had grown up in Los Angeles with the Light and Space guys and artists like Bruce Nauman and Ed Kienholz. They were all hybrid artists where sculpture, painting, theater, and architecture were liberally blended. I had the mistaken impression that Los Angeles was palpably more supportive of these concoctions. When I moved back, I realized that these artists operated in a near vacuum without significant cultural or commercial support, so nobody cared what they did except their fellow artists. In a way there was no art superego in Los Angeles, and at that time at least, everything seemed possible. I think the lack of cultural places for showing their art caused artists to see their own studios as art venues, and, in many cases, the envelope of their studio became the art itself. Without the "cultural mosh pit" like in New York where the shear density of artists and art institutions could hold certain art content aloft, Los Angeles often simply referred to their own senses, minds, directly physical experience for inspiration. The meaning and significance of their work was verified in their bodies. All that said, it certainly would have been useful to be in New York from a career point of view. Lately, LA is cooking, but in the 70s, LA artists had little commercial success.

*mereubu*, 1996. Bronze, 93 1/2 x 33 x 55 inches. Group exhibition (#10), 13 September–26 October 1996, L.A. Louver, Venice, CA

**Neil: As the language of sculpture is increasingly computer driven with 3D modeling and printing, is it important that the artist still works with their hands?**

**Peter:** My license plate reads "EYEHAND," which reveals how strongly I feel that an artist's main contribution to culture is focused on the scale between their body, life in their time, and their manifested object. I think an artist's work is evidence of a life lived in a particular moment, and the intimacy of their process as expressed in their direct physical and psychic making of their work. Artists can't compete with the capability of mass media or industry. But they can tell us something about the life of their body and spirit as they make their short passage through time.

I have used computers to some extent when I've done some enlargements for work and/or had some patterns cut for me from scans. But generally, I'm not interested in the idea of using a computer to make my work, except to facilitate enlargement or other kinds of issues that may have to do with engineering for public works.

**Neil: As your works are often large and technically complicated, is the cost of production a consideration in the conception of your work?**

**Peter:** Well, certainly complication and expense are a huge problem for me. I have regularly stuck my neck way out beyond what might have been wise. But I've always been interested in work that relates to your body and somehow confirms its meaning in the body. So, often the scale of the work is large enough to literally hold or mirror the body. Early on, I made large works that you could even enter and move around in. Those works were ambitious and difficult to make as well as expensive and very labor intensive. I must always think about the expense of a work and the kind of time that goes into it. At my age, I'm very conscious of the limitations of works that I might want to make. Part of my success has been to balance my extravagant, playful, and experimental nature that wants to extend itself into the world broadly and the reality of what I can afford to make at any one time.

**Neil: The later works seem to have sublimely incorporated sexual content; can you comment on this? Also, the later works seem to breathe inside of their large volumetric forms, while the earlier works were more linear and solid. Is this a fair assessment?**

**Peter:** I don't know if I would call it sexual content because when you say sexual it usually means genitalia to me or the act of sex. I think of the work probably more in terms of valence, as in the polarities of positive or negative, masculine or feminine, field or ground, and inside or outside. It is probably more related to the idea of yin and yang energy as you would see in eastern religion. I am more interested in how the work relocates the cerebral in our bodies. When people have a kind of visceral somatic response to my sculpture, then I feel it has been successful. Certainly, I do impart some quality of skin and flesh and some bit of anatomy, even if it is nearly submerged, because I want to draw our bodies into the experience of the work.

*reddress*, 1998–2011. Mixed media, 63 1/2 x 70 x 50 inches. "eyehand: selected sculpture from 1975–2011," 19 November–14 January 2012, L.A. Louver, Venice, CA

**Neil: I have asked you about your artistic influences. Any thoughts on why so many of your forms reference the natural organic world?**

**Peter:** Who knows how we get to where we are? I had always been obsessed with anatomy and biology as a child. My grandfather was a small-town general practitioner and surgeon. I was always making things as a kid. I wanted to make spaces to enter, to create a space to get lost in. I have been fascinated with the inside and outside of things. My largely hollow work is filled with holes that focus the threshold between the two. My father was paralyzed on his right side from a WWII sniper head wound. His survival from this mortal hole in his being must have played into my interest in the body. The '60s broke down barriers of all kinds, often seeking wholisms that brought disparate disciplines together in a complete field.

When I was in college, drawing or modeling the human figure in college was largely verboten. The LA artists I admired, who placed the viewer in a perceptual space, were for me inherently figurative. There was a preoccupation with the "new," so anything that opposed the old was elevated. Fabrication replaced modeling, industrial materials replaced bronze or stone, and the figure became you, the viewer, in an actual space with the art, rather than experiencing it through the proscenium of a picture frame, curtained stage, or on a pedestal. So, for years I fabricated everything. I already had such training, anyway, working summers for my Ohio Mennonite Studebaker relatives, who were marvelous inventors, fabricators, and engineers. And my birth town, Troy, Ohio, was the home of Hobart Brothers Welding Company and Trade School where I received my welding trade certifications. All of this was fine until I started trying to bring some aspect of the figure back into my work, not so much for depictive reasons but to draw our bodies into the equation. The problem for artists my age was to get out of the Platonic cul-de-sac of Judd and Andre. While as impeccable and convincing as these artists were, short of becoming an acolyte of them, we were forced to reengage the human. It took me a long time to give myself permission to think about an organic form, and initially, I had no idea how to make such work.

*dogstar*, 2007. Bronze, 88 x 76 x 89 inches.

As for artistic influences, they ranged from early 20th-century greats Giacometti, particularly Brancusi, Jean Arp, Picasso, Gonzalez, and later David Smith and George Sugarman in mid-century. Then, of course, the LA artists and teachers I mentioned before.

*blackslot*, 2010. Fiberglass and steel, 95 x 29 x 102 inches, and *redpocket*, 2010. Fiberglass and steel, 72-1/2 x 65-1/2 x 85-1/2 inches. "3x3," L. A. Louver, Venice, CA.

*toast*, 2016–20. Fiberglass, resin, fillers, pigments and steel, 70 x 53 x 6 (12" with bracket) inches.

**Neil: Do you start your ideas with form or drawing? Also, does one work lead to another stylistically?**

**Peter:** Yes, I usually start with a crude drawing or two. Drawings can be really useful for thinking about certain kinds of forms. Other times, drawing isn't so useful because it may be hard to render something because it may not have discreet contours or forms. I may be trying to visualize a subtle surface that does not lend itself to drawing. In this case, I just start directly cutting, clawing, and scraping my materials. Bruce Nauman was a wonderful model for me as a young artist because he worked very broadly and seemed to do whatever he felt like doing. His work might be obdurate or even opaque and very minimal. Or other times, it might be ribald, noisy, and graphic. That made sense to me because I always think of art as a kind of garden with many different life forms, from the tiny blades of grass to mighty trees. And then the ecology of all these forms together can be its own subject. The human body is similarly differentiated between discreet organs and systems of relationships. I like to work broadly and not get stuck in a repetitive caricature of myself. Sometimes I focus on a particular form, then at times try to summarize the broader connections of my work.

**Neil: Do you have favorite artists that influenced your work?**

**Peter:** I loved the perceptual nature of Giacometti's work, where he tried to see his subjects in actual conditions of bright sunlight, dim twilight, walking in the rain, up close, or very distant.

He made every effort not to fill in the erosive, or blurring, distorting nature of seeing a figure in real settings by applying idealized preconceptions to what he observed, i.e., what he actually saw and not what he knew. I loved how David Smith drew on the floor or in space and applied the gesture of his body through his process. I also thought that George Sugarman's work of the late '50s and '60s was really underappreciated. His morphing forms were made intuitively not as some might imagine now by computer. Compositionally, he didn't hang everything on a tradition-

*thinmanlittlebird*, 2004. Graphite on mylar, 18 x 24 inches. Proposal drawing for Indianapolis-Marion County Public Library, Indianapolis, IN.

(Left) *thinman*, 2009. Cast bronze, 44 x 4 x 4 feet. (Center) *littlebird*, 2009. Cast bronze, 5.25 x 11 x 11 feet. (Right) *littlebird*, (detail).

al figurative tree. He laid the forms out on the floor like a line of railroad cars. I think he was influential on people like Don Judd, at least in the serial arrangement of forms. And he could have several morphing themes in the same work. The best works played with scale, where the small at your feet would be contrasted with an intimation of architecture in the same sculptural group. I think that my individual and emsemble works owe a lot to George's invovations. There are certainly some of my peers that I feel very close to, like Martin Puryear. He makes really wonderful poetic physical work. It is a bit different than my own, I think, in that he seemingly works a lot with vernacular functional forms—things like baskets, wheels, and other tools. As with my work, I appreciated the artist's touch and the somatic in his work. Generationally, I get compared often to the British sculptors. We all had the same problem of what you do after the likes of Judd or Andre, so we can see our various strategies to reintroduce the body back in the work without devolving into depictions of it. I like much of what they do, but for my taste, there is a bit too much of the academic in their sculpture, which probably comes out of their educational traditions.

**Neil: What was your favorite project or commission?**

**Peter:** While doing many temporary commissions in a gallery or museum context, I have only completed four permanent public works. When I was younger, and because of the enterable scale of my work, I thought that public commissions might be a place to find support. I quickly realized that commissions where I could fully express my interests were going to be rare. No one wanted work you could enter both because of liability reasons and the imagined prospect of antisocial behavior. I was naïve. And because public funds were being spent, there was the idea that everyone should have a say in what was made by an artist—except maybe the artist. Appropriate public content seemed to arise out of the current use of a site and its history. Generally, this leads to a pretty bland but broadly acceptable work, one that can be explained and forgotten just as easily. So, the opportunity to do a really full-blown Peter Shelton work in public has been scarce. Luckily, a few, well planned public works have managed to sneak through, where I can happily include them in my portfolio. I've completed four powerful public works in Indianapolis, two in Seattle, and one here in LA. Maybe my favorite is the Indianapolis *thinmanlittlebird*. It was a real challenge to work with the existing 1917 Greek Revival building by Paul Cret, a Philadelphia-based French architect, and respect his wonderful architecture, and at the same time, to find a way to make a fresh work that would push forward sculpture to our current moment. Modernism, in its search for the essential and the new in the same spirit as science, music, and psychology, has had a great investment in denying the past. I understand this impulse. However, I felt compelled to make work for the Cret building, which only lacked sculpture unrealized at the end of WWI, to complete its whole Beaux Arts program, where a building is a kind of stage set waiting to receive the finishing touch of its sculpture.

**Neil: You mentioned you were related to the Studebaker family—what is the lineage?**

**Peter:** Actually, on both sides of my family, I had engineers, tradesmen, and architects. My father's mother was a Studebaker descended from three Studebaker blacksmith brothers who came from Solingen, Germany, to the United States in 1736. Their heresy in the Reformation was that they were Anabaptists, e.g., Mennonites, Amish,

Church of the Brethren, etc., who, amongst other things, didn't believe in child baptism. My cousins were incredible inventors, engineers, machinists, and fabricators. I worked several summers for them. On my mother's side were the Telfords—my middle name, as it turns out. Thomas Telford, who was an amazing civil and structural engineer, architect, and designer in the late 18th century and first half of the 19th century, was my relative. I was fascinated by this history, probably more than anyone in my family, save for my father. This history gave me an early glimpse of a life of making.

**Neil: As you have had an amazing career on all levels, has your audience changed to include a younger generation?**

**Peter:** That's an interesting question. Having stopped teaching, I don't feel in touch with what younger artists think. I wish I was still teaching and had younger colleagues. I still think of myself as a Modernist. Or as an art historian friend said recently to me, "you don't seem to have a postmodernist bone in your body." Things began to change pretty radically in the mid to late '70s, in my view. Irony became the norm, and often art was put forward only as a didactic dummy or prop for theory. A whole school of non-art art evolved. I wanted to be an artist because of great art I saw, not as a fulcrum for discussion outside of the art. Also, the discussion about art itself got a bit lazy. It seemed that the new motto was "everything is everything" and the more of everything the better. For me, being a good artist means that you have to make a choice. Here is what I am going to do and try to do it well. From there, you are probably going to feel tinges of being passed over or irrelevant to the current flavor of the day. Art is an organic process, not a paper doll assembled from demographics. You have to have thick skin and risk not being seen, or not taken seriously, and just being misunderstood.

It is a pleasure looking at Peter's work through more than three decades. Objects are inert, yet we are not, and our changing perceptions measure our growth and thoughts. In this way, returning to Peter's work after so many years brings me back to the first time I saw his work. While looking at his sculpture now, the new work propels me forward. In this regard, the questions posed represent an edited version of a longer conversation. I am grateful for the time that Peter spent answering these questions as well as the opportunity to continue a dialogue with an artist whose work I have known and admired over many years.

**Neil Goodman is a sculptor formerly based in Chicago with an extensive exhibition history. Presently living in the central coast of California, he retired from Indiana University Northwest as Professor Emeritus of Fine Arts. He is currently represented by Carl Hammer Gallery as well as serving as the South Central California Region Editor for the *New Art Examiner.***

(Left) *bluegate*, 2016–2020. Fiberglass, resin, fillers, pigments and steel, 62 x 59 x 6-1/2 (10" with bracket) inches. (Right) *whitemesa*, 2016–2020. Fiberglass, resin, fillers, pigments and steel, 54 x 54 x 9 (14" with bracket) inches.