

IBRAM LASSAW [1913-2003]

September 2010

Sculpture and Works on Paper



*Untitled*, 1986, mixed media on paper, 11 x 13 ¾ in



*Nindar*, 1987, bronze, 16 x 21 ½ x 15 in

*“The moment of working to me is an engagement with life. The sculpture itself is reality, not an interpretation of reality.” Ibram Lassaw*

Opening September 2<sup>nd</sup> and running through October 18, The Drawing Room in East Hampton is pleased to present *Ibram Lassaw (1913-2003): Sculpture and Works on Paper*. On view are six welded bronze and bronze alloy sculptures made in the 1980s and a collection of paintings on paper in the spirit of his sculpture. Having achieved recognition as one of the first American abstract sculptors, Lassaw was at the height of his career, in full command of his intuitive welding techniques when he chose to explore the potential of multi-positional sculpture. While most sculpture is made to be viewed in the round, Lassaw’s intention in his late work shown here was to weld sculpture so intrinsic to its abstract process that it works in any relationship to gravity. In addition to the six sculptures on view will be a group of acrylic and ink paintings on paper, some of which predate the three dimensional work and throw light on the fluid line Lassaw drew and sculpted as he investigated the nature of space over his long career.

A resident of The Springs from 1954 until his death in 2003, Lassaw came into artistic maturity in New York where he was a founding member of The American Abstract Artists Group (1936) and The Club (1949). Inspired by a love of natural sciences and the structure of organisms, the rich art of his time, and Zen Buddhism, Lassaw’s work evolved with his growing study of and appreciation for the interconnectedness of nature’s designs and the excitement in the growing field of systems theory in which an organic, interdisciplinary perspective emerged in the sciences, philosophy and the arts.

The first of several breakthrough moments in Ibram Lassaw’s studio occurred in 1950 when he began to use an oxy-acetylene welding torch to further explore the visual weight of space itself and the reality of interiority in his open structures. Working without a plan, welding moment by moment, Lassaw observed, “I never argue with the medium.” Hot globs of molten metal would fall from his torch forming branches like sand castle drips one on top of the other in whatever configuration he

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imagined. This process was known as “action” sculpture and led to Lassaw’s extraordinary body of work over the next twenty years. These works defined him as a critical Abstract Expressionist, a pioneer in tune with his invented medium.

This show focuses on a later breakthrough when in the 1980s Lassaw achieved his goal of making multi-positional sculptures that appear to defy gravity and were conceived to hang or “be” in any position in space. In this body of perfectly realized shimmering objects the welding rod itself became structure and surface and glue to free the forms in space. Melting welding rods of various metals with his torch, Lassaw fused open geometric shapes and then puddled the molten bronze to create pools of gold light over the surfaces. Light reflecting trapezoids, triangles and fan shapes of melted bronze alloys radiate from their core holding any number of positions with lyrical buoyancy. Now he could imagine both organic and architectonic grid structures floating in air or, alighting in various postures in flamboyant gestures on pedestals. These works have a new exuberant spirit and reflect the experimental and ambitious context of American sculpture in the 1980s.

The titles of the some works evoke star clusters and constellations. *Callisto* is a sprawling, bold construction of flat gold trapezoids that hold motion in space like blades of a windmill. Another work is *Heart of Gold* in which latticed planes of bronze and nickel silver lines at right angles to one another form an architectural grid casting exquisite shadows. A sparkling copper colored universe of its own, *Sothis* recalls a delicate early flying machine. The liquid light that covers the web of welded rods suggests Lassaw is effectively painting in three-dimensional metal.

The selection of drawings in acrylic and ink from the 1974 through 1996 provide insight into Lassaw’s two-dimensional fascination with the object in space. With titles like *UFO* and *Black Hole*, Lassaw made clear his curiosity about all life in the universe including flying saucers and cosmic events. Particle physics was an exciting field at this time and his works on paper reveal his fully conceived contemplation of all matter in the universe. The deep grape space in *UFO* holds rows of flying black baskets of lines lit from within from across the field. The black ink drawing, *Ambulating*, recalls Zen calligraphy simultaneously with the wobbly line of molten metal.

Born of Russian émigré parents in Egypt in 1913, Lassaw came to New York at age eight fluent in French and focused on making plasticene sculptures in many colors. He enrolled himself in sculpture classes taught by Dorothy Denslow at the Brooklyn Children’s Museum. By the time he was thirteen he was a regular visitor to the Metropolitan Museum who admired the classical Greek sculpture, and in 1926 he attended the first “International Exhibition of Modern Art” organized by Katherine Dreier of the Société Anonyme. There he first experienced the Bauhaus artists and the Russian Constructivists. Soon he was studying the work of Brancusi, Lipschitz, Gabo and Pevsner all of whom had a profound effect on his development. Already fully engaged by sculpture, Lassaw became a member of The Clay Club. Soon The Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney Museum of American Art (where he would be included in the second Biennial in 1933) were founded and he discovered Arp, Miro and Calder. Both Buckminster Fuller’s articulation of Universal Architecture and Moholy Nagy’s *The New Vision* were provocative sources for Lassaw’s drive to invent new materials and methods with which to explore the potential of sculpture in space.

Ibram Lassaw’s work is in the permanent collections of the Whitney Museum of American Art, The Museum of Modern Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice, the Philip Johnson Glass House Museum, the Israel Museum, Jerusalem, and many others.

**Hours: Monday, Thursday, Friday & Saturday, 11–5, Sunday 11-4.**

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