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ART

A Welder of Metal and Fervid Imaginings

L.A. sculptor Peter Shelton often replicates architecture and parts of the human body in his works.

November 30, 1997 | Hunter Drohojowska Philp | Hunter Drohojowska Philp is a frequent contributor to Calendar

A winding road through the hills of Malibu turns toward a pair of barn-like buildings clad in galvanized steel. Industrial but elegant, hedged by bougainvillea and horsetails, they seem the ideal residence and studio for Peter Shelton.

The artist is known for his iron and steel sculptures, which often replicate elements of architecture, as well as abstracted parts of the human body.

For the 46-year-old Shelton, who wears wire-rimmed glasses and has shoulder-length gray hair, the connection between domicile and work is elemental. "I think architecture and sculpture come from a similar impulse, which is an extension of ourselves into our immediate environment," he explains. And there's more: "Ever since the '60s and '70s, there has been a sense of the inseparability of the environment and the art. After I make the work, I ask myself, 'Where does it go?' Which fosters the idea of your home being indivisible from your work."

Shelton's sculpture has been shown widely throughout the U.S., from his retrospective at the L.A. County Museum of Art to the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York. His most recent installation, titled "sixtyslippers," in which a field of 60 forged steel discs will be suspended just above the floor, opens at L.A. Louver Gallery on Dec. 4.

Like many L.A. artists of late, he has been receiving recognition in Europe. In March of 1998, he will install 193 of his fiberglass body parts, called "godspipes," in the rooms of an old soldier's home in Dublin, now the Irish Museum of Modern Art. In addition, he was commissioned by the Henry Moore Foundation to create "blackelephanthouse," a work to be exhibited from Nov. 21 to March 15 at Dean Clough, the foundation's studio in Halifax, England.

Shelton conducts a tour of his cavernous, cluttered and dusty studio, where the pieces are in various stages of completion. Several assistants furiously sand and carve a giant potato-shaped piece of hollow fiberglass rotating on a spit in the center of a huge room. This is one of two molds for "blackelephanthouse," which will be cast as a 12,000-pound lump of black gypsum cement before being sent to Halifax. A computer was used to generate the diagram for the steel armature inside the sculpture, but the finishes and surfaces still need the human touch.

Although Shelton revels in the details of fabricating his work, the variety and spontaneity of the models and drawings lying about the studio prove that it's just as much about his fervid imaginings as about craft.

He leads the way out of the studio, past a stack of the discs destined for L.A. Louver, and into the house next door, which he shares with his wife, Sharon

Takeda, a curator specializing in antique Japanese textiles at L.A. County Museum of Art.

The contrast is startling. An immaculate white living room with blond wood floors and vast windows overlooking green fields is sparsely accessorized with a black granite fireplace, black deck chairs and glass tables. An adjacent room, a gallery within the house, showcases half a dozen of his sculptures: a rusted metal model of Rome's Pantheon, for instance, upside-down and dripping water into a pan; or a wall built from cast-iron bread loaves, also dripping with water. A fiberglass pelvis and spine hang like a cross on another wall.

There is one piece that is not of Shelton's making--a 19th-century Japanese Shinto shrine. It brings him back to the connection between buildings and sculpture.

"I'm interested in architecture, especially old Japanese and Indian architecture because their approach is very much like sculpture," says Shelton.

"I always wanted to make an object in-between sculpture, with its discrete identity, and architecture, with its temporal, processional quality, where the sense of being separate from you is not so clear. Henry Moore's idea was to be on that threshold between sculpture and architecture," says Shelton. "One of the things about being in California, artists like Bruce Nauman, James Turrell and Robert Irwin could make an easy slide back and forth between architecture, sculpture and theater."

What about his own slide between architectural and body forms? Both, he says, are about containment. The biomorphic objects, after all, examine human architecture, pulling out bones, innards and vascular parts.

"I've started to think that you are creating a whole organism, which is both physical and graphic but also a function of perception," he says of all his work. "Sometimes [it] is about the ineffable interaction of the system and its parts, sometimes it's more graphic and descriptive."

"Here in L.A., without a strong cultural matrix, artists often look to their own body, their own immediate physical and sensuous environment to give them cues and forms for their work," he continues. "The work here has seemed visceral. Content would be verified by perception, by the body rather than a content gained from aesthetic history. But I'm wary of discussing the body thing these days, because it's become a cliché."

Shelton grew up in Tempe, Ariz., and entered Pomona College as a premed student in 1969. In high school, he had been zealous in the study of anatomy and biology. But his interests in the giddy and rebellious early '70s did not dovetail with the discipline required for medical school. He transferred to the art department and studied briefly with Turrell. More relevant learning, however, came about in a trade school in Troy, Ohio, the town where he was born. Shelton specialized in metalwork. "It seemed like a good alternative to graduate school," says Shelton. "For me, it was slightly romantic, like retracing David Smith's roots. It was a straight program of eight hours a day learning how to weld, following engineer's specifications."

Instead of pursuing the notion of a noble blue-collar trade, however, Shelton found himself making sculpture. "After spending all this time in college when there was such a contempt for making things--this was during the first round of Conceptualism--I became very interested in making objects. I was interested in the idea of sculpture that could be pushed to the point where it could be physically challenging. With these skills, I was able to build big environmental things using scavenged surplus materials."

His affinity for working with metals may have genetic roots, he says. Research into his genealogy revealed that his Scottish middle name, Telford, derived from

Old French for armor-maker. He is related to 19th-century Scottish civil engineer Thomas Telford, renowned for his designs for iron suspension bridges. On his mother's side, he is related to the Studebaker family, who were blacksmiths before manufacturing automobiles.

Shelton also believes his titles, often lowercase and without punctuation, owe something to his family--in this case, its writers. His father was a journalist before being wounded in World War II, his mother was a secretary, and his older brothers both are proficient in writing. One worked as a journalist before becoming a lawyer, the other is a poet.

After a year at the trade school, Shelton completed graduate studies in art at UCLA, where he integrated his trade skills with his ideas. That resulted in a number of ambitious installations, culminating in the 1986 installation "floatinghouse DEADMAN." It was an early exploration of the hovering effect in "sixtyslippers": metal architectural shapes and domestic furniture were suspended a few feet off the ground. It won over the critics. "As demonstration of the overlap between poetic suggestion, engineering and magic," wrote Roberta Smith in the New York Times, "this work is hard to beat."

Looking at his work, it is not surprising that Shelton keeps notebooks of his dreams. "The dreams for me establish the tone. The subtle things, the relationships between things hanging and displaced, it has a certain ethereal quality related to dreams but it's not a specific imagery. What's nice is that dreams remind you of what level you want your work to operate on. It's about a kind of feeling and breadth in the work. I feel like I'm making a parallel life in a way."

The artist, obviously, is pleased with the recent international support for his work. Sighing, he admits, "It's like getting to a buffet and getting everything you want on your plate, sitting back and realizing you have to eat it."

Realizing that this might sound like a complaint, he hurriedly adds, "But I have a good time."

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PETER SHELTON, "sixtyslippers," L.A. Louver, 45 N. Venice Blvd., Venice. Dates: Opens Thursday. Ends Jan. 17. Phone: (310) 822-4955.