

PRESS RELEASE

William Tarr: Alchemy and Artifice

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The Shamnoski Gallery is pleased to inaugurate its first exhibition of William Tarr's work spanning from 1950 to 1980. Born and raised in New York, William Tarr (1925 – 2006) was a burgeoning artist in the 1960s and 70s art scene and contributed largely to the city's visual landscape. Author of the monument to Martin Luther King Jr. located on 66th Street and Amsterdam Avenue and also of the 40 ft tall monument *Morning Side Heights* in front of PS 36 (now dismantled), along with various public works, Tarr's work is discreetly spread out in the city that so deeply inspired him.

Tarr's oeuvre, now reintroduced to the public after some silent years, is marked essentially by a spirit of action and adventure. A contemporary and friend of Willem de Kooning and Ibram Lassaw, Tarr shared what critic Harold Rosenberg famously called the action painters' defining impulse: the canvas not as a picture, but as an event. Except Tarr's canvas was space and his medium, a welding torch.

Tarr's sculptures — all unique and individually welded in cor-ten steel or scraps of various metals and sometimes cast in bronze — appear as collages, like layered beasts forming imposing, hulking chimeras. A self-taught experimenter, Tarr audaciously assembled these pieces of metal into large towering structures, sometimes even at his own peril. Elevated at dangerous heights, he welded his sculptures himself, in a dauntless spirit of action which is reflected in these striking pieces.

Unlike the Minimalists who began overtaking the art scene as Tarr was entering it, Tarr repudiated simplicity and concept in favor of materiality and enterprise, believing that 'during the course of its birth, a work of art has to abrade against something.' Though his sculptures, shown at the Stephen Radich gallery in the 1960s, were perceived as holding an ancient, almost mystical dimension, which might be most discernible in the laden symbolism of *Rock* (1961), Tarr's work is in fact straightforward. His surprising double life as a successful magician made him staunchly disillusioned and anchored him in the concrete, material existence of things. This shows in his raw steel pieces: they express pure physical energy transformed into physical matter, like the offspring of fire.

Tarr's work could be described as pragmatic and most deeply inspired by his direct surroundings. Alternating between sharp, vertical forms, and more blunt, totemic edifices, Tarr's sculptures project a variability and movement that echo the sounds of a buzzing city. Basic shapes — recurring spheres, sharp cones, blunt rectangles — are recurrent motifs in both his sculptures and paintings. These forms and their layered amalgamation in materials that refer directly to modern industry and enterprise, seem to reflect the atmosphere of New York City: dynamic, primal, industrious.

In fact, urban landscape, its vertical lines and density of towers, seeps throughout Tarr's sculpture and paintings. His *Model for a Large Piece* (1962) or the *Untitled* wooden piece (1965) are most reminiscent of modernist apartment complexes, their small protruding spheres almost

like individual lives stored in the tower. His smaller *Untitled* collage (1965) reiterates these geometric forms in primal blues and greens — almost like a birds-eye plan, each square delimiting a city block. Though his paintings are less geometrically inclined, they still retain recognizable, rectangular forms. It is difficult not to imagine these dark, intense lines as antennas in a night sky or a horizon of tenements, doors and windowsills.

Underneath this abstraction also lies a defined social, humanistic dimension to Tarr's work. Tarr was interested in making art that was direct and accessible to its viewers. Both of his most important public works were commissioned by New York's Board of Education, and he was adamant on making something recognizable, that the children could relate to — hence the letters, numbers, and quotes layered on these imposing monuments. His *Gates of the Six Million* or *The Gates of Hell*, now at the Holocaust Museum in Washington DC, reimagines Rodin's masterpiece by emphasizing horror and barbarity through the prevalence of spikes, reminiscent of medieval torture devices. His gates reflect very directly the terror of the Holocaust by using relatable signs rather than figurative elements. The monument to Martin Luther King Jr., is dense with inscription — King's Nobel Prize date, the dates of marches, fragments of his speeches, the initials of his wife and children and fellow leaders — making it like a public archive accessible to all.

In his few figurative works, Tarr always depicts humans as interconnected, linked through a network of emotion. Similarly to the lines that always connect in his paintings, the people he depicts are never left solitary. Even in his *Untitled* ink drawing, a levitating man connects horizontally the four other figures, all stiffly erected like the towers in the background. The recurrence of vertical lines in Tarr's work seems as a testament to life: human beings standing tall, a direct line from earth to sky, which materializes into towers, products of fire and energy.

Throughout his career, William Tarr was less focused on recognition and fame and rather on making great art. And to him, art was about connection — with his materials, with the city, with the people who lived in it. This exhibition is an invitation to connect with him again.

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This exhibition has been organized in collaboration with the Estate of William Tarr. Shamnoski Gallery is deeply grateful to all the collectors who generously loaned their works to this exhibition; we thank you for supporting William during his life and allowing us to honor his legacy.

Text: Sara Cemin