

Artweek



■ Surveying Sculpture ■ Peter Shelton ■ Nina Glaser ■ Don Rich

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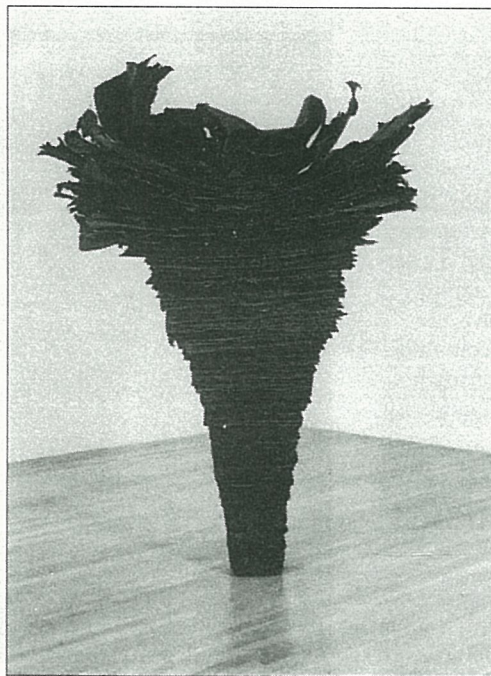
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SURVEYING SCULPTURE

A conversation with Don Rich, sculptor

By Meredith Tromble

Don Rich was born in Oklahoma on an Indian reservation and raised in Idaho. While still a boy he learned to work with metal from his father, a blacksmith, and began making sculpture from leftover scraps of ornamental ironwork. He came to California in the late 1960s to attend the California College of Arts and Crafts, where he earned a Master of Fine Arts. After additional study in Italy, he purchased a building in the industrial part of Oakland and opened an art foundry. In recent years he has concentrated on producing his own sculpture, including a series of works that combine steel and glass.

Artweek *How have you made a life for yourself as a sculptor?*

Don Rich I started casting for artists to make a living. My foundry blossomed into a successful art foundry and became really big. I had thirty employees and I was casting for people like Claes Oldenburg, Henry Moore, and Isamu Noguchi. I saw myself as an apprentice to these people. Finally it ate me up as an artist. I didn't do any work at all for about three years. So I got out of the business. I taught at San Francisco State for a few years. I've never wanted to rely on selling my sculpture. I never frown when a sale comes, but I make a living doing other things.

AW *What important changes have you seen in sculpture since you began working forty years ago?*

DR I was lucky when I came to California because it was right at the time artists were developing their studios. People like Pete Voulkos developed casting and created an opportunity for all kinds of people who didn't

know anything about the industry of casting to cast their work. It makes me smile when I see the availability of the foundries now.

Great people are coming out of the schools, including women. Thirty years ago that would have been out of the question. It was almost impossible for a man to go into a foundry, unless he worked there.

AW *Has increased access to foundries changed contemporary sculpture?*

DR It really made a difference. If an artist has to go to a regular foundry there's a separation between their

work and the making of the bronze.

That works for a mature artist but a young artist needs hands-on experience. They need to work through the process, make the mistakes. Most of the mistakes are discoveries of new directions.

AW *Tell me about such a discovery in your own work.*

DR If you approach a piece of metal and everything goes exactly as planned, you make a piece that you conceived prior to making it. It says nothing new to you. All it does is compliment you on how good you are at what you're doing. An artist needs to have information come back from their work. There's got to be some mystery in there somewhere. Usually the mystery starts when you have to solve a problem to make an area work.

An example in my own work is the way I've been handling glass. I found a piece of glass with a very interesting break that reminded me a lot of making arrowheads. The technique for arrowheads is to take an antler and press it against the obsidian, which causes an oystering break with little spirals. I started trying to break glass in that way and I just couldn't do it.

Then I came across an article in an old alchemy book on a technique called dahling. Surgeons in the 1500s used it to break glass, to make a knife sharper than metal. At that time all they had was copper. I found an old etching of a dahl hammer, so I made one and sure as hell it worked. Now I'm getting what I want, starting to expose the tension that's in the glass. It's a real mystery, glass, fluid and solid at the same time.

AW *How do you begin your work? Do you make drawings or work with*

maquettes?

DR Some of both. When I first started with this series I didn't draw at all. I just started working with the metal, putting blocks together, taking them apart, and putting them together again. After I made two or three pieces I started drawing them and also made maquettes out of wood. Almost always I draw a piece after I do it. I really love this stuff and I like to draw it because I've never seen it before and it's interesting to me. I think drawing is one of the most sensuous things in life to do. It's so delicate and so under your control.

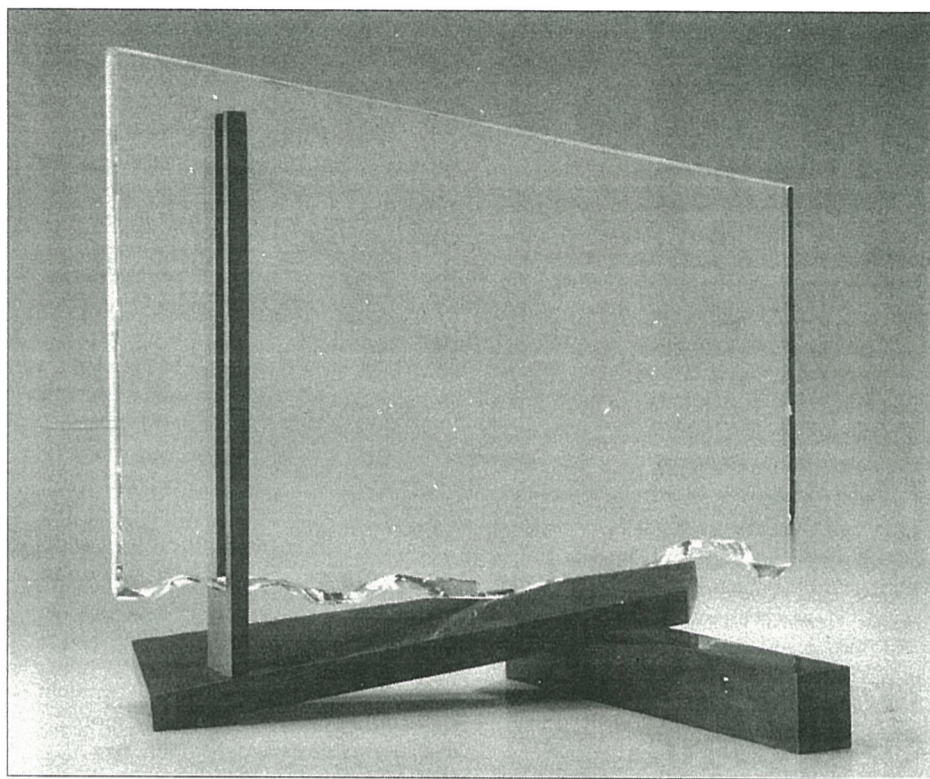
AW *What ideas are you pursuing in your work now?*

DR The sculpture is taking me into landscape, into the feeling of environment and how I relate to the world I live in. We have to learn how to live where we live. I've figured out a way to live in this environment and not really miss the environment that I came from, the trees, mountains, water and the animals. I don't feel deprived. Some people can't live in the city. They can't stand to come into West Oakland and see what they see.

AW *Are you working towards doing public sculpture?*

DR I have a bone to pick about public sculpture. It's in a terrible state today. There's a ten-headed monster, a conglomeration of panels and lawyers, who decides where the sculpture is going to go and how it should look. Pieces that get carried to completion are so watered down that they're a detriment to the sculptor. The work doesn't have the impact that it has in the studio and the artist is walking around wondering what happened.

The problem we're having with public sculpture is that we try to think of it as art. You could say there are artists and there are sculptors and there are some people who are both. But a lot of what we call public sculpture now is decoration. Just as there's a lot of sculpture that was done during the WPA that was great stuff, but it wasn't art then and it's not art now. It's just great, decorative, beautiful stuff that adorns buildings.



Above: Don Rich, *Headland Pike*, 1996, steel, glass, 21" x 27" x 17"; below: *Southern Syl*, 1996, bronze, glass, 84" x 31-1/2" x 12-1/2". (Photos: M. Lee Fatherree.)

