



The Boat Show

Fantastic Vessels, Fictional Voyages

21 August – 28 October 1990 Portland Museum of Art

Since earliest times, the boat has played a prominent role in mythology, religion, literature, and art. From the burial barges of the Egyptian pharaohs to the spaceships of today's science-fiction films, the image of the boat has been employed as a poetic device to transport mankind imaginatively to distant realms. In ancient Egypt, the classical world, and many tribal cultures, a Ship of the Dead was believed to ferry souls to the afterlife. Vikings buried the bodies of dead warriors in their longships.

Implicit in the form of the boat is the idea of the voyage. Since the time of Homer, philosophers and priests, along with artists and writers, have portrayed the sea voyage as an allegory of the individual's journey through life, an odyssey toward spiritual enlightenment. The ship often symbolizes the solitary self or, as in the metaphors of the "ship of state" and the "ship of fools," a group.

In eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literature, the storm-wracked boat was a potent image: it evoked either man's helplessness in the face of nature's overwhelming powers or his forcible submission to an unknown fate. Today, on the threshold of interplanetary travel, the ancient seavoyage myth remains deeply embedded in human consciousness.

The fantastic vessels in this exhibition have been created by contemporary artists. They have freighted their boats with allusions to age-old meanings attached to ships and voyages. The works thus mark the survival of timeless symbols in our modern world and challenge us to embark on our own imaginative voyages of discovery.

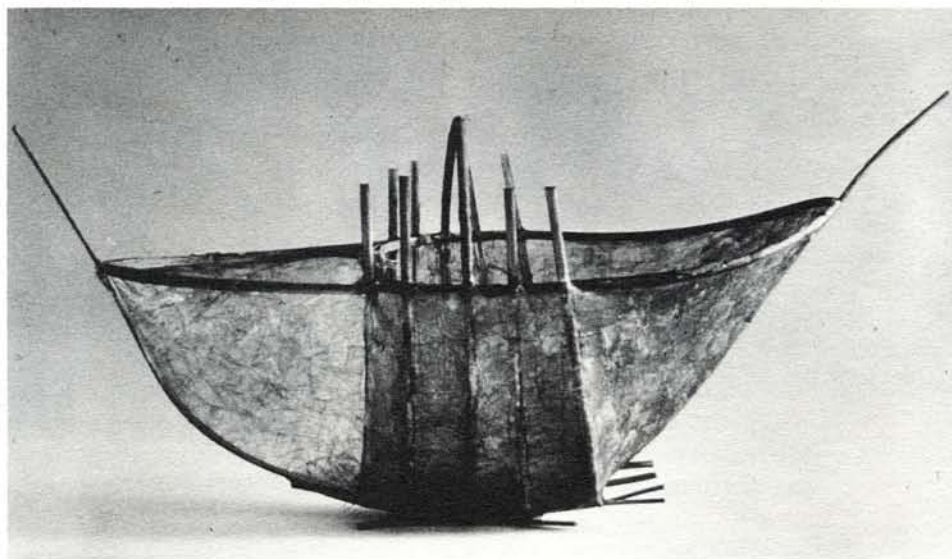
Lillian Elliott born 1931 and **Pat Hickman** born 1941

Lillian Elliott and Pat Hickman have been collaborating on the creation of sculptural forms using basketry techniques for the past eight years. Although their

River Styxx

1987

rattan, gut, linen,
and colored inks
Lent by Donna and
William Nussbaum



productions are reminiscent of aboriginal baskets, they are resolutely nonutilitarian. The artists concentrate on form and structure. Elliott creates the inner framework, and Hickman applies the translucent outer skin, generally using hog casings. Sometimes, they aim to achieve a particular color sensation or a special feeling of space.

River Styxx is part of a series of basket-vessels in which the artists employed heavy rattan sticks and emphasized the color of the walls. The series is characterized by what Elliott describes as a "fantastic, otherworldly feeling." The boat imagery became evident only after the work was finished. During fabrication, the artists thought only in terms of pure form. Pat Hickman named the piece, alluding to the legendary river of the underworld across which the ancient Greeks believed the souls of the dead were ferried. With its deliberate misspelling, the title is also phonetically descriptive of the rattan sticks used in the construction.

Greg Hannan born 1952

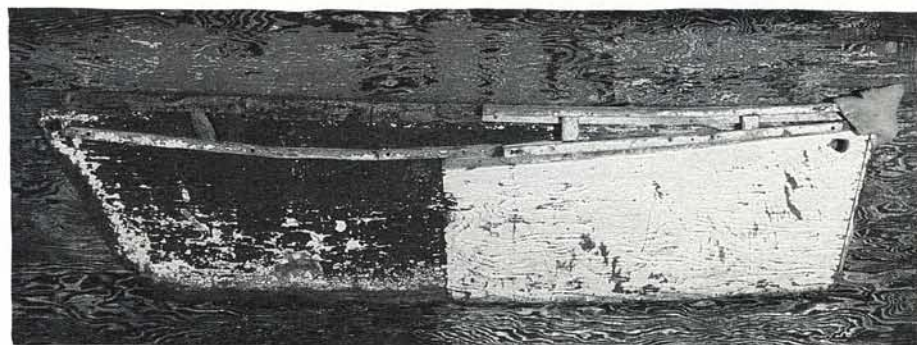
Artist and poet Greg Hannan, who spends part of each year on Brier Island, near Nova Scotia, creates large, found-object constructions that often allude to the sea or to boats.

Hannan's found objects are articles of the quotidian, chosen for their surface, their color, or their scale. Hannan frequently formulates a title and later creates a piece from

Reconstructed Hull

1986-87

found wood and
acrylic paint
Lent by the artist
Courtesy Addison/
Ripley Gallery,
Washington, D.C.

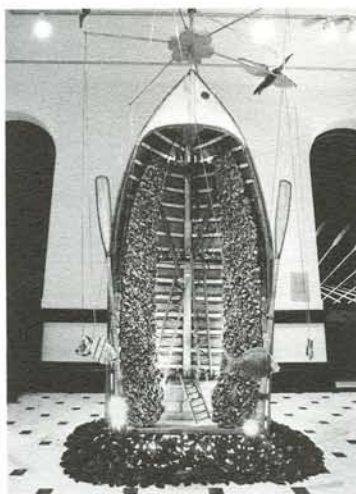


the associative process of linking his words with the objects he collects. An outspoken social activist involved with the Students for a Democratic Society in the 1960s and health-care issues in the 1970s, Hannan maintains that his political attitudes have only recently permeated his work.

With *Reconstructed Hull*, made up of found fragments of wood, crudely painted, Hannan has created a piece that addresses the validity of alternative media. Hannan's boat imagery, coupled with his use of found objects, reflects a tendency to embrace the familiar, the mundane, while exploring the possibilities of a broadening artistic vocabulary.

Valhalla Vertical Triptych

1986
cedar boat, ceramic, wood, Mylar, copper, straw, beeswax, paint, and electric lights
Lent by the artist



Robert Hubany born 1956

Through the use of symbolic imagery, Robert Hubany explores levels of consciousness and reality. Iconographically complex, *Valhalla Vertical Triptych* strongly suggests a ritual function: an initiation into the mysteries of a primitive religion. The title invokes the legendary Norse afterlife, while the boat itself suggests a symbolic passage to self-discovery or enlightenment. Its vertical position expresses the idea of ascension; the tripartite division, a religious icon. In its entirety, the sculpture represents the dynamic relationship between life and death, man and nature, the animal and the spiritual.

Resting on a bed of glowing coals, the vessel is encircled by birds above, fish below. Water and fish are associated with the unconscious mind, birds and sky with consciousness. Symbolizing the self, the boat travels on the plane of life where the sky and water meet. The three levels of votive lights signify an essential tripartite division: hell (red), earth (green), and heaven (yellow). Behind bouquets of ceramic corn (fertility), snakes (ancient symbols of healing power) ascend and descend ladders, uniting the three levels. From afar, the painted prow, gunwales, and interior ribs of the boat depict a skeletal fish, a memento mori image. The drumming sound adds to the sense of mystery.

Larry Kirkland born 1950

Larry Kirkland first established his reputation as a textile artist, but for the last fifteen years he has created complex hanging sculptures. Composed of curtains of painted wire screen, metal tubing, and wooden spheres, these site-determined aerial arrangements have been commissioned for public places with vast interiors. *Soulboat* is a more personal work based on the artist's experiences in the Far East. The sculpture was inspired by Southeast Asian fishing vessels and canoes that incorporate human forms, as well as by Oriental ideas of the soul's journey to the afterlife as a voyage by boat.

My man/person/boat is the recently departed spirit. To me, the moment when the body dies and the new journey begins must be like the second a bird takes flight . . . a great upward rush of wing.

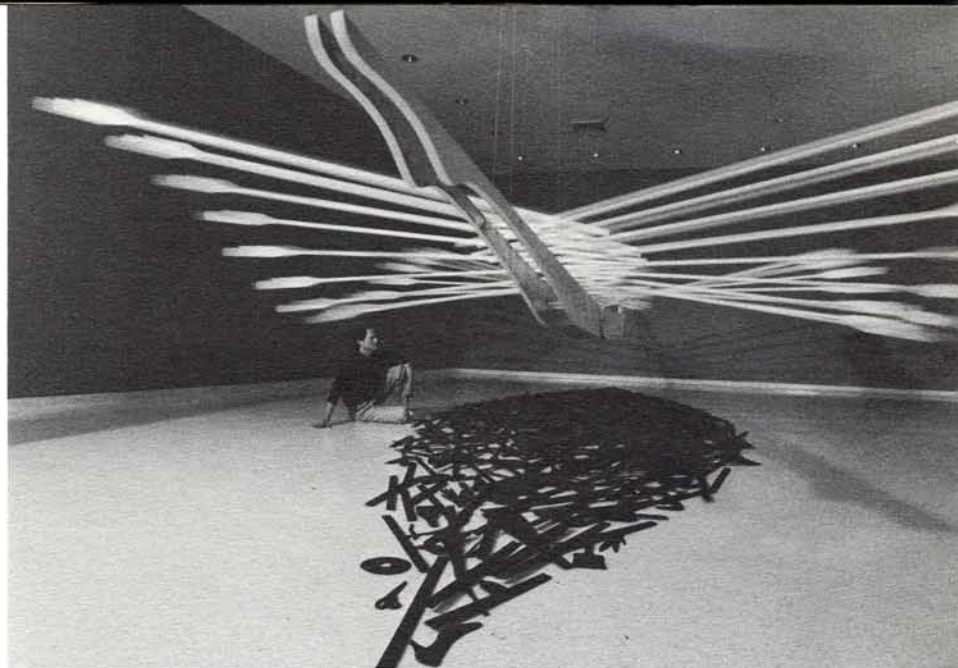
Whereas Eastern religions often assume the need for possessions in the afterlife and place symbolic goods aboard funerary vessels, Western civilization believes "you can't

Soulboat

1987

wood and paint

Lent by the artist



take it with you." Asian-inspired *Soulboat* takes flight from the flotsam and jetsam of an Occidental life. The recognizable objects amidst the sea of cutout shapes hold a personal meaning for Kirkland—they are things he himself would reluctantly leave behind.

Ann McCoy born 1946

Ann McCoy's art is rooted in the sacred. Her imagery is drawn from the ancient religions of Egypt, Greece, and Rome. The figurative subjects of her mural-sized drawings and small sculptural groupings are not, however, simply appropriations

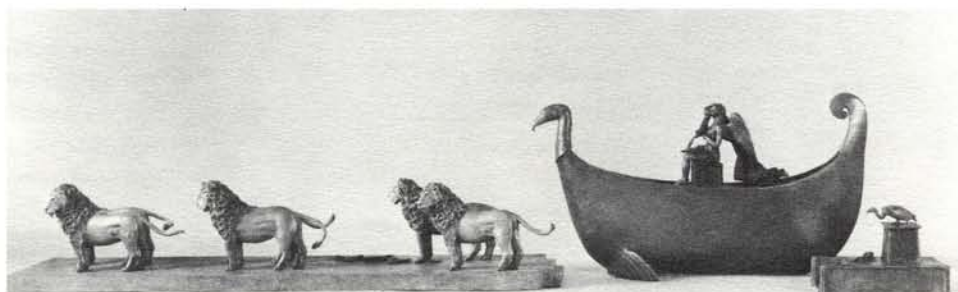
**Barque with
Lion Goddess III**

1985

bronze with colored

patinas

Lent by Sidney Singer



from antiquity or nostalgic idealizations of myths. They are revelations from her own voyages into the dream world of the collective unconscious.

McCoy's specific images are brought to consciousness through the ancient process of incubation: a method of controlled use of sleep to retrieve symbolic dream images for healing or prophecy. McCoy practices modern-day incubation with a Jungian analyst. She carefully traces her dreamed forms to their literary and archaeological sources and then explores their associations.

Barque with Lion Goddess III is one of a series of works incorporating boats. It is indicative of the artist's abiding interest in feminine archetypes and in the resurrection of feminine spirituality. The arrangement of forms is based roughly on representations of the Phrygo-Roman nature goddess Cybele, seated in her lion-drawn cart. The barque is a reference to the dusk boat that carried the Egyptian solar disc through the night. Its birdlike form is taken from a European Iron Age votive ship. The lion-headed goddess seated in the barque is an amalgam of the feline deities of Egypt—Sekhmet and Bastet—and the lion goddess Tanit of Carthage. The accompanying vulture is the ancient Egyptian mother goddess. Suggesting a voyage through the night and the dream world of the subconscious, *Barque with Lion Goddess III* evokes the idea of an interior journey in a quest for hidden realities.



Thula

1987

wood and acrylic paint
Lent by the artist
Courtesy W. A. Graham
Gallery, Houston, Texas

Dalton Maroney born 1947

Dalton Maroney, an associate professor at the University of Texas at Arlington, has employed boat imagery as an expressive sculptural format since 1982. To Maroney, boat forms are simultaneously accessible and mystical.

While it is hoped that the familiarity of this form offers a non-intimidating invitation to a wide spectrum of viewers, it is as much the sublime qualities of spiritual objects that I hope is also present here.

Maroney generally invents titles that phonetically simulate the visual appearance of his sculpture. Like the shapes of his works, the titles appear familiar—possibly exotic islands or ancient cultures—but their sounds are poetic creations.

Maroney's sculptures suggest rather than replicate boats. *Thula* evokes an oared craft. That, however, is as far as Maroney wishes to go. The nonspecific nature of his vessels remains their essential characteristic and the means by which they attain an expressive richness. The content remains elusive and indeterminate. Through shape, color, texture, and sonorous titles, his works allude obliquely to a variety of longtime personal interests: outdoor recreation, ornithology, anthropology, and primitive cultural artifacts.

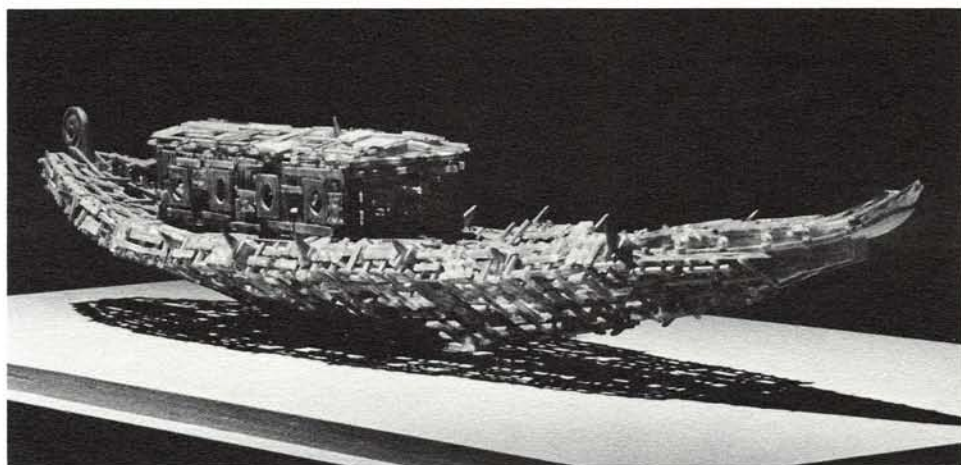
Jay Musler born 1949

Jay Musler is one of an increasing number of artists who have abandoned traditional glassblowing and its inherent beauties in order to communicate disturbing states of mind and philosophic viewpoints in glass. Much of Musler's work conveys powerful emotions—anger, frustration, despair. Well-crafted glass bowls are

Oh! Romeo

1988

glass and oil paint
Lent by June
and Don Ringe
Courtesy Maurine
Littleton Gallery,
Washington, D.C.



punctured, lacerated, and sandblasted, their smooth rims cut into jagged silhouettes. Musler adds to the menacing character by painting them apocalyptic hues of red, black, and ash gray.

In 1983, the artist moved his studio to the industrial outskirts of San Francisco. Nearby was a canal full of abandoned boats. Some were complete, others half-destroyed skeletons. Their rotting forms fascinated Musler, and he began to construct intricate hulls with strips of painted glass. All, like the boats in the canal, were derelict ships—vehicles for voyaging through the subconscious—revealing a spiritually desolate world.

Society's obsessive search for "Love" is an endless voyage in the subconscious. *Oh! Romeo's* form refers to the romantic fantasies associated with a gondola tour through Venice.

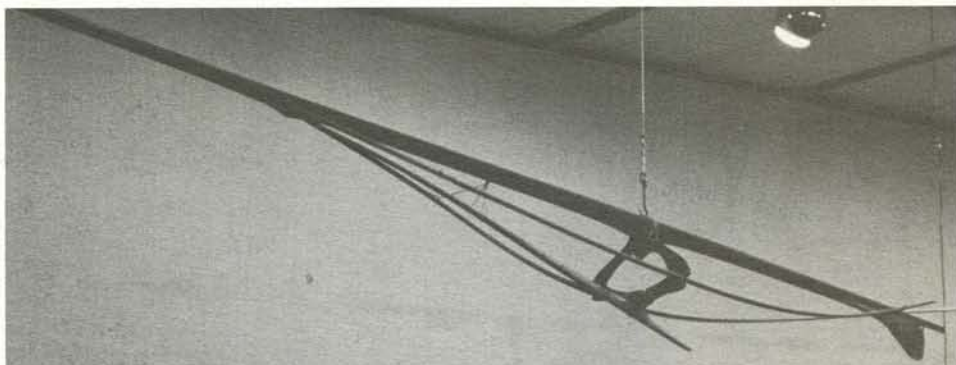
Mark Roeyer born 1943

After graduating from art school, Navy veteran Mark Roeyer spent five years working as a shipwright in a yacht repair shop in Portland, Oregon. During this period, he developed a passion for woodworking and a fascination with the construction

Hull #7

1982

redwood, pine, lead,
cotton cord, copper,
and India ink
Lent by Robert and
Sally Hoffmann



of wooden hulls. Since 1980, the artist has used his boatbuilding skills to create sculptures whose graceful forms are abstractions of the hulls and keels of sailing ships. He also makes at least one functional boat each year in his studio in Lawrence, Kansas.

Like art, boats are works of risk—even danger. Boats lock up monumental forces to resist wind and water. Capturing this mad strength compels me.

Making boats in Kansas is not a contradiction. The geography is much like the sea: unending sky, terrifying weather, and a commanding sense of smallness on the earth.

Michael Shaughnessy born 1958

An installation and environmental artist who teaches at the University of Southern Maine, Michael Shaughnessy employs hay as his primary sculptural material. The humbleness of this odiferous and nonmalleable medium has profound implications for the artist. Shaughnessy has written:

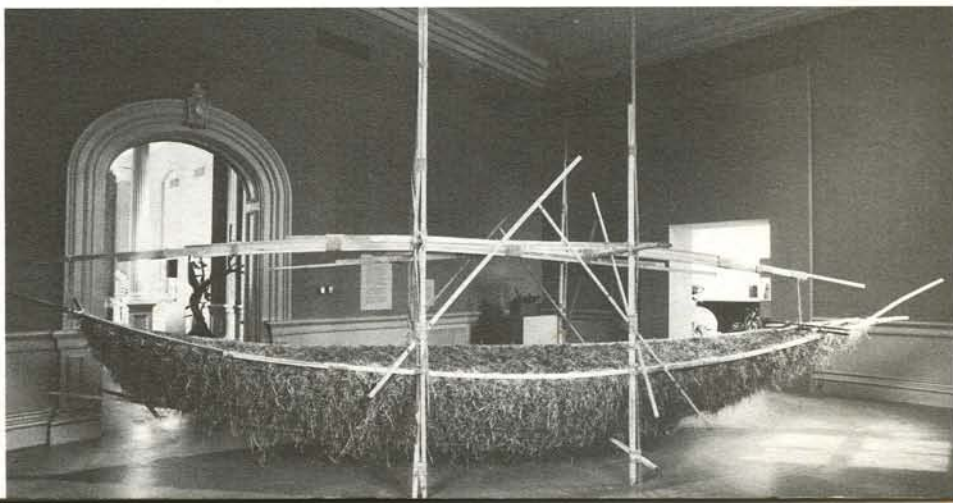
Hay has its own voice. It speaks of its past and present, regeneration, the labor it involves, its politics, its religion. It holds close the common and the communal. It is as near the truth as any material I have found.

Animal fodder and the substance of primitive shelters, hay symbolizes the essential bond between man and the cycles of nature upon which existence depends.

Hayboat

1984

reconstructed 1986,
1989, 1990
hay, wood, and twine
Lent by the artist



There is an uncivilized quality to the crude materials and construction of *Hayboat* that may challenge our ideas of artistic propriety and craft traditions. Using recycled wood and bailing twine, Shaughnessy erects a simple framework. On the members resembling the gunwales and keel of his earthbound boat, he arranges a warp of twine, and on this elemental loom weaves his vessel with handfuls of locally grown hay. Although it is based on no particular boat form, *Hayboat* does relate to the votive ships kept in old Norwegian stave churches, ritual objects carried during religious processions to help bless the fields and ensure abundant harvests.

Paraparaumu

1987

clay, glass, and glaze

Lent by Philip W. Levine

Robert Shay born 1944



Presently chairman of the Ohio State University Art Department, Robert Shay is a well-known potter and ceramics teacher. He has been artist-in-residence in centers in Australia, New Zealand, and Denmark. In 1983, he received the Purchase Award at the International Ceramic Competition in Faenza, Italy.

Shay is not especially attracted to the imagery or symbolism of ships. "For my part," he writes, "I hate boats; they make me seasick." His boat sculptures evolved from his pots. *Paraparaumu* was created when the artist was completing a series of slip-cast, multifired ceramic sculptures in the shape of boats. In this work, he dispensed with the smooth, colorful surfaces of that series, leaving the surface rough and introducing molten glass.

Paraparaumu is a visual pun on the double meaning of the word *vessel*. The artist has summarized its conception:

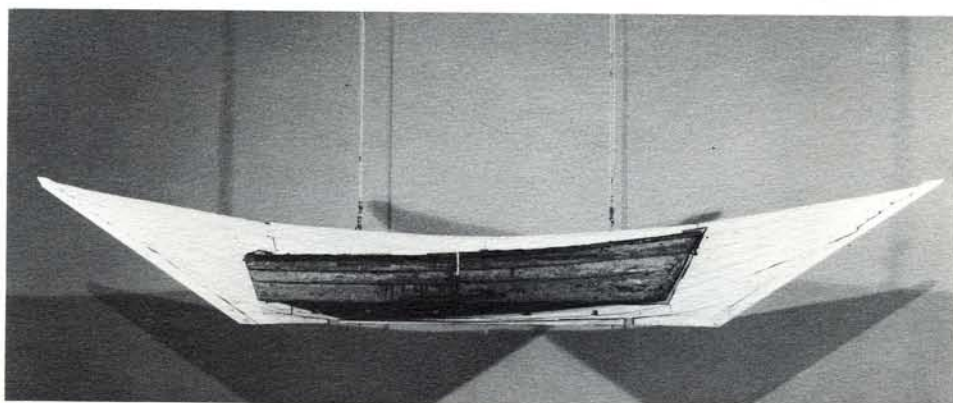
**Potter makes Vessel
Vessel is Boat
Boat is in Water
Boat breaks up
Water is in Boat
Boat becomes Pot
Which is made by Potter**

Robert Stackhouse born 1942

Since the early 1970s, ships have been a prominent motif in the art of Robert Stackhouse. Viking burial boats, in particular, have attracted his interest, not only for their elegance of design and construction, but also for their symbolism. These buried vessels suggest rebirth or transcendence, and Stackhouse employs such evocative forms as vehicles for imaginative transformation. They are metaphors for change.

Dreamers

1980
wood boat, cedar, poplar,
brass, iron, paint, tar, and
polyurethane
Lent by the artist
Courtesy Dolan/Maxwell,
New York



The artist has stated that *Dreamers* is one of his favorite works, created at a critical moment in his career. Its plural title hints at multiple meanings. It is about the transformative nature of dreaming. The battered and cleaved rowboat is set into the backdrop of a ghostlike image of a ship from another time and place. The modern boat dreams of its idealized ancestral form. The size of the latter suggests the rowboat's desire to become the dream image.

There is more than one dreamer. The rowboat is also the artist who, newly arrived in New York, fantasizes about fame and glory, about transforming — and being transformed by — his art.

James Surls born 1942

James Surls is noted for his expressive wood sculptures. He uses trees native to his East Texas home, and through an energetic process of chopping, sawing, carving, peeling, whittling, and burning, the artist creates idiosyncratic pieces that have a

Weathering the Storm

1981
cypress, pine, walnut,
and oak
Lent by Laura L. Carpenter



powerful, sometimes fearsome physical presence. He combines different types of wood for textural and color contrasts. Although the materials are taken from his immediate surroundings, the subjects of his sculptures transcend the commonplace to address essential human concerns: life, death, war, peace, religion, and procreation.

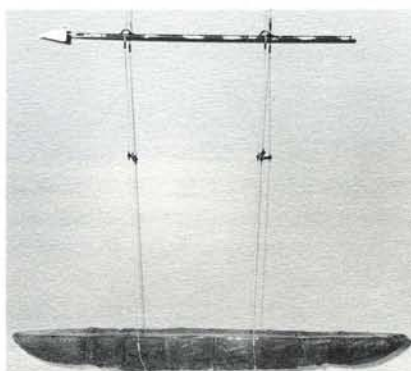
Weathering the Storm, a narrative work, is composed of literal and symbolic elements that are part of a complex iconography developed by the artist. The boat represents the self, the church signifies spiritual ascension, and the wind-shaped branches evoke immortality. Concerning the sculpture's literary aspects, Surls has written:

**From what we were to what we are
has been and is an everlasting**

journey. . . . We reach into the winds of forever, our vision set; we don't turn back. Through it all we pass from wave to wave, over clear days and calm waters, through times of trouble and raging seas. It is not easy, weathering the storm; we only do our best.

Bertil Vallien born 1938

Bertil Vallien is a Swedish-born industrial designer and artist whose work is recognized internationally as being among the most significant art glass produced today. Vallien is chief designer for the Swedish glassmaking firm Kosta Boda. Formerly on the faculty of the Pilchuck Glass School in Washington state, he was also artist-in-residence at the Rhode Island School of Design. His sand-cast boat sculptures are widely known and admired in the United States.

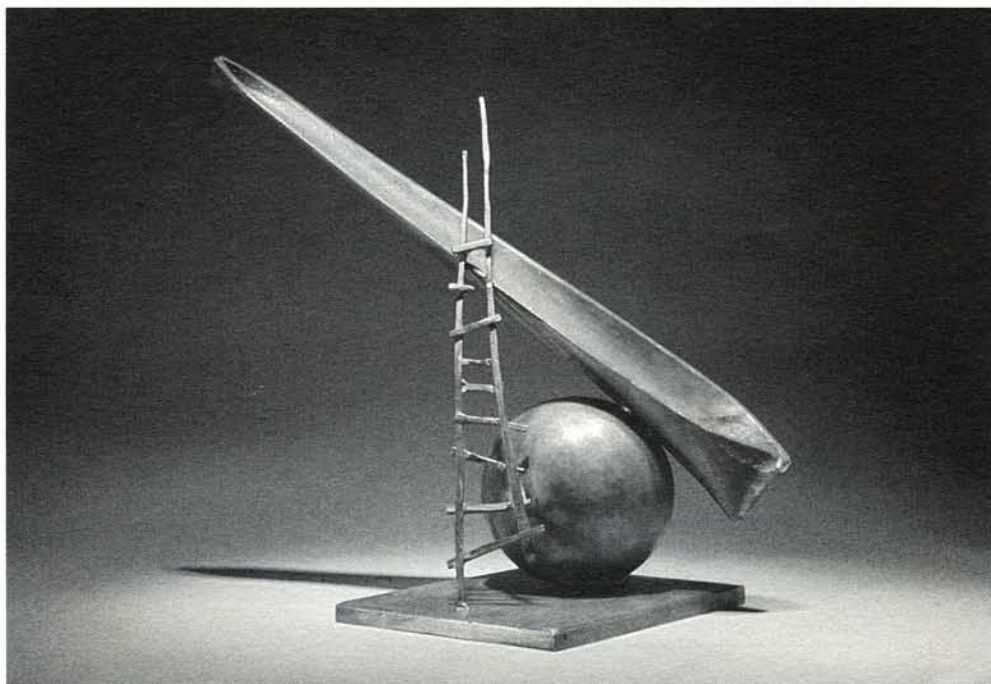


Vallien casts molten glass into molds formed in sand. His method is innovative and results in unusual effects. Human forms and decorative elements (made of blown-glass shapes and colored glass rods and shards, with other nonvitreous materials) are dropped into the molten matrix and appear, when the glass has cooled and been polished, as mysterious objects buried in clear ice. The outer surface of the hull remains roughened by the sand and, when seen from above through the transparent glass, looks like a depression in the ocean bed left by a sunken ship.

Shaman's Journey, one of Vallien's largest and most ambitious boat sculptures, suggests psychic journeys and metaphoric voyages.

John Van Alstine born 1952

John Van Alstine's contact with the quarries of Kennebunkport and the rocky coast of Maine in his youth spawned his interest in the use of granite as a material for expression. His trademark usage of granite and steel in combination explores the relationship between the manmade and the natural.



Shaman's Journey
1987
sand-cast glass with
internal hot-worked
details and metal
Private collection

Pyxis Awry IV
1989
bronze
Lent by Steve Chase

The idea of the intimacy and the delicacy of this interrelationship pervades *Pyxis Awry IV*, but the idea is expressed symbolically, instead of inherently through the materials as in Van Alstine's earlier works. *Pyxis* refers to a southern constellation or a mariner's compass, suggesting humanity's dependence upon nature as a guide. The loaded word *awry* evokes the fragility of this harmony and the imminent potential for imbalance. The precariously placed elements echo this notion.

Van Alstine speaks of the boat image as one of "safety and spirituality." *Pyxis Awry IV* suggests a movement of ascension through its form. The weightiness of its material lies subservient to its upward motion. The inclusion of a ladder reconfirms and emphasizes an escape from temporality, a transcendence. Van Alstine creates a complex image and demonstrates the duality of the boat as a vessel of dependence and of freedom.

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