



Since 1947 I have managed to read poetry almost every day of my life. I do not read it primarily to study the structure and rhythm of language and syntax, although I do find those elements deeply involving. I prefer, rather, simply having it around like a sudden burst of song, like the wood stove in the corner that warms the room, like a glance at the sky through the glass window. It is not "truth" that I seek in poetry, it is human insight and connection to history. Poetry, for me, expands the meaning of life and keeps me aware of the unknowable.

When I point out that Bill Gilbert's sculptures and installations are driven by a sense of the poetic potential, I mean something like that. The airy, lattice scaffolding — which completely filled half of the Janus Gallery in Santa Fe, New Mexico in October, 1990 — surrounding the chunky cylinders of fired clay, that lay unarranged on the gallery floor, seemed as strikingly allusive and articulate as poetry.

The thin, peeled, bright aspen saplings were threaded together to fashion a suspended super-structure, an intuitively framed and fragile delineation of a human habitation. Lodged within the formal architectural space of the modern gallery, they echoed the character and dimensions of an out-of-place Anasazi cliff dwelling. Those echoes became

a metaphor for human instinct, survival and the insistence of history.

On the other hand, the solid, cylindrical blocks of seared clay, distributed randomly at the foot of the structure, anchored Gilbert's conceptual architecture to the earth, to the material present. They spoke plainly and directly: "This is what will result if you drill core cylinders in your backyard on land outside Cerrillos, New Mexico, and fire them to a very high temperature without processing or refinement." As dense as granite, raw, heavy, and fused by the fire, their presence contradicted and contrasted with the spun intricacies of the delicate framework which enclosed them. This was a poetry of polar elements: the lightness of the almost invisible hand which had hung the rectangular outlines of the house, and the very evident, weighty process that dug up, transported and fired the cylindrical earthen masses.

The contrast between the two elements of Gilbert's installation extended further. The sapling super-structure was clearly "site-specific," designed for the Janus Gallery space and for this exhibition. The clay cylinders were anonymous, serving almost as a kind of poetic "ballast" for the site structure. Placed anywhere else they would act in the same way, without any particular reference to the site.

Bill Gilbert's work derives from his relationships to nature, to trees and to wood, to clay, as a malleable, plastic material, and to earth. When the artist installs natural elements in a gallery, it is in an act of "displacement" akin to the concepts of the "earth artists" of the 1970s — Robert Smithson, Michael Heizer and others. Earth Art, however inept that is as a label, arose from a dawning environmental concern on the part of artists and is rooted, as well, in an ambivalence towards the gallery and museum exhibition system.

Gilbert's sensibilities both share and avoid that conceptual ambivalence. His delicate, sensuous structure exposes the architecture of the gallery space in a new and refreshing way. At the same time his dominating forms refer to the world outside the gallery in a very personal and contradictory mode. His poetry points in both directions. It is in the interplay between the forces of gravity and the airy ordering of human habitation that the resonance of Bill Gilbert's poetic intent is evident. □

Bill Gilbert is represented by the Janus Gallery in Santa Fe.

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Bill Gilbert, *Nullarbor*, 25' x 30' x 14' aspen and adobe, 1990. Photo: Herb Lotz, courtesy the Janus Gallery, Santa Fe.

THE STRUCTURES OF
BILL GILBERT

Mac McCloud