

472 Words

by Patrick T. Murphy, former director, ICA Philadelphia
Catalogue essay on occasion of *Bill Walton* at Arcadia University (2005)

It is appropriate to title this note on Bill Walton's work with the number of words employed in its writing, for Walton's work moves us to such constituent detail.

Here is an American miniaturist who encompasses the philosophical materialism of the American minimalist with the material poeticism of European Arte Povera. Walton unlayers a lamentation for a lost industrialism from the topographic obsessions of the first colonists. In that, he is quintessentially East Coast.

The natural features of the landscape—river, pond, falls, hill, tree, plant—accompany West Main (a street), Roulette (a town), and the domestic geography of the home—outside the kitchen door, second-floor back, red floor room.

Materiality is bridled within a tight range. Elemental metals—copper, iron, lead, gold, silver, tin—are combined with composites—aluminium, brass—all evoking the sweat of labor of the mine and the foundry. Then there is wood, as free as the sweat and labor of the mine and the foundry. Then these is wood, as free as the gnarled time of a fallen wisteria or as abject as once useful wooden stud. History emanates from the depth of the material. Glass, cotton, baking powder lead us to the hand—blowing, picking, weaving, folding, mixing.

Surfaces are not so much coloured as patinated. White, dark, silver are derived from palladium, graphite, leaf. You know with these companions that when paint is used, it is from a hardware store. Labor is the ethos behind the work.

Walton's deployment of thee materials is effused with decisions. Nothing is ever singular; always two or more elements are combined, but never more than five—and five, with his mnemonic loading, is quite a complex proposition. Elements are cradled, stacked, bent, laid down, twisted, supported. You can sense the trial and the error, sense that work in getting it right.



Left; Bill Walton, *Sweet Lou & Marie* (#1), no date, Right; Bill Walton, *Sweet Lou & Marie* (#3), no date

And then there's the wide open spaces, the American landscape that rears out of these modest propositions in inverse proportion to their size. Over there is the little creek and dark river that is *West of Roulette*, and *Roulette* itself, a single strip with three worn and used elements on its street. The artist knows how to show you the things that lie beneath the derelict industrial landscape of the Northeast. In *Second Falls*, your eye is led from the floor-based smaller element to the horizon line and back to the larger floor plate, just as if you were reading the two rivers outside of *Roulette* teeter over a small precipice. And here we meet *Sweet Lou & Marie*, stacked pillars of society and domesticity.

Bill Walton's sculptures are hard won, deeply imbued physical haikus. These simple but sophisticated devices conjure a whole understanding of what it means to be American. Not the nation that values the new and consigns all else to obsolescence but an older, more considered nation that values its rich history and the lessons and loss contained within it.