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Like a comet from the unknown skies, the young Italian sculptor Virginio Ferrari first was seen on New World horizons in 1962, again in 1964, and returning in 1966, for the past year has exerted a magnetic influence on the realm of sculpture in Chicago, particularly at the University of Chicago where, as sculptor in residence at the Midway Studios of the Department of Art, he has been the focal point of creative energies.

Thoroughly trained in the fundamentals of plastic art and sculpture in his native Verona, and during four years a teacher of sculpture in the Veronese Liceo Artistico, Ferrari has shown his work since 1958 in national and international exhibitions in Italy, winning prizes beginning with the first year.

Many gallery exhibitions in Italy and in some other countries, Germany, Yugoslavia, and the United States, have kept his name fresh and have made it possible to follow his remarkable progress from year to year. This exhibition of recent sculpture and painting in the galleries of the Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago is the seventh one-man show in five years.

In the meantime, through commissions and purchases, his works have left the private domain of the studio for public places in museums and churches in Italy, a museum and a hospital in the United States. Museums of modern art in Rome, Verona, Atlanta, Georgia, now own sculpture by Virginio Ferrari.

For nearly a year I have witnessed the immense imaginative outpouring and the creative productivity of the sculptor in his Midway Studios workshop. I have learned that overnight a new wellspring of plastic invention may begin to flow, with unforeseeable consequences in the day-by-day productions of the studio.

Whatever the future holds, it is hard to imagine a more productive period for Ferrari than this present year. As some vigorous plant moved to fresh soil seems to find new life, so the release from teaching in Verona, the transfer to a new continent, and the freedom attached to the post of sculptor in residence brought forth a burst of creative energy in many media and in many compelling works of high merit.

Without attempting to review the sculptor’s whole career, it may be enough to establish the fecundity and tempo of his inspiration by going back just a few years to work in which hovering planes of bronze, set at cross-angles one to another, seemed to defy gravity with aerial poses in dynamic balance.

From these constructions in space, Ferrari moved to more massive forms, also active, but with rougher textures and an effect of great strength. At the moment when these conceptions were in his thoughts a tragic accident stirred him deeply, and called forth even more powerful statements in bronze. Shortly after several members at the Atlanta Art Association had visited the Ferrari Studio in Verona, they and their associates from Atlanta perished in the 1962 airplane crash at Orly, France. The series of bronzes, large and small, that gave abstract expression to the disaster, evoked the black mood through down-turned surfaces, ragged edges and broken forms.

The “Tragic Flight” bronzes were shown first in America at the Ravinia Festival, Winnetka, in 1964. Subsequently one was acquired by the High Museums of Art in Atlanta, and was dedicated as a memorial in the autumn of 1966. Another has been lent for exhibition in the Saarinen-designed Woodward Court at the University of Chicago. And in Milan stands the largest of the “Tragic Flight” sculptures, a great horizontal wing executed in concrete.

The large bronze, commissioned for the entrance of the Sylvain and Arma Wyler Children’s Hospital at the University of Chicago, proved to be a transitional piece leading to the earliest works included in the present exhibition. Its large forms have surfaces enriched by half-controlled accidents in manipulation of the clay of the model, and in this it relates to previous accomplishments but also it has a number of sub-forms and some spiral structures that prefigure the next phase in the sculptor’s course.

In 1965 and 1966, while working in Italy on several of the bronze pieces in the exhibition, Ferrari’s intensified concern for man’s relations to his environment, especially to the man-made environment, led him to a combination of forms overtly symbolic of two elements, the mechanic and the organic or human, engaged in struggle for control or dominance. Often mute organic forms seem caught in mysterious mechanisms. There is great tension between these two elements, expressed through the visual contrast of machine-like forms with knotted strains and pierced spheres suggesting the organic, and expressed also through the design and construction of sculptures.

There is something grotesque about certain pieces, to be found in deliberately awkward conjunctions of form. Yet, stern as the generating ideas may be, some softer, even playful qualities appear in those pieces in which organic forms predominate. For example, “Maternità” concerns the mother feeding the child.

The major change, however, is that in these pieces the sculptor controls the forms. Even to the surfaces, accident has been banned almost entirely. In the process of asserting control, expression not only does not suffer but is strengthened because the artist governs the smallest details.

For whatever reasons, the first sculptures made in Chicago developed increasingly in biomorphic directions, with several themes recurrent. The nodules on cord-like strands grew in size and variety of shape, becoming extensions and protrusions. Soon there appeared the motifs of the drooping form, the teardrop as from a wound, and the umbilically connected volumes.

At this point, midway through the year, the emergence of new life became the dominant theme of the sculptor, a consistent development from earlier work. It is very hard to remain uninvolved in the presence of these expressions of life processes, none of them a particular or specific representation, but all vital and affecting.

During the same period, the largest of the works in the exhibition was created. Titled “La goccia della vita,” the Drop of Life, it is a great curved, painted wall of wood, textured and worn, with a central aperture from which comes a descending thread of bronze leading to an ambiguous expanded volume, also bronze.

The sculptor’s flow of ideas, as if reacting to an excess of organic forms, next envisioned the fluid drop emerging from the funneled opening in a machine-cut block of aluminum. The mechanical perfection of forms, relieved only by varied textures on the silvery reflecting surfaces of the aluminum, sharply contrasts with the colored drop, bringing back in a new matter the opposition of mechanical and organic.

It at this moment in time the Renaissance Society exhibition halts the sculptor’s Odyssey, it is only apparently so, for his formidable creative energies continue to search new paths. The exhibit displays one digression from sculpture in the large, strongly colored paintings on the gallery walls, a sudden overflow of two-dimensional design. In the view of a steady production over the years of drawings and paintings, including some work in stained glass, these paintings are not unexpected, except for their strength and simplicity, and they derive directly from the central themes of the sculpture; in their own way they too celebrate “La goccia della vita”.

Color also appears on some pieces of sculptures, accenting surfaces, affording contrast with sculptural materials, and contributing to sculptural effect in keeping with traditional uses of color to emphasize and not destroy forms.

The grand effect of this exhibition of recent work by Virginio Ferrari, in the Goodspeed Hall galleries and outdoors under the trees of the adjoining quadrangle, is to confirm the belief and justify the confidence of the many friends and admirers of the sculptor who, like Mr. and Mrs. Albert Pick, Jr., see the touch of genius in the artist, as versatile as were the great sculptors of the past, who can model the definitive likenesses of the Doctors Karl and William Menninger and other notable Americans, while also contributing his highly personal and original abstract sculpture to the mainstream of contemporary art.

Ferrari is the sculptor of life.

