

## **The Divine in the Lines**

By Katyayani Pathak

By now, most of you have probably seen the large steel sculptures on the lawn outside of the de Saisset Museum. The pieces are part of the museum's new exhibit, Squaring the Circle, featuring art by Brian Wall from April 10th to June 14th. Wall's art is showcased within and in front of the first two galleries on the first floor of the museum. Although his primary medium appears to be the stainless steel sculptures, Wall has additionally included framed artworks of Sumi ink on Japanese paper. These drawings act as decor, and can be seen hanging on the grey walls of the exhibition. While, I believe, abstract art may not be everyone's favourite genre, Wall's comprehensive pieces allow even the most skeptical of us to appreciate and relate to it, if not aesthetically, at least intellectually. I can attest to this first-hand, as I am stubbornly apathetic towards modern and abstract art.

I distinctly remember, as I first walked into the de Saisset Museum, I was confronted by one of Wall's massive contraptions. It was hard to miss, as the three tall and thick curving beams are stacked against one another to the right of the room's centre. While the structure is magnificent in size, with its height straining toward the ceiling, it left me definitively unimpressed. I approached the exhibit aware of my heavy bias against this type of art, as I considered abstract art to be lazy concoctions of unimaginative and esoteric artists, driven by their desire to be original, often resulting in clichéd creations. Without a comprehensive idea of the art being featured, I had already decided that Wall's art could not be inspiring nor have any depth. Despite my biases, I walked around the galleries and was mesmerized by the beauty of the rooms.

Dark hardwood floors contrast with the brightness of the steel sculptures so that a translucent layer of reflective light casts over the room and creates a striking and magnificent halo. Shinning sculptures are accented with bright and dark shadows that reflect from the ceiling lights, and this accentuates the long and clean streaks of each stainless steel beam. The wall opposite to the entrance

is painted a bright canary yellow and the other three walls are a flat steel grey. A lone yellow wall is left bare and along the grey walls are a series of artwork consisting of Sumi ink on Japanese paper set inside beige frames on white backgrounds. The combination of the grey walls, beige, white, and cream colours adds an element of classiness or formality and, dare I say, legitimacy to the entire exhibition. Even though I could not appreciate the artwork from a technical point of view, I greatly admired its aesthetic beauty and found comfort in my ability to feel any pleasure from an exhibition like this at all.

However, I felt disappointed by my inability to understand this form of art and ventured back outside with the hopes of gaining clarity. The back wall of the foyer, near the staircase, is painted the same canary yellow. To the left is a poem by Jeffery Meyer that sets the mood of the exhibit by articulating the beauty of shapes and how light and geometric curves mold our artistic perception of what we see. Meyer also draws poetic inspiration from the historical context of these shapes and their artistic nature. To the right is an excerpt on Brian Wall written by guest co-curators Peter Selz and Sue Kubly. They introduce Wall as an artist inspired by “Hepworth’s abstract sculptures, Kandinsky’s abstract expressionist paintings, as well as Mondrian’s canvases of coloured rectangles in equipoise” (de Saisset). This made sense to me, as I reflected back on the unusual elements of Wall’s art. Selz and Kubly continued to explain that the arced rectangular pieces when put together form a perfect circle, and that each segment was constructed by Wall intuitively. Selz further explained in his book, *Squaring the Circle*, which is on display at the museum, that Wall was inspired by these transcendentalists, more specifically, by their emphasis on “the spiritual.” Both Selz and Kubly regard Wall’s art to be “endowed with integrity, clarity, and strength” (de Saisset). As I read the passage, I felt my cynicism dissipate. I could not dispute that there was an eternal beauty in Wall’s sculptures, but it was only upon understanding the concept behind his artwork, and realizing its purpose that I began to enjoy abstract art for the first time.

I returned to the second gallery to focus on a specific steel-figure, called “Bydo,” and was curious to see how my newfound appreciation would affect my assessment of this piece. I was startled by the difference. “Bydo” was created in 2009. Its dimensions are 60” x 89” x 38”h (de Saisset), and like all the other structures it is made of stainless steel. Brian Wall’s sculptures either extend vertically or horizontally. This piece happens to span outward. Again, I was struck by the beauty in the way that light hit the different limbs. “Bydo” is composed of five segments, each of which is layered, one on top of the other, seeming to weave in and out. Despite its intricate form with arcing and pointed ligaments, somehow Bydo remains a solid and balanced figure. Each segment, depending on its angle and my distance from it, was either illuminated by light or dark shadows. When I approached the structure, I could see the light move across its surfaces, changing my perceived shape of the limbs and adding life and movement to the piece. The brightest contours are contrasted by the darkest. As the light hits the sculpture, the points of intersection between beams are the darkest and at the ends are the brightest, while the long “runs” of each limb have a varying greyscale effect. The figure resembled liquid metal as I moved around it. “Bydo” is shiny, magnificent, and alive. It feels infinite and expansive, and transforms the shape of each individual segment as part of a living “being.” Each limb can also be viewed as a portion of a complete circle, thus projecting a completely different representation of the sculpture. There is something so clean, precise, and inspiring about these sculptures, and as they glow, they resemble some kind of divine ornament. What I appreciated most about Brian Wall’s art was its metamorphic quality. Even those of us dogmatic in our beliefs on such “modern art” can benefit from seeing his exhibit.