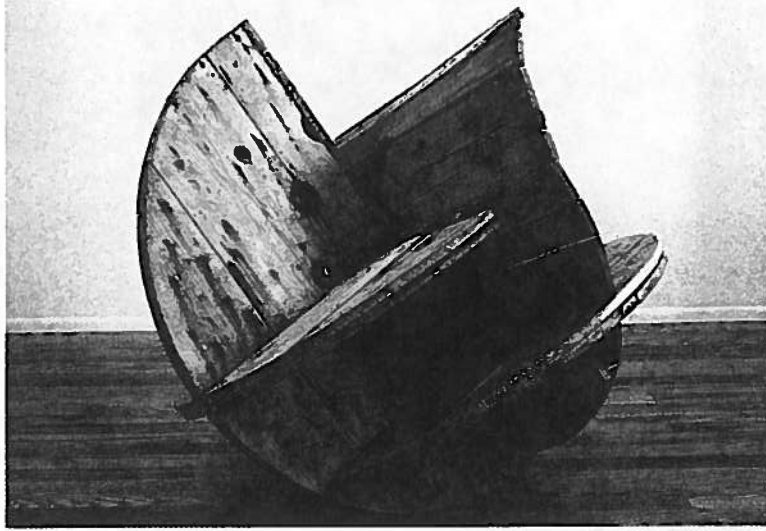


PAUL BOWEN

MARCH 1–APRIL 14, 1996

PROVINCETOWN ART ASSOCIATION AND MUSEUM
PROVINCETOWN, MASSACHUSETTS



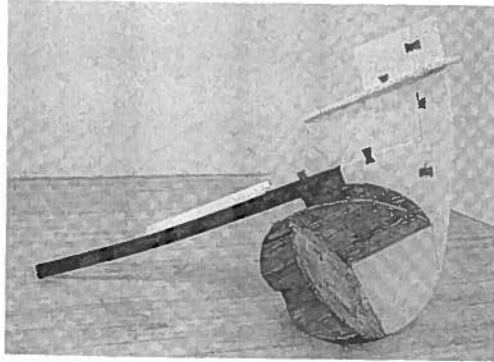
Untitled, 1986-88
wood, 36" x 36" x 36"
collection of Dr. John and Bette Cohen

PAUL BOWEN:

Beyond the Mythological

1986 - 1996

Had Paul Bowen lived in the 19th Century, Henry David Thoreau might have mistaken him for a "wreck-master," a consummate beachcomber salvaging the shorelines of Provincetown for his livelihood. The Welsh native's livelihood has, in fact, developed out of a keen and instinctive relationship to place — to Wales and Cape Cod and to the mythologies and histories inherent in their flotsam. Wood wreckage has long served as Bowen's primary medium, and its dignity and symbolism, imbued with layered narratives, emerge as values integral to the artist's vision. It is Bowen's vision, singular, intellectual, and evolving, that has transformed the intricate assemblage of found fragments into a compelling quest for the whole.



Clam Plow, 1986-88
wood and paint, 56" x 32" x 100"
collection of Kathy Feld

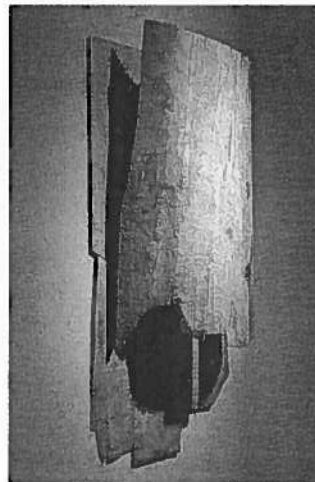
Since the mid-1980s, Bowen's sculptural journey has reflected a shift away from the metaphors of personal ancestry, seen in such works as *Pilgrim Shrine* [p. 5] and *Raft* [p. 10] of the late '70s, toward a purer dialogue with form and space, line and movement, exemplified by *Broniad* and *Rafter*, created a decade later. Materials such as cloth, bone, metal, leather, tape, cork and straw, once ubiquitous, appear only rarely, the recent constructions composed almost solely of wood. And by introducing white pigment into the newer work, Bowen has largely replaced the tar and wax he began using in the early '70s, enhancing his exploration of weight, mass and illusion. Amid the changes, however, there are constants: structural, geometrical and compositional motifs — most notably the dominant disk shape frequently paired with a rectangular armature, frame or window. Likewise, Bowen's joining techniques — exposed wood dovetails, butterflies, glue, and staples — continue as visible structural elements, though process as a theme has been eclipsed by more complex issues of imbalance, movement, gravity and space.

This freer, more abstract and minimalist quality Bowen has achieved in recent work marks a striking departure from the more precisely defined symbolic sculpture of the mid '80s. *Watchman* (1985) [p. 2] and *Oubliette* (1983-86) [p. 31] exemplify Bowen's final period of infatuation with crude objects of history

cradled in clean constants of geometry. The hard lines and textured surface of straw, leather and cloth in *Watchman* combine to create a vertical window through which a door, hanging aslant, is flanked by long weaponlike forms. The eight-foot-high black structure — akin to Bowen's "navigational" works that incorporate figurative elements inspired by Celtic tools and archaeological relics — is a twin of sorts to *Oubliette* [p. 31]. The latter, an imposing nine-foot high, rectangular work, was begun by the artist in 1983 and completed in 1986. Referential elements are here distilled down to a single wrapped rod isolated in a vertical window at the right side of overlapping black slabs. The slabs, metaphorical doors, appear to be sliding closed on the past.

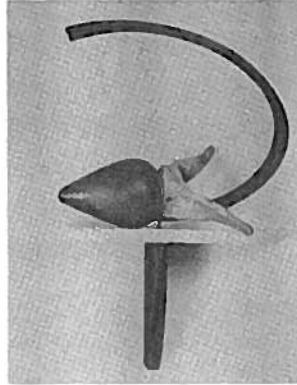
Overt mythological imagery is, for the most part, absent from Bowen's subsequent work, with freer, abstract configurations emerging in both small and large-scale wall and floor pieces. Angles have become curves and the stark blackness has become a dawning blue in a large work called *Hiraethum* [p. 17]. Color makes only rare appearances in Bowen's work and he has credited *Hiraethum* as being pivotal and atypical. The nine-foot wall piece, constructed in 1986, is a flat disk made of pine planks rubbed with blue chalk and attached side to side with visible butterfly joinery. At the center, a semi-circular window is poised open like a shutter to reveal, from the side, a crescent moon-like stencil of light. Across the sculpture's front plane, a crude rectangular frame blocks out right angles, setting up a dynamic found frequently in Bowen's earlier sculpture. But the resonant blue pigment brings a new emotionalism to the work. Open and azure, it is unabashedly celebratory, joyful of its ample and elegant exposure. Poignantly, *Hiraethum*, a title derived from Welsh for homesickness, leaves explicit associations of Wales behind.

In a small, untitled work [p. 8] constructed a year later, Bowen uses blue once again, but here cobalt



Broniad, 1987
wood and wax
41" x 19" x 7"

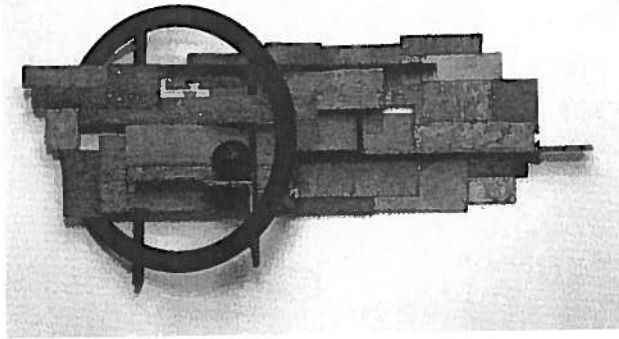
collection of Vasco de Freire de Andrade, Paris, France



Untitled, 1993
wood, bone and paint
12" x 9" x 8"
Berta Walker Gallery, Provincetown

blue carpenter's chalk covers a ball of wool protruding from a waxed wood circle of broken, angled halves. The twine wraps the crux of crossing sticks, echoing sections of another untitled wall piece made in 1984 [p. 12]. In this larger work, straw and cloth-wrapped sticks appear to sprout from between the shifting planes of vertical white planks that compose a four-foot disk.

The organic quality created by natural materials in a work such as the larger piece, is evoked by form itself in the fish-box constructions Bowen began building in 1986. Using quarter-inch pine from fish-packing crates he found washed up on the beaches, he began to patch and puzzle together fragmented blond scraps. The resulting sculpture incorporates exposed structural armatures with pieced-together skins that spread horizontally and vertically, often in a single flat plane broken by windows that angle out, curve, peel, bridge, or fan. In *White One* (1986) [p. 15] and *Window of Opportunity* (1994) [p. 23], the artist has integrated precise textural details — knots, holes, rough and smooth surfaces — into the larger mapping of planes, angles and curves. These works extend gently into space, evoking an architecture of weightless elegance and intimacy. White paint on the upper right-hand section of *Window of Opportunity*, has the effect of banishing mass without disturbing the careful balance of form. Bowen has referred to this as “subverting”

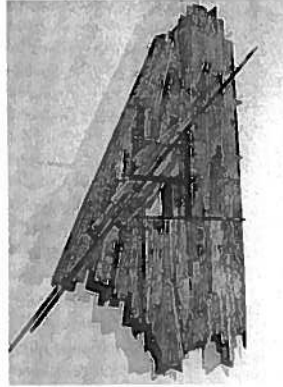


Untitled, 1990
wood and tar, 51" x 104" x 16.5"
collection of Joel and Zoe Dictrow

himself; using the paint has allowed him to subtract weight and visible form without physically removing it.

In several of these works Bowen challenges the notion of "truth to materials"; while the intrinsic properties of wood seem to deny extreme possibilities of curvature, Bowen's sculptures surprise with rolling turns and rounded folds. In *Ramp* (1987-88) [p. 15] Bowen uses fish-box wood in an eight-foot high run of horizontal planks that folds over on itself in an impossibly engineered curve. A ladder-like armature can be seen climbing vertically from the bottom in between the doubled layers of wood. This wrapping of form takes on a more whimsical and dramatic twist in an untitled piece constructed in 1993-95 [p. 19], in which a sled of planks appears to embrace, even to race, around the upper portion of parallel vertical wood rails, like a surreal roller coaster.

The sled imagery summons an early influence of Bowen's, German artist Joseph Bueys, who used mundane objects (including sleds) to explore a personal mythology often touching on issues of survival and healing inspired by dramatic incidents in his own life. In Bowen's sculpture, healing is a personal, though less explicitly autobiographical movement toward wholeness and identification with the truth. There is a constant fitting and refitting of fragments; there is a peeling away, as in *Flight Path*, 1994 [p. 23]; there is towing, collecting,

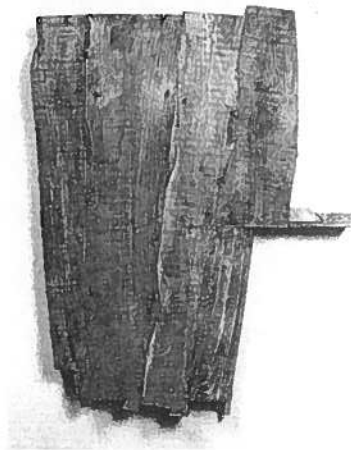


Rafter, 1987-88
wood, 144" x 96" x 12"
collection of Fred V. Rubenstein and Joan Kaplan

bundling, and storing as in *Kedge*, 1989-90 [p. 21]; and there is the search for the missing, as in *Skid* [p. 11].

Everywhere there is decomposition coupled with composure. The circle itself — so dominant and recurring in Bowen's body of work — is the ultimate suspension of disbelief, narrating healing and hope. Even its fragments imply movement toward the whole. But Bowen's circles are not always constant, steadfast or faithful. They exist often in a state of uncertain, ambivalent recovery; they are either impaired or regenerating, sometimes stridently present in soul but only partially in body.

Conversely, the circle appears as the dependable life-ring in Bowen's work, rescuing irregularities of form from chaos or abandonment, waking linearity from a post-tempest sleep. At least four of Bowen's constructions incorporating completed circles or rings were, in fact, created in the wake of one of the most destructive bouts of weather to hit the East Coast in decades. The December storm of 1990 ravaged dwellings all along the Provincetown harbor [p. 11], and among the bits of boats, houses and decks strewn along the beach were the tarred underpinnings of a studio belonging to printmaker Michael Mazur. Bowen utilized this harvest in a commissioned sculpture later mounted on an outside wall of the studio. The remaining wood Bowen used for additional sculptures [p. 10], and in four of these, a complete ring appears to keep the neat

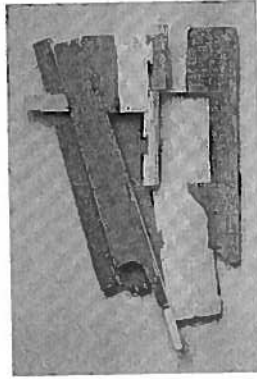


Untitled, 1993
wood, pigment and wax
38" x 22" x 3"
in memory of Joan Garrett-Goodyear
collection of Smith College, Northampton, MA

vertical and horizontal assembly of pieces from spilling back into some inevitable pandemonium. The black tarred wood, in three of these works, sets linearity and mass against the dank weathered wreckage. In the fourth, the decaying vertical black planks that form a ragged disk are woven with the sharp right angles of blond strips looped by a flat black hoop. The composition forms a precise ideogram of line, rectangle, and linkage.

Much more refined and intimate in their visual language are the untitled minimalist shelf-pieces Bowen has continued to make since 1980. These small-scale works incorporate configurations of half disks mounted on the wall as shelves. Each one holds a wood — and in one instance bone — object [p. 18]. Narrow wood tails extend out from these pieces in arching curves, providing visual-balance as well as movement that summons primordial associations, astral trails, and the geological curl of Cape Cod. In the much larger floor piece called *Clam Plow* (1986-88) [p. 14], the same axis or handle motif suggests the machinery of life on land. The tail, a recurring element in the last decade of Bowen's work, seems an apt metaphor for transformation.

Shifting further away from rational allegiances, Bowen's themes are changing from the associative to form itself. In a unique collaboration with poet Robert



The Wing Behind You, 1994
wood and paint, 34" x 23" x 7"
Galerie Raymond Bollag, Zurich, Switzerland

Lunday, commissioned by the Uchidayoukou Corporation of Japan in 1995 [p. 25], Bowen created a 12' x 10' wall sculpture with a poem by Lunday called *Shapeshifting* branded across its salt-wood surface. The pine planks, mottled and furry, were salvaged by Bowen from an old Provincetown house, and were originally part of salt-work troughs that lined Provincetown's waterfront. "I would feast on you/In memory/To get at the secret of form," reads a portion of the epistolary poem addressed to Bowen. This paradox of form — its physicality, its mysteries seducing the imagination into unpredictable distances of mind and craft — is Bowen's compass. To watch his work is to experience a passage. "To survive the passage,/ " the poem ends, "You must not disembark."

For Bowen there is no disembarking. In the past decade he has produced abstract monuments that are distinctive, dynamic and direct, reflective of process, of the mysterious and intrepid evolution of — and search for — ourselves.

SARA LONDON
1996, PROVINCETOWN