

ARTFORUM

JANUARY 1993

ROBERT GROSVENOR | KUNSTHALLE BERN

by Jean-Pierre Criqui

Translated by Diana C. Stoll

The seven sculptures Robert Grosvenor exhibited here, all untitled and created between 1977 and 1991, seem to reflect on the primitive—not in the sense of borrowing elements from different cultures but, rather, in the spirit of what Barnett Newman meant when he said that “the first man was an artist.” It seems possible, in fact, to view Grosvenor’s oeuvre as playing out a kind of fiction, that of the “earliest man of today”—a fiction both productive and improbable, which at its best plays on the tension between contemporary materials (corrugated iron, plastic, fiberglass) and “original” themes, like the fusion—or indistinguishability—of sculpture and architecture. (Grosvenor has said that on a trip to Easter Island he was struck by the way the natives had taken up residence in a shelter built from the tangled fragments of fallen statues.) Even the poster for the exhibition suggested this reading: rather than a reproduction of one of the artist’s works, it showed two black and white photographs he had taken in the Caribbean, depicting, from two different angles, a type of metallic igloo—a found construction—of precarious appearance and uncertain function.

One of the largest pieces, dating from 1989–90, consists of two parallel cement walls covered with silver paint, and supporting a black corrugated-iron “roof.” At the center of this somewhat shabby roof is a Plexiglas window, through which the spectator (who has to bend down in order to cross this open, but cut-off, space) can perceive the ceiling of the gallery. The apocalyptic tone of several of the works here evokes Samuel Beckett’s work as well as a return to origins. A piece from 1986–87 is something between a refuge and a vehicle: a big dark canopy resting on four pillars that end in metal circles, like wheels, under which a large cement block anchors a blue plastic tarp.

This configuration appeared again in one of the more recent sculptures, in which a transparent canopy shelters cement blocks placed in the form of a *T*. Even stranger and more vertical, countering the open, architectonic character of the previous works, another sculpture has the look of a parasol: thrusting upward from two car roofs—assembled and positioned on stone blocks, forming a kind of protruding pedestal—is a shaft supporting, between six and seven feet off the floor, a translucent plastic umbrella, closed at its base by a thin film of plastic.

In order to leave the Kunsthalle one had to go back through the first room of the building, and thus one was again confronted with the first work in the show—also the earliest, an untitled piece from 1977–78, and without doubt one of the most impressive examples of post-Minimalist sculpture. A large parallelepiped of wood

coated with creosote, the piece is made of connected girders that, after splitting them through the application of considerable pressure, Grosvenor has adjoined by means of steel bars and bolts. The sides have been approximately equalized with a chain saw, leaving inflections on their surfaces. Taken altogether, the object has a vaguely funereal allure, as if it had sustained a previous fracture. In the same way, Grosvenor's later works, their singular qualities highlighted in this exhibition, simultaneously evince a sharpened sense both of the primitive and of the contemporary.

-Jean-Pierre Criqui