

ART

GALLERY VIEW/Michael Brenson

Four Sculptors With Intense Visions

SCULPTURE IN NEW YORK THIS April has a confidence that it has not had in a while. The themes are big. Sculptors 35 to 45 years old seem capable of a new completeness and sweep. The days when sculptors felt defensive or apologetic about an intimate involvement with materials, the physical mass of their objects and the need to make art that could refer to anything, are over.

The current exhibitions of Michael Heizer, Ursula von Rydingsvard, John Newman and Wade Saunders — as well as a group show called "The Artist's Hand" — have little or nothing to do with the hands-off Conceptual esthetic that has been the focus of so much critical attention. Indeed these four sculptors complement and provide an alternative to it. Their shows are a sign both of the strength of sculpture and of the force of the emotional and physical demands that Conceptual art may be unable to address.

In all four exhibitions, there is an intense

The personal touch provides an alternative to the machine-made sculpture of Minimalism.

involvement in the process of making. There is a pull toward objects that give shape and make shapes. Whenever there is a hands-on approach — that is to say, whenever sculptors are personally involved in moving, molding and manipulating their materials — there is likely to be a need for memory, a desire to dig into the personal and cultural past and uncover ideas and feelings that can bridge past, present and future. Fossils are essential to the iconography of contemporary sculpture. So are tools.

In the context of solo exhibitions far removed from the machine-made sculpture of Minimalism, "The Artist's Hand" at the Sculpture Center (167 East 69th Street, through Tuesday), is revealing. With work by Jackie Brookner, Patrice Claire, John Crawford, Barry Parker, Jeffrey Schiller and Douglas James Warnock, it calls attention to the direct involvement of sculptors in metal, which has not been identified with a hands-on sculptural approach since David Smith. Claire and Crawford use tools to make sculptures resembling drills, nails, spikes and anvils that in turn provoke meditations about tools. If sculptors are looking for an intimate relationship with aluminum, iron, bronze and steel, it is an indication that the distant relationship between artist and materials advocated by Minimalism and Conceptual art is not enough.

The attraction to tools has been part of American sculpture since Smith, but it may never have been as ubiquitous as it is now. Smith, who died in 1965, loved tools, loved using them, and they were memorialized in his welded steel landscapes and totems. From Jim Dine through Martin Puryear, tools have gripped American sculptors. Whether used ironically or with reverence, their appearance touches the need to make

to build, to preserve personal contact with objects we watch and use. If tool imagery is widespread now, it is surely a response to an artistic moment in which this personal contact seems in danger of being hammered to pieces.

Tools shaped all of Heizer's new works. Saunders's installation contains references to shovels and hammers. One of Newman's sculptures, suggesting the spiraling movement of a drill or auger, seems almost to be a generic tool. In von Rydingsvard's work, the evidence of tools is so pronounced that it becomes either a covenant or a wall between work and viewer.

The nine sculptures in Heizer's show (at the Knoedler Gallery, 19 East 70th Street, through Thursday) were inspired by ancient Mexican tools the artist encountered on childhood journeys with his archeologist fa-

ther. All the sculptures were made of modified concrete, poured as cement over mesh and a wood lathe and then worked with hand tools. Most of the objects are black. While the ancient tools are small, many of these sculptures are so large that they seem to have been excavated from a site once occupied by giants. The objects are both finished and raw. While the solid geometry and weight suggest permanence, the consistency of the concrete makes the surfaces seem permanently wet and therefore capable of being continually reshaped.

There is nothing defensive about the shapes, imagery, materials or scale. Heizer makes no attempt to justify himself to any artistic constituency. The objects have none of the self-consciousness that can inhibit younger sculptors as gifted as Win Knowlton, whose imagery is also drawn from fossils

and tools. Inspired by artifacts relegated to anthropological and archeological display cases, Heizer has generated compressed, economical sculptures packed with violence, tenderness, movement and death.

The 14 sculptures by von Rydingsvard at Exit Art (578 Broadway, through April 30) are constructed from cedar beams. They suggest a domestic and farm world, but of a very particular kind. Written into the bones of her bathtubs, closets and stables is a terrible history, one that flows out of her childhood as a Pole on a labor farm and then in refugee camps in wartime and postwar Germany. The bathtub is a coffin, the closet a catacomb, the stable a gallows.

Von Rydingsvard, who arrived in the United States in 1952, attacks wood, hacks away at it, chews it up, and in the process turns it into something that seems capable of hacking and chewing away at us. She does not so much transform a domestic and farm world into something untamable as discover what there is in that world that cannot be tamed. She cuts through childhood, through Germany, reaching some kind of traumatic arena in which she clearly believes everyone has been forced to battle. Although the arena has no clear outline and it can never be located on a map, her certainty is total. The physical and emotional conviction of her work is equal to that of the Minimalists, for whom the notion of sculpture as interior journey was anathema.

Saunders's "Water Drawings" are scattered about the floor of the Diane Brown Gallery (560 Broadway, through Saturday).

There are 80 bronzes in all, most of them about a foot long. All of them can be rocked, all can hold water, and all are firmly balanced. Saunders selected them to be cast from about 200 objects modeled in wax. The bronze has a patina of silver nitrate, which gives the surfaces a worn, ancient look.

While the sculptures have a sketchy, throwaway, unfinished quality, the range of gestures and references is so broad that the installation seems finished. The sculptures resemble pipes, ships, shoes and shells. They suggest not only practical and functional objects, but also spirals, lotuses and other Oriental symbols. They are filled with bawdy, even lewd male and female sexual shapes. All these pieces on the floor suggest a puzzle without a key. But if the installation is about fragmentation, it is also about completeness. Everything — sex and religion, industry and nature, symbol and function — seems to be here.

With his five freestanding and relief sculptures at the Gagosian Gallery (521 West 23d Street, through Saturday), Newman has attained a new level of confidence and resolution. There is a billowing, voluptuous sensuality in the way the open, rounded forms seem to roll across the floor and walls. Like Saunders's "Water Drawings," however, the five sculptures are in some way about synthesis. If they resemble organic forms like shells, they also suggest industrial forms like stovepipes, and even scientific diagrams of galactic movements. They come out of the clear, hard-edged geometry of Minimalism, but they also look back to the more intuitive, free-flowing sculptural rhythms of European modernists like Raymond Duchamp-Villon and Jean Arp.

In order to harvest such different fields, Newman has created hybrids that do not seem entirely rooted anywhere. His work suggests a great deal and at the same time assumes an absolute distance from anything to which it refers. This sense of remove is everywhere. For example, the intimacy of Newman's working process, from drawing, and then to building cardboard and sometimes plaster or wood models, is concealed by casting the work in an impersonal material

All four shows have an intense involvement in the process of molding.

like aluminum. While the sculptures are filled with flowing shapes, they also have a mechanical austerity and precision. The voids are never completely void; the solids are never completely solid. These sculptures seem full, self-contained, yet the distance from whatever inspired them seems poignant and final.

In all these works there is a liberating dialogue with the sculptural past, particularly Russian Constructivism and Minimalism — the two sculptural developments that have most influenced American sculpture during the last 25 years. Von Rydingsvard uses Minimalist ideas of standardized units and repetition in the service of objects that are far more inconsistent and personal than Minimalist sculpture, both in the way they were made and in their content. Some works suggest boxes, the trademark of Donald Judd, but they are not light and their interiors are haunted by desire and violence.

Saunders's sculptures lie scattered about like the squares of a Minimalist floor sculpture by Carl Andre. While Andre's sculptures were made of identical, adjoining, machine-made metal parts that reduced associations to a minimum, all 80 of Saunders's "Water Drawings" are different. None touch, all were created by the artist's touch, and they touch many realms of experience.

The shape of Newman's "Uprooted Symmetry (The Anchor)" brings to mind a Russian Constructivist spiral, but the sculpture is larger, heavier and far less utopian, suggesting the power of a propeller and the weight of an anchor. Newman is 35 years old, the youngest and most conceptual of these four sculptors, and he shares with many other artists of his generation a mixture of unequivocal respect and absolute distance from his modernist ancestors. He is so free to use the past as he wishes because he assumes at the beginning that he is someplace else.

These are strong shows. In the 1970's, Richard Serra's declarative sculptural statements that seemed to

speak both to the distant past and the distant future brought a prophetic voice into American sculpture. Heizer is part of the generation after Serra, and in the way his ancient tools seem capable of taking off like mis-

siles and pounding like steamrollers, he is clearly after something comparable.

Von Rydingsvard plunges into her origins with an enchanted savagery. Saunders's sculptures are filled with

loss, yet they are also filled with the memory and — more surprising in this skeptical decade — with the possibility of wholeness.