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Raoul Hague

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RAOUL HAGUE

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Raoul Hague, who died in 1993 at the grand age of ninety-three, was a major figure accorded only minor recognition. He deserves better: his sculptures, made of huge tree trunks, have the controlled (perhaps contrived) mixture of implosion and explosion of the best Abstract Expressionist work. What Franz Kline did in paint, Hague did in three dimensions: create a dramatic sense of immeasurable scale and primordial power in singular forms. His sculptures have the mythological grandeur of Reuben Nakian's; they are like titanic torsos—stumps of giants, trapped and tortured in an underworld, yet still very much alive. Hague carved the trunks, "mutilating" them, while opening up their natural expressivity by way of the grain, the surface cracks that come with age, and the rawness that remains despite it. There is a starkness to Hague's sculptures, but they are also subtly refined, even self-consciously aesthetic: the surfaces are partly polished, and the torsion of some of the pieces seems mannered, as though laboring for spontaneity.

The most intriguing aspects of Hague's sculptures are their fragmentary character and the tension between inner space and outer surface that animates them. Each fragment becomes an abstract whole, transcending its figurative implications. At the same time, each seems like a figure being turned inside out. *Bainbridge*, 1967, for example, seems restless to the point of disintegration, and composed more of inner space than outer, as though we were peering into the shell of a figure. Hollowness—negative space, presented as a substance in itself, with its own abstract autonomy—is in fact the theme of these sculptures. The outer wood becomes a frame that never completely contains a void. The shapeliness of Hague's sculptures, in fact, distracts from their true point: the absence at the core of their strong presence.

As vehicles for articulating emptiness, Hague's sculptures stand comparison (unlikely as it may seem) with many of those by David Smith, which allow emptiness to seep in—that is, also making a certain point of negative space. Hague lets emptiness seep out, which makes them more mysterious: the natural forces his tree trunks invoke have in fact abandoned them. They are demystified into pure material. That, I think, is the tragic point of Hague's sculpture: yearning to find spirit—to experience the indwelling mystery of nature—he in fact discovers nothing, indeed nothingness in unadulterated form. He digs into the trees, which seduce him with their organic forms—they look vitally alive—but draws a blank.

Hague's work is about the end of a very ancient relationship to nature, which today looks superstitious and pointlessly romantic, but was once a source of glory and hope. One stares into these sculptures finding, in their hollows, the death of one's own spirit.

—Donald Kuspit



Raoul Hague, *Bainbridge*, 1967, walnut, 47 x 45 x 41".