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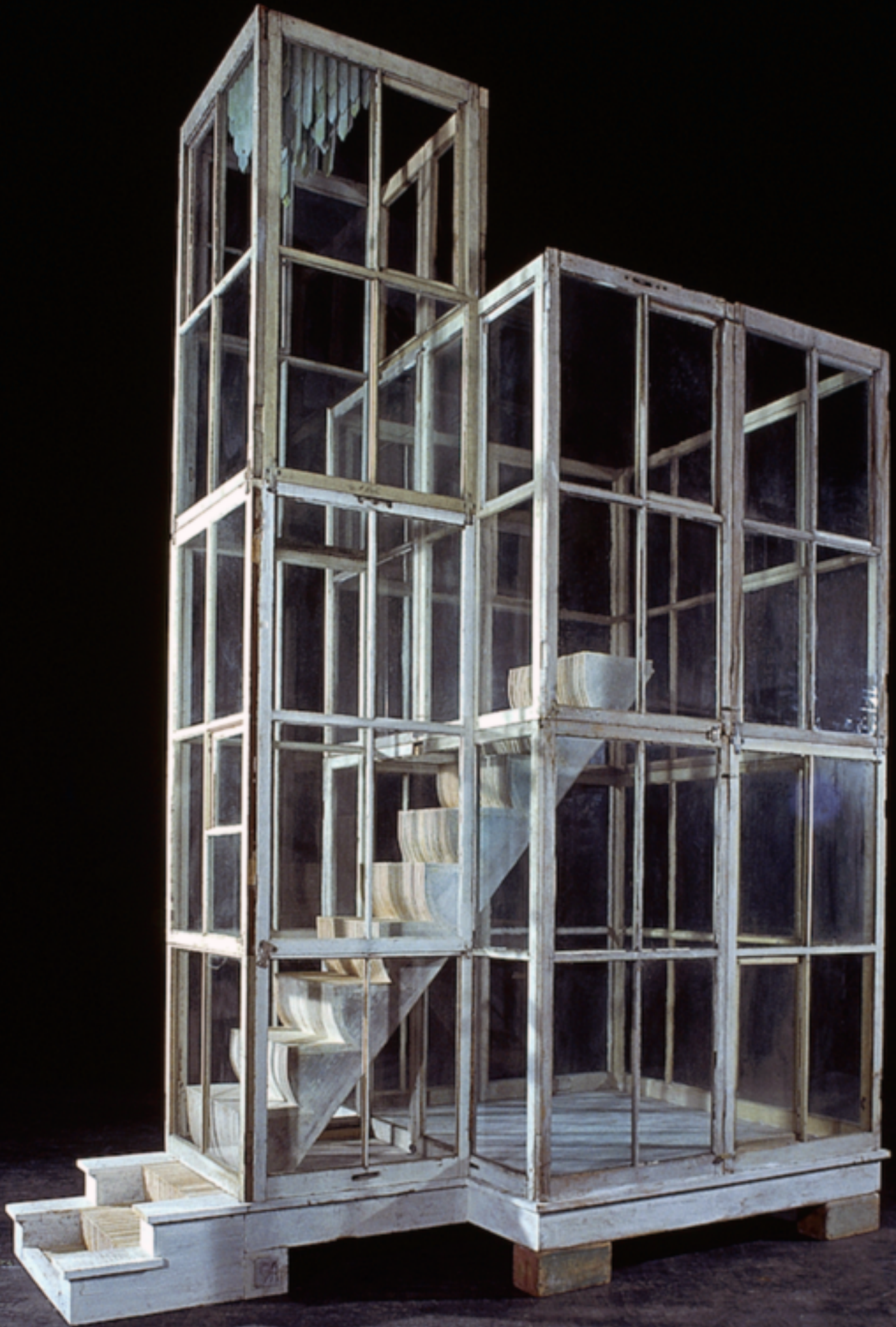
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Driven By the Body



A Conversation with

Malcolm Cochran

BY MICHAEL GOODSON

Opposite: *Saying Good-bye to Grace*, 1983. Storm windows, wood, child's blocks, whitewash, and paint, 174 x 72 x 120 ft. This page: *History Lessons*, 2011. Poplar, steel, polished stainless steel mirror, and whitewash, 8 x 10 x 6 ft. diameter.

In 1992, while I was an undergraduate focusing on sculpture at Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio, I helped to install Malcolm Cochran's *In Maine* (1989) in the galleries. The work consisted of, among other things, the still-operating guts of 19 refrigerators. I was fascinated by the expansive realm of installation art at the time — Christian Boltanski, Ann Hamilton, Milton Berra — and Cochran's work ran with that pack. Beyond the scope and labor, his works reveal a profound and steady mindfulness of the small and often phenomenological occurrences from which he extrapolates large gestures. In looking at *Dutch Shoes* (1996), *Buffet of Memory and Anticipation* (1992–99), and *Private Passage* (2005), one notes the solemn tenor of the attention paid to occurrences and ideas. That attention has affected how I and many other people — students and viewers alike — engage with small things.



Above: *Cusp* (detail), 1999. Fabricated and cast bronze, 48 x 19 x 360 in. Right: *Song Without Words (for Amy Beach)*, 1987. Steel, glass, wood, melodeon, and oscillating fans, 116 x 108 x 60 in.



Michael Goodson: *Where were you born, and how has your upbringing affected your work?*

Malcolm Cochran: I was born in 1948 in Pittsburgh. My father taught art and English at Shady Side Academy, a boys' prep school. My mother was a music educator. In 1955, my father received a Fulbright grant to teach English in Helsinki, and we all moved to Finland for a year. Then he got a job teaching at Colby Junior College in New London, New Hampshire—a women's junior college at that time. I was about eight years old. I stayed there until I went to Wesleyan University in 1967. Immediately after that, I went to Cranbrook.

After Cranbrook, friends were moving to New York, but I knew that I didn't have the energy, the money, or the chutzpa to take it on—even though my family had lots of friends there, and my mother would take my brother and me there almost every spring vacation. My father was very interested in architecture, and we would go to buildings like the Guggenheim. So, I moved back to New Hampshire in 1973 and was there until I came to teach at Ohio State University in 1987.

MG: *Your work reveals a clear sense of materials and how things are built, particularly the tanks from Steel Tanks and Delivering Mail (Columbus, Ohio, December 1999). You drew from cement mixers and commercial tankers to create new forms, with just the right amount of seamlessness. It's not finish fetish stuff, but it's incredibly well made because of the quality of attention.*

MC: I embraced my father's good eye and skills as my own direction when I decided at Wesleyan that my focus would be ceramics rather than creative writing. I had a wonderful teacher, Mary Kring Risley, who

taught me how to throw on the wheel, glaze, and fire. In hindsight, I have come to appreciate throwing as perhaps the only method of creating form directly with one's fingers. No tools are involved, other than the spinning wheel; to make a vessel, you simultaneously touch the inside and outside walls of the volume. It is an immersive and intimate way of understanding three-dimensional form.

MG: *What was your experience like at Cranbrook?*

MC: The first year I made terrible work. It was a shock—a good shock—to go from having classes and assignments to just having a studio, and that's it. Once I adjusted, that part of Cranbrook was absolutely wonderful. In my second year, I began doing the "Family Portrait Series" in which I applied photo emulsion to fired ceramic heads. These were vessels, really—featureless head forms. I then exposed the emulsion under an enlarger and developed them in buckets of developer.

MG: *So, you turned fired ceramic into a light-sensitive object, pushing it into another territory?*

MC: Exactly. The photographs were of me as a kid, of my father and mother, of me at Cranbrook. For my thesis show, I grouped multiple heads on found objects and furniture. Arguably the most important thing at Cranbrook was my work on the museum's installation crew. We did really ambitious things, like fabricating an airplane fuselage sliced in half, lengthwise out of plywood. These were my first forays into transforming gallery spaces, which gets to *Steel Tanks*.

MG: *And after Cranbrook?*

MC: When I moved back to New Hampshire, I got a part-time teaching job, making \$100 a week, which I couldn't live on. So, I went to Dartmouth, the closest place with a bonafide exhibition program, and asked for a job. I got a call a couple of months later, and I ended up working there for 13 years.

MG: *The idea of transforming spaces is incredibly pertinent in terms of what you were making then. With *Bedroom, North Sutton, New Hampshire (1975)* and *Saying Good-bye to Grace (1983)*, you moved from one or two materials—clay and wood—to mixed-media tableaux made of things left over from actual lives.*

Western Movie, 1990. Mechanical horses, sheet lead, still and film projections, wood ramp and platform, steel railing, and theater seat, approx. 2400 sq. ft.

MC: It was in New Hampshire, working alone in a barn studio, that I found my voice as a sculptor. When I came back from Cranbrook that first summer, I had no job. I ended up delivering the *New Hampshire Times*, a weekly paper, with my nephew Sean. We'd make a loop up through the White Mountains. I began to see the state, its architecture and people, in new ways. *Bedroom, North Sutton* is a meditation on the life of a man whose house was in a town near where I'd grown up. He had moved into an old folks home. The rooms of this house—his, his mother's and his sister's—were fascinating because it seemed like each life had been reduced to one room. They were like time capsules.

MG: *Were these works, which introduce the idea of absence, important to your later development?*

MC: Yes. I went from a real presence in the "Family Portraits Series" to using the absence of the person or the body to imply presence in *Saying Good-bye to Grace*. My mother-in-law Grace Stevens had developed Alzheimer's. The work is an example of material and idea coming together intimately. It's primarily made of elements designed to protect, including reused storm windows, while the escalator is of my own making. The idea that her soul would rise through this space and up through the open top was really important to me. The structure, in a very fundamental way, is like a church, a sanctuary.

MG: *How good were you then, and how good are you now, at making vision and work become one?*

MC: For me, it goes back to teaching. In student



critiques, one of my rules is that the person who made the work cannot speak about it. I let other people speak first, because I don't want to hear about intentions or about all the work put in. I expect the piece to read. What I finally realized is that it should hit my gut, then it can go to my head. It needs to be physical first in order to register and vibrate, then it becomes more cerebral. I developed a way of looking at what I'm making and asking: "Is it working against my gut sense of the idea?" That's how I check myself. It's driven by the body, then the mind, which doesn't mean that it can't be profound.

MG: *You're creating an intellectual experience by way of a corporeal one?*

MC: Yes. Scale is often a factor. It's a way of having it hit the body first. Bigger than life often starts with "bigger than you." Take *Cusp*, the giant knife. By making it bigger, the experience of holding a knife becomes something that you feel in your gut instead of in your palm. The idea started with seeing Hieronymus Bosch's *The Last Judgment* in Belgium, in the early '90s. There was a postcard of a detail in which a figure straddling a large knife is being sliced in two. Years later, that image kept coming to mind as I thought about the weird mixture of anxiety and excitement in the air with the approaching millennium.

Sad Wave, 1991. Plywood, wire mesh, cow tails, cow hair, steel tubing, air spouts, and blower, 42–78 x 144 x 336 in.



TOP: FRED MARSH / BOTTOM: TONY WALSH



Soliloquy, 1995. Hair, video, mirror, and original bed frame, installation at Eastern State Penitentiary, Philadelphia.

MG: *Song Without Words* almost acts as a liminal device between your life in New Hampshire after Cranbrook and the life you were coming to in Ohio. It points to more complex installations like *Western Movie* (1990) and *Sad Wave* (1991).

MC: One of the blessings of being in Columbus was that I could have things fabricated. A terrific tube bender fabricated the railing for *Western Movie* and the piping around *Sad Wave*, which was complicated because gusts of air emanated from it.

The Wexner Center commissioned *Western Movie*. I acquired 13 mechanical horses and skinned them in sheet lead. We built a large elliptical wall to show projected slides of Frederic Edwin Church's *Niagara*. Eight film loops of footage that I took at Niagara Falls were superimposed on critical areas within the projected painting, including footage of my daughter, Nora, swimming. She swims upstream against the current, in opposition to the horses. The loudness of the projectors and the mechanical horses, galloping toward Western expansion, suggested the roar of the falls.

MG: *Have you used film or video in other works?*

MC: In 1996, I did a residency at the Headlands Center for the Arts in San Francisco. During the open house, I did a performance, *Washing Feet*, in which I washed the feet of 47 people. In the resulting work, the footage was edited so that images of the heads and feet are in sync, the heads projected on a screen and the feet on a block of marble on the floor. The idea came from having witnessed the most unusual thing during a layover at Heathrow Airport—an Indian man having his feet washed by a younger family member. It startled me, and the image stuck.

MG: *What about Sad Wave? It involved a brutal process.*

MC: *Sad Wave* was a reaction to the build-up to the Gulf War in 1990. I felt a kind of national anxiety. For me, that translated into a wave of sadness. It felt like a brutal time, and the work is essentially an anti-war piece. It contains around 4,000 cow tails. Taking them from slaughterhouse condition to lustrous strands was a grueling, often nauseating, process. I'm forever grateful to the students who assisted on this and other projects. Welding the "greenhouse" for *Song Without Words* was also arduous. Were it not for a consummate undergraduate welder, it wouldn't exist. I always paid the students well. Making this work isn't easy, and I think that assisting me became an extension of my classes.

Field of Corn (with Osage Orange Trees), 1994. Pre-cast concrete, Osage orange trees, and bronze text panels, 109 elements: 72–75 x 22–24 in. diameter each.

A lot of ideas that become work start out small, with things that catch my attention. *Song Without Words* (1987) began with the title, after I heard a composition by the 19th-century composer Amy Beach. I didn't know anything about how it was going to look or what it was going to be. I just wrote the title on a piece of paper. I brought the half-done piece to Ohio on the roof rack of our Dodge Caravan when I came here to teach in 1987.

MG: *Could you explain the main components—the cage, the melodeon, the fans?*

MC: The title, the language, stuck with me after I heard the music. I wanted to find a form to go with it, to encapsulate how those words struck me. The space is glass enclosed, and while the fans operate continuously, the melodeon (an instrument that operates with air) is mute. I wanted to convey the most elemental aspects of singing, the transference of the information of a song without the actual song.





Private Passage, 2005. Steel with thermal-spray zinc coating and patina, security glass, stainless steel, and incandescent lighting, 102 in. diameter x 360 in.

MG: *Could we talk about your public works?*

MC: I've made public works and works for alternative spaces. The tenor of the two is a little different. *Soliloquy* (1995) is an alternative space work, created for "Prison Sentences: The Prison as Site/The Prison as Subject" at Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia. I fabricated a 75-foot-long rope made of braided hair. It started in a bun on the iron bed frame in a cell and climbed about 12 feet through a skylight, across an exterior yard, and over a high perimeter wall. In the next cell, a video of a woman braiding her hair, pinning it, and unpinning it was projected on a small, wall-mounted mirror. The viewer could watch the movie through the cell door bars. It had a kind of aged, daguerreotype feel. I imagined doing time as essentially a meditation on the nature of time, the inmate growing her hair long enough to become a means of escape, though there's really no escape, just the passing of time.

MG: *Would the "Dutch Journal" series also qualify as alternative space works?*

MC: Yes and no. The suite was exhibited in an alternative space, but it developed from having lived in an "alternative place," the Netherlands, where I taught in 1993. I chose not to get a studio and traveled around the country in order to gather ideas. The suite includes *Dutch Shoes* and *Spaanse Kraag* (*Spanish Collar*).

MG: *Both of those works are complicated. Your public works might appear less so because of their immediacy.*

MC: In terms of complexity and immediacy, *Field of Corn* (with *Osage Orange Trees*) (1994), commissioned by the Art in Public Places Program of the Dublin Arts Council in Ohio, sits somewhere in the middle. Like many places, Dublin had changed dramatically in a quarter-century, from farmlands to developed suburbia. In researching the site, I learned that it had been owned by generations of the Frantz family; Sam Frantz had been a leading corn hybridizer in the 1940s and '50s. *Field* is a kind of memorial to corn production—part cemetery and part roadside attraction like the giant coffee cups atop diners.

MG: *There's a somber absurdity to Private Passage, at Hudson River Park in New York City, part of which comes from scale.*

MC: In this project, which was commissioned by the Hudson River Park Trust, I wanted to explore my personal relationship to the park, which is not the norm for public work. When my father received his Fulbright to teach in Helsinki, we sailed from New York. We returned a year later on the *Maasdam*, a Holland-America liner. When I entered the building where I was interviewing for the commission, I realized that it was the former Holland-America Line Terminal. Given that, I felt I had a kind of license. I decided on a bottle with a ship's cabin in it instead of the entire ship. The cabin is made for a single individual, done entirely in stainless steel, a monochromatic *mise-en-scène* that might evoke a black and white film still. The interior is viewable only through portholes along the sides, and there's a special lower porthole for children. My thought was that the viewer is the message in the bottle, or the one experiencing passages of life.

MG: *Many of your works provoke reflection, into the present, the past, and the self. This comes to bear in a different way at the Ohio Judicial Center in Columbus* (*In Principle & In Practice*, 2006).

MC: The reflecting pool and plaza were part of the original building. In the pool, I placed granite letters spelling out 10 words central to Western judiciary. When the pool is filled, jets of water, naturally occurring ripples, and reflections obscure and distort the text. In winter, the letters sit starkly against the black tile or become blanketed with snow. They can be blurry, even difficult to read. The conceptual core of the project is the tension between the solid, seemingly immutable text, and the conditions—both physical and political—that make the concepts fluid and elusive.

MG: *What are you working on now?*

MC: A piece called *Requiem*, which will debut at the Weston Art Gallery in Cincinnati in February 2018. I would describe it as an anti-war piece like *Sad Wave*. It came to me as a quiet thing, a small emissary for an enormous idea. For years, I have held on to 16 empty refrigerators left over from *In Maine*. I had been looking for a way to respond to civilian deaths from genocide, massacre, and warfare, and to human suffering from injustice and exploitation. A couple of years ago, it occurred to me that if I turned the fridges on their backs, they would read as coffins. From there, the idea expanded to have female vocalists perform a capella songs without words while sitting in the fridges. This was partly influenced by a trip to Guinea, West Africa, to visit my daughter in the Peace Corps. Wherever I turned, I saw ingenious re-purposing of things. Weirdly perhaps, I could imagine the refrigerator shells being turned into coffins. The performers will sing ancient and classical compositions transcribed as vocalise and commissioned works by composers I met during a 2016 residency at Cité Internationale des Arts in Paris. The installation is an experimental dovetailing of visual and aural elements that I hope will be startling, destabilizing, and moving.

Michael Goodson is Senior Curator of Exhibitions at the Wexner Center for the Arts in Columbus, Ohio.