

## MICHAEL TOM

1946-1999

To work a sheet of metal, to coax it into suppleness, to draw it slowly into a curve of containment, Michael Tom would spend uncounted hours, hammer's cry and maker's heartbeat merged in their singular intent. He once commented,

*...there are times when I spend four continuous hours a day for months sitting emptying out all thoughts, and pounding, planishing metal. The repetition, the sound, and the rhythm are Zen-like. It is mastery over boredom and fatigue.*

There was perhaps something in Michael's nature that drew him to a material that was contentious and resistant, its energy shaped through heat and human force. In some lives, struggle and heightened awareness often go hand in hand, so it was also part of Michael's gift to have learned to tune his ear to the voice of his material, hearing from the sound of the hammer on metal how close he was to reaching a limit, or the edge of new possibility.

Michael understood himself as a maker of objects, and the way in which he honored the process of making—the care, the craft, the meditative at-oneness with materials—came from a strong work ethic and provided a foundation of formal excellence. He also understood the potential of some objects to speak beyond the process of their own making, and it is in nurturing this capacity that his work has achieved its visionary nature.

*Making a piece may not be difficult, but making a piece that says what you want it to say is difficult.*

What Michael Tom wanted to say was most often about death; his was not a morbid nature so much as one which was pre-

paring itself for that inevitable encounter and embrace. Making things was a way to confront mortality and push back its boundary at the same time; the forms that most clearly spoke for Michael were those which helped to define and negotiate that very threshold.

*Vessels, from earliest times, have been a part of our everyday life and a part of our symbolic life. Vessels are forms that contain—food, water, ashes...They still carry thousands of years of memory.*

Michael Tom began his creative path as a painter but moved after earning his undergraduate degree in 1971, into working with metals, eventually completing the Master's program in metalsmithing in 1981 at San Diego State, where he thrived under the tutelage of Helen Shirk. His MFA exhibition, like his earlier paintings, already expressed concern with questions of death and dying as a thematic imperative.

*Although death has been a major theme in all my work, my work is basically about living in the shadow of death. I've always believed that an artist should be an inquisitor of all phases of human existence and, therefore, questioning death is my way of seeking the purpose of existence.*

Michael continued to develop and refine these two entwined concerns: a material aesthetic which centered on the strong tradition of the vessel, as form and as metaphor, and an increasingly complex metaphysical sensibility that engaged and grappled with difficult questions and states of being: fragmentation, vulnerability, displacement, loss. Michael came to

understand death in a corporeal context, as the tangible cessation of the body. But for much longer, he also understood it as a silencing of the spirit by the chatter of human egocentrism.

*As a "modern" I suffer the similar fate of my contemporaries in that we have lost the link to the sacred by severing our ties to the mythological structures of the past. For many years now I have been attempting to mend this break and find some linkage to the sacred.*

What emerged from the intersection of those two concerns—the material, the metaphysical—was a life and a body of work of exceptional power, from the first mature vessel works of the early 1980s to the mixed-media installations and large commissioned works of the late 1990s. The early vessels drew on a deep reservoir of intuition about containment and the rituals of protection and preservation. As the vessels moved from planar, plate-like to more fully rounded or enclosed structures, they often implied an air of secrecy, of things held in reserve. Some works such as the columnar *Windrunner* and the bowl-like *Maturity* used a more organic vocabulary, distinguished by delicate tendrils of metal emerging from the beaten surface and playing off the edge. On occasion, as in *Silence*, combining copper and black bamboo, Michael consciously juxtaposed natural and fabricated elements, emphasizing both the delicate tension and the dark-hued affinity between them. But more often Michael's formal language engaged elements of architecture (as in *House of Sacrifice*) or geometry, working angle

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against curve, edge against edge, as he explored the ways in which to construct something which might capture and contain an elusive spirit or feeling state. Sometimes, the pain is palpable; the multi-layered and fractured edges of *Silent Anger* almost wound the eye. Sometimes, peace of mind prevails, as manifested in the ordered tranquility of *Image of Continuation*. The ovoid or flattened spherical forms which provide the foundation for these vessel works invite a kind of ambiguity, evoking both bowl and biosphere.

*...individual pieces capture fleeting insights into life or the absence of it, while installations create a suspended environment and interaction that through contradiction blurs the boundaries between life and death. I guess this "blurred area" is where I exist...*

In the late 1980s Michael began to explore a second vessel form—the boat—and with it, expanded and more active metaphors of voyage and passage, changes of place and state. With it too, a sense of something holding, rather than being held by, a human presence. That presence was to emerge more fully as Michael moved from objects to installations. Bowl, boat, body—all are forms of containment, but it was the possibilities of installation, where space itself becomes the vessel, which provided Michael with an arena for expanded narrative and interaction, and which also proved to be a liberating force.

In 1990 Michael was a visiting lecturer in Canberra, Australia and met the artist Akio Makigawa, who inspired an interest in new approaches to media and method. As the 1992 recipient of the Catharine E. B. Cox Award from the Honolulu Academy of Arts,

Michael had the opportunity to develop an integrated body of work which responded to these ideas. What Michael gave up in letting go of the finish and perfection of the copper vessels was more than balanced by the expansion of scale, material, and color, and by a rawness, a visceral sensibility which brought him closer to looking mortality in the eye. Michael often understood the possibility of irony, not the least in choosing a line from T. S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*—"April is the cruellest month"—for a segment of this installation; the fecundity of spring both signals the revival of the earth from the death of winter, and points inevitably toward another death. Elsewhere in that installation, Michael expanded his language of forms to include more explicit references to the body, from anthropomorphic guardian figures to repeated use of a detached heart, sculpted with attention to clinical detail. He would return again to this body fragment, drawn perhaps both by its potency as an emblem of the Catholic iconography with which he had been raised, and by its significance as the literal vessel of lifeblood.

*The Dead Bird series is about the fragmented images of an artist grounded in the secular world. The reconstruction and assemblage of body parts, bird parts and limbs are attempts to make whole the artist's vision with the realization that "wholeness" can never be attained within the world of the "profane." The final realization is that the "dead bird" is me.*

In 1993-94, Michael focused on the completion of a major commission for the Maui Arts & Cultural Center, based on the story of Daedalus and Icarus, that potent myth of creation and transgression, flight

and fall. These themes (including an awareness of the risk of going against one's nature, denying one's mortality) converged with the aesthetic of mixed media and came to new fruition in the *Dead Bird* series which formed the core of a small solo exhibition in 1996.

Michael also became more preoccupied with the idea of fragmentation, of things not only in parts, but coming apart. *Severed Heart* and *Reclining Hemisphere*, works from 1997, each revisit earlier paradigms of body and vessel, but now with a sense of disembodiment and fracture. Among the last works Michael created were boat forms, signalling a return to an earlier theme, but perhaps also making preparations for an anticipated journey of his own.

It was often Michael's way to gather in notebooks his sketches and working drawings, along with quotations of text—some framing his own thoughts, some captured from his extensive reading. One fragment of writing by Eugenio Valdes Figueroa clearly resonated with Michael's enduring concern about making things as a way of coming to terms with life's finitude:

*It has always been Man's dream to live on through the object he makes and to fabricate his own transcendence on a bid to resolve his own finiteness in the fatal cycle of birth and death.*

Now, Michael Tom's heart is still, and his tools laid to rest, and what remains is the soundless echo of enduring, transcendent forms. In Michael's life, they voiced his concern for mortality. With his passing, they become a testament to his lifework.

*Marcia Morse*