

INTERVIEW: BEVERLY PEPPER

James Barron: What was the process you used for the Bedford Columns and for Pietrasanta Presence? Describe for me how cast iron is made.

Beverly Pepper: Well, these were all made in carved wood molds first. That's the positive. You make a mold around that, then the empty part of the mold (the negative) is filled with molten iron. It takes a day or two to cool. You break the mold. Then you let it cool. You get rid of the mold – you can't use it again because the metal destroys it in the process. After it's cooled it's a grey metal – cast iron. Then you begin working on it with different grinding machines, filing it – all hand work – until you get it the way you want it. It is very heavy material so it requires a lot of hand work and machine work. After that it's sandblasted, then we put plain water on it until I get the color I want. The color is stable as it's an oxidized metal. For upkeep, which should be pretty unnecessary, you can wash them once every few years with plain water. If you want to oil them that is good too, but you don't really need to. It's a very stable material, the most stable.

JB: Where were they made?

BP: They were all made in the US, some in Moline, Illinois, and the rest elsewhere.

Pietrasanta Presence was a Moline Marker. All of those were made at the John Deere Factory in Moline, Illinois; so, known at first as the Moline Markers. The Bedford Columns were shown in NYC and larger Moline Markers were in The Grand Palais show. *Pietrasanta Presence* is in Rosalind Krauss' book (p. 120-121), and also included are the Moline Markers, 1981 – some of them photographed in Moline, Illinois the day they were finished. These were exhibited at the Belvedere and Palais Royal.

The Bedford Columns were originally called the Di Carlo Columns, 1992-93. Di Carlo was the name of the worker who helped me with them. His name was Carlo. Then I changed the names to Bedford because they continued into the Bedford series.

JB: How many Bedford Columns are there?

BP: Not many. Each one is unique. You can see pretty much all the Moline Markers on my website.

JB: Are there other versions, larger or smaller, of *Pietrasanta Presence*?

BP: There is one larger version in NYC. It is taller than this, and the neck is different. This kind of casting is not like bronze casting in which you get a finished piece after the cast. This is industrial casting, so you get a rough cast and then the work by hand begins – you refine, you alter, you carve...you sculpt! I work towards making them more pristine – in the grooves for example. The two sides are cast separately and then I make the sweep where they gather at the bottom before they move into the base.

JB: Do you normally like them in a group, or do you feel they can stand on their own?

BP: Although I like them alone – and each one has its own power alone – I have usually put my columns in groups. At the Federal Plaza in NYC, they are grouped at one end, and there is a single one at the other end. In groups, they are much more silent. Two is different than three. In

this case, *Pietrasanta Presence* and the *Bedford Columns* form what I would call a “spiritual circle”: they look like they came out of each other. They fill the space with silence even though they are not that big. The works in this particular group do what I call “feeding each other,” by which I mean they affect each other, they influence each other. There is an aura around them: the spaces around them also have a solidity. The space around them is also an element in all of these Markers. As you turn around them, they keep altering the viewer’s space. With two together there is the shape between the two of them – the negative space – which becomes active and makes for a third sculpture, as if it were made of absence or void.

Pietrasanta Presence works to create further tension between the *Bedford Columns*. All three talk to each other. The solid *Bedford Columns* create a new spaces between the linear *Pietrasanta Presence*. The slightly differing heights lead to greater tension.

JB: Tell me about what they mean to you in relation to your overall work.

BP: They embody my move towards the spiritual, which we also saw in the *Messengers* and *Sentinels*, and you now see in my recent exploration of the void. They are answers to questions I have about what exists in the so-called “immaterial.” As they are grouped, they lead to further questions. I’m fascinated with the spaces between them, which I feel to be other sculptures in their own right. They lead me to see void or emptiness as another fullness – which of course has spiritual implications.

In different times of the day they are also extremely different. They look simple but they are very complex, both in terms of their emotional nature and in the ways their definitions of space operate. What you see is not what you get. They absorb space, as well as define it and create it. These change more with each time of day than many of my works. Because they are dark they have a strange interaction with shadows: sometimes the shadow creates almost another sculpture between them. Alongside the work, the negative space between them seems to solidify. In all this they address spiritual sensations.

JB: In a sense, you were working with a new material in these works, right?

BP: Being at John Deere [in Moline, Illinois] was an extraordinary experience. They invented ductile iron, which is more flexible. They found that cast items were not as reliable as hand made ones so they invented this process of casting and then remaking or refining by hand. What interested me was the unique color and flexibility of their material. They were delighted I was making art with it.

Each new generation of sculptors has a new relationship with materials. These pieces came out of that breakthrough moment for me in relation to materiality. I thought a lot about Gonzalez while working on these; one of the earliest artists who worked with iron. There is so much to say about iron! I can’t really even begin here. There are gods who are the smith gods in the Greek and Roman pantheon just because of how miraculous iron is!

James D. Barron
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