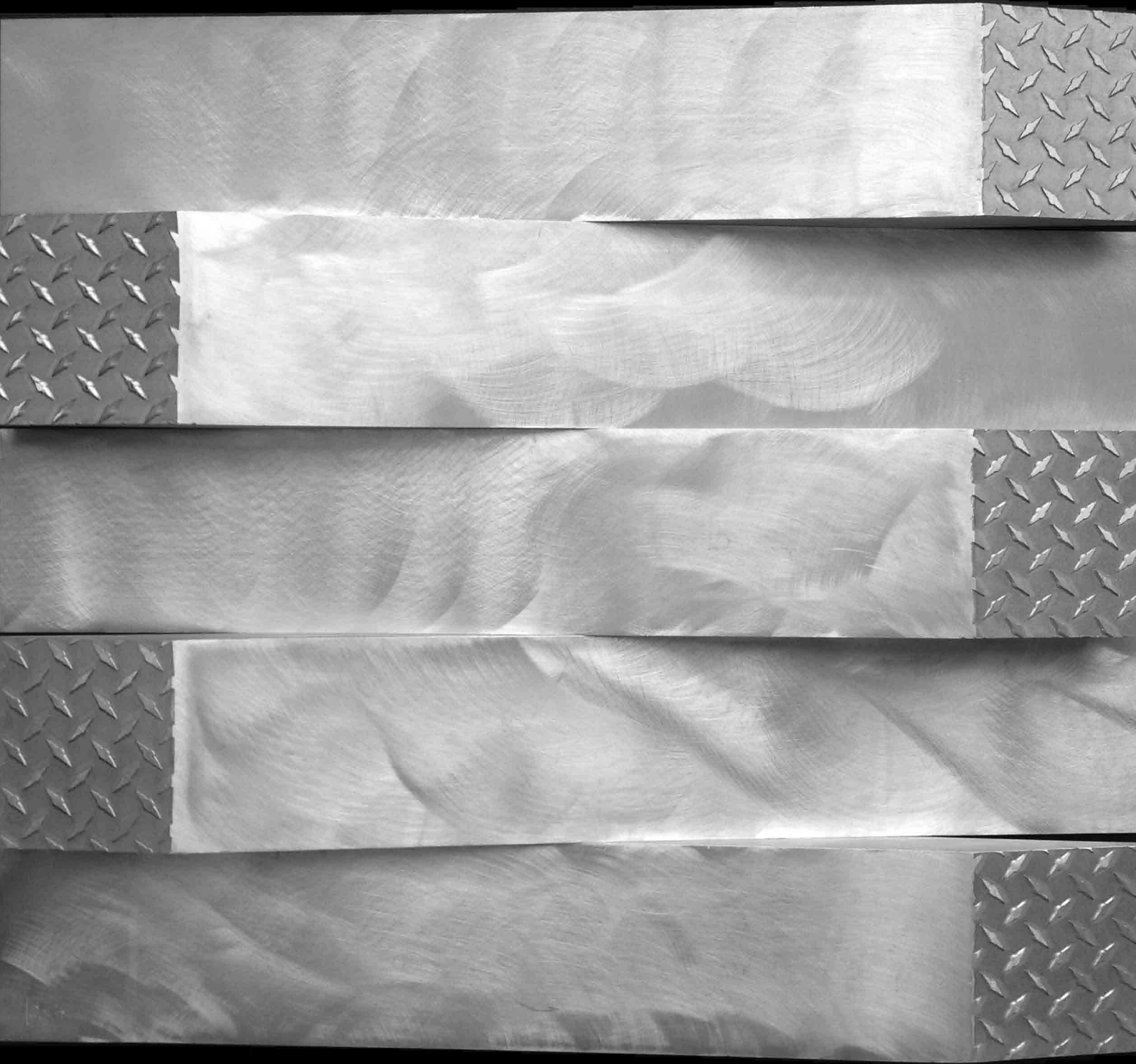


HOFSTRA UNIVERSITY MUSEUM



DAVID JACOBS:
SIGHT and *SOUND*

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February 4-April 27, 2014

Emily Lowe Gallery

Curated by Karen T. Albert
Associate Director of Exhibitions and Collections
Hofstra University Museum

Front and back cover credit (detail):
David Jacobs (American, born 1932)
Star Wars V, 1980,
Aluminum,
30 x 30 x 4 in.
Courtesy of the artist.

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“Here we are ... sensing an experience and a space ...”

– David Jacobs

Since the 1970s there has been a growing interest in sound sculpture. One needs to look no further than the recent first major sound-art exhibition, *Soundings: A Contemporary Score* (August 10-November 3, 2013), at the MoMA for evidence of the innovative work being done in this interdisciplinary artistic arena. An early contributor to this “movement” is the artist David Jacobs whose *Wah-Wah* sound sculptures were first shown at the Hofstra University Museum’s Emily Lowe Gallery in 1967. A multifaceted artist and educator, David Jacobs also served on the faculty at Hofstra University in the Department of Fine Arts and Art History, starting in 1962.

To develop this exhibition, Karen T. Albert, the Museum’s associate director of exhibitions and collections, has worked closely with the artist to select precious gems from his extensive body of work to convey multiple aspects of his artistic directions and sensibilities. The exhibition, *David Jacobs: Sight and Sound*, also pays tribute to Hofstra University as it achieves ever greater prominence in the fields of engineering and technology. This exhibition provides viewers with gateways through which they can experience the merging of the fine art process with the problem-solving and analytical skills requisite to achieve technological innovation.

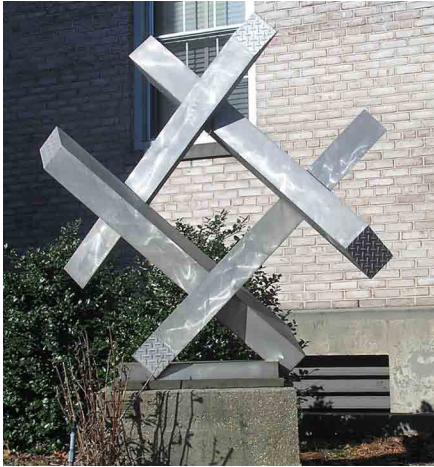
David Jacobs, in his own words, provided essential insights into his artistic thought processes. The artist, ever conscious of wanting each person to have a totally immersive sensory experience with his work, asks that we take time to slowly walk around, through, in front of, and behind his sculptural works as we contemplate the shifts in what we perceive visually and also through the sensations created by vibrations of sound or pitch. These sound vibrations, or shifts in pitch and volume, which are at times very close in frequency, change their tonality and resonance as one moves in space around his *Sound Column Environment* to a moment in time and space where we experience what the artist calls “the sweet spot.” It is only through total sensory and physical absorption that we can become one with this sound environment created by the artist. As David has stated, “... moving around space [you] will experience harmony and disharmony, and a sweet spot where the sounds are in unison.”

David Jacobs has a remarkable and unique sense of beauty, space, harmony, and disharmony, which he uses to develop aesthetically elegant and singular works. He is a master of the ability to forge artistic vision with the use of unusual and industrial materials to create sculptural works and experiences that allow for individualistic engagement in a transient moment in time, space, and sound that leads us to rare glimpses of sensory understanding and clarity.

We thank the artist; Joan Jacobs; Matthew Nichols, PhD, associate professor at Christie’s Education for his insightful essay; Michael Carolan; and the New York Community Bank Foundation for their support of this exhibition.

Beth E. Levinthal
Executive Director
Hofstra University Museum

Transforming the Campus Environment



Crossing the Channel, 1979

Sculpture placed throughout the landscape is a unique feature of the Hofstra University campus. David Jacobs, with a discerning eye, helped to transform the campus environment during his tenure at Hofstra. He has always been concerned with the viewer's overall encounter with a sculpture and feels that the placement of sculptural works within the landscape (or an interior) is vitally important to that individualized experience.

While previously teaching at Ohio State University, Jacobs had worked to place and create outdoor sculpture within the campus environment. When he arrived at Hofstra in 1962, sculptures were not featured on the grounds of the campus. Beginning with the opening of Emily Lowe Gallery in 1963, Jacobs began an informal program of placing and displaying sculptural work on the campus, created by faculty and students. These initial works were placed primarily in the garden area located on the west side of Emily Lowe Hall. In 1967, when the college library (now the Joan and Donald E. Axinn Library) opened, he loaned his large scale work *Head Columns I and II* for exhibition in the new building. The *maquette*, or model for this sculpture, is included in this exhibition.

In his continuing efforts to engage the students and surrounding community with contemporary art, Jacobs produced a Happening in collaboration with the artist Allan Kaprow as well as students from the Department of Fine Arts and Art History. *Refills*, 1968, was an exchange of earth from trenches that were dug in three unrelated locations: the quadrangle north of John Cranford Adams Playhouse, Hofstra University; Memorial Park, Sea Cliff, NY, and the estate of Rhett and Robert Delford Brown, Kings Point, NY.

Through the 1970s, Jacobs worked with advanced students on using *maquettes* to plan large-scale outdoor sculptures and their installations. In 1977 then Hofstra University President James M. Shuart, upon presenting a student sculpture award, recognized the importance of incorporating outdoor

sculpture within the University environment. Dr. Shuart formalized an agreement with Jacobs to place additional sculptural works throughout campus. Among the sculptures that Jacobs eventually placed was a group of works by Long Island sculptors in honor of Long Islanders (known as the Long Island Hall of Fame), which were accepted into the Hofstra University Museum's collections in 1984-1985. One of Jacobs' own works, *Crossing the Channel* (HU85.23), was selected in honor of James M. Shuart's induction into the Long Island Hall of Fame. The welded aluminum sculpture is currently located south of Weller Hall, where the artist originally sited the work.

Two works by the artist are permanently displayed on campus, and they have become part of the HUM permanent collections. In addition to *Crossing the Channel*, in 1992 *Skater Gate* (HU92.8), now located east of the Sondra and David S. Mack Student Center on the University's North Campus, was added to the collections. *Skater Gate* was created in 1979 while Jacobs participated in a grant-funded artist-in-residence program at Central High School in Valley Stream, NY. The site-specific design was originally intended for placement in a pond, which became a skating area when frozen. But Jacobs donated the sculpture to Hofstra University in memory of Al Davidson, founder of Davidson Aluminum and Metal Corporation, who passed away in 1992.

In the late 1980s, the oversight, including installation and maintenance, of the outdoor sculpture collection came under the auspices of the Museum. Until his retirement from the University, Jacobs continued to offer his counsel and advisement for the best locations, placement and installation of sculptural works throughout the campus. The current outdoor sculpture collection contains more than 70 works with representation by artists such as Vinnie Bagwell, Robert Berks, Dan Devine, Richard Heinrich, Paul Jenkins, J. Seward Johnson Jr., Ibram Lassaw, Paul Manship, Antoni Milkowski, Henry Moore, Constantino Nivola, Tony Rosenthal, Jason Seley, Rhoda Sherbell and Greg Wyatt.

Hofstra University offers its enduring gratitude to David Jacobs for the invaluable contributions of time and talent that he has made to the development and placement of this fine outdoor sculpture collection. The collection continues to animate the Hofstra University campus and inspire all who visit.

Karen T. Albert
Associate Director of Exhibitions and Collections

From Figure to Frame: The Sculpture of David Jacobs



Figure 1. *Ohio Gothic*, 1960

Art historians are both buoyed and burdened by the knowledge they bring to unfamiliar works of art. Over the past several years, for example, while becoming acquainted with David Jacobs and his sculpture, I often found myself reflexively placing his work into context, making sense of what I saw by relating his materials, forms, and techniques to what I already know about postwar American art. Subsequent research has confirmed many of my hunches and revealed Jacobs' active engagement with the dominant sculptural strategies of his day. But this impulse to historicize can also hinder a more direct and satisfying encounter with his work. As the present exhibition demonstrates, Jacobs has long made art for the sensate beholder, asking viewers of all stripes and backgrounds to simply experience his sculptures, and in turn become more aware of their own embodied presence in space.

Born near Niagara Falls in 1932, Jacobs grew up in central Michigan and spent many creative Saturdays in classes at the Flint Institute of Arts.¹ When his family moved to southern California in 1946, he began an earnest study of painting, eventually receiving his bachelor's and master's degrees from Los Angeles State College. In 1957 he was hired by Ohio State University to supervise the school's craft workshop and teach classes in metalwork and jewelry design. This new role demanded new skills, including command of a welding torch, and before long Jacobs was making metal sculptures. By 1959 he was visiting scrap yards in Columbus, Ohio, where he scavenged steel and iron objects that he fashioned into mostly figurative assemblages. While never obscuring the primary identities of the pipes, saw blades, wheel rims, and other objects he found, Jacobs would smartly arrange them into human and animal forms that often engaged the history of art. In *Ohio Gothic* (1960), for example, the pitchfork-wielding couple from Grant Wood's iconic painting is reconceived as a skeletal arrangement of farming tools (Figure 1).² Other assemblages from this period dig deeper into art history and take the form of fallen warriors and reclining female nudes.

At the urging of David Smith, who admired this early work on a visit to Columbus in 1959, Jacobs traveled to New York in 1960 to seek wider exposure in the city's galleries. After viewing photographs of his sculptures, the Barone Gallery quickly arranged a solo show for Jacobs that opened in April 1961. The 21 assemblages in his New York debut were embraced by critics. Writing in *The New York Times*, Stuart Preston praised their "extreme cleverness," noting that, "Mr. Jacobs apparently makes it a rule to use parts just as they are, adding to the difficulty of means but also to the effectiveness of ends."³ Curator William Seitz also visited the show, and later included Jacobs' work in "The Art of Assemblage," his landmark survey of collage and constructed sculpture that opened at The Museum of Modern Art in October 1961. Seitz selected *Ursula* (1959), a small sculpture that efficiently combines a gas tank, a tractor pedal, and two iron stove legs to suggest a roast pig (Plate 1). Resting on its side on a raised platter, this porcine form is surmounted by a filigreed handle that doubles as a curly tail.

With his career jump-started by these early exhibitions in New York, Jacobs continued to weld assemblages through early 1962. But one day that spring, while sketching in his Ohio studio, he was intrigued by the shadow he cast on his drawing pad, and the fleeting episode prompted a long series of "Cut-Out" sculptures. At first using large panels of plywood, Jacobs excised bold silhouettes of human figures, painted them as bright monochromes, and presented both the positive shapes and their negative frames on metal brackets. By the summer he was cutting similar sculptures from steel plates, including *Red Man* (1962), which was awarded first prize by Henry Geldzahler at a juried exhibition in Columbus. Standing more than 6 feet tall, this scarlet silhouette of a man's head and shoulders can be displayed near or far from its green parent plate. *G Man*, also from 1962, offers a variant of this strategy, since Jacobs partially covered a golden panel of Masonite with a black layer of the same material to outline a robust male torso (Plate 2). The titular reference to a secret agent is reinforced by the visible rivets, which fuse the panels together while traversing the body like the crosshairs of a gun.

¹ Biographical information is drawn from David Jacobs' personal archives, as well as conversations with the artist in 2012 and 2013.

² This subject reflects Jacobs' training as a painter, which was steeped in the "American Scene" tradition. One of his high school painting instructors, Jack Ball, was a student of Grant Wood.

³ Stuart Preston, "Art: Italian Old Masters," *The New York Times* (April 21, 1961), 31.



Figure 2. Cut-Out Installation, 1961



Figure 3. *Diamond Box*, 1963

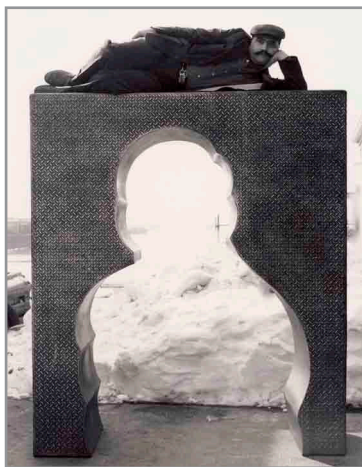


Figure 4. *Man Monument*, 1963-64

After joining the faculty of Hofstra University in fall 1962, Jacobs established a new home and studio in Sea Cliff, on Long Island, and began forging stronger connections to the vibrant New York art world.⁴ Critics sometimes linked his “Cut-Outs” to the freestanding portraits that Alex Katz began painting in 1959.⁵ But Jacobs expunged all internal details from his own flat sculptures and privileged pure silhouette over individual likeness. Thus, while many of the “Cut-Outs” are premised on the contours of his body, they achieve a crisp graphic punch and an Everyman anonymity that correlates to the accessible aesthetics of pop art, which was newly ascendant in New York circa 1962. Indeed, the earliest examples invite comparison to (and sometimes predate) similar silhouettes in the work of Tom Wesselmann and Idelle Weber. In March 1963, for his second show at the Kornblee Gallery (formerly Barone), Jacobs presented numerous “Cut-Outs” on the gallery’s rooftop deck (Figure 2). Photographs of this installation reveal a colorful and dynamic interplay of positive forms and negative spaces, as the freestanding silhouettes of heads and bodies alternately frame and block views of their neighboring sculptures.⁶ The exhibition impressed Thomas Messer, then director of the Guggenheim Museum, who purchased *Steel Head* (1962) and four related drawings for the museum’s permanent collection.

In retrospect, it seems fitting that Donald Judd reviewed the 1963 Kornblee show for *Arts Magazine*, where he recommended further reduction and described the “Cut-Outs” as “an apt synthesis of flat and pure abstract art and the supposedly Lazarene figure.”⁷ For as Jacobs continued to explore silhouettes in late 1963, his sculptures became less pictorial, more experiential, and thus emphasized many of the perceptual issues that were currently motivating Judd’s own sculptures and those of his fellow minimalists.⁸ These shifting concerns were manifest in the pivotal *Man Monument*, an ambitious sculpture that Jacobs completed in early 1964 (Figure 4). While searching for Corten steel in Long Island City, Jacobs discovered aluminum tread plate and used this industrial metal to construct a 7-by-6-by-2-foot sculpture that expanded a flat silhouette into three dimensions, essentially creating a deep arch from the generalized

contours of his head and shoulders. Significantly, as one passes through this portal, an optical understanding of the figure gives way to a fuller somatic immersion in the literal space of the sculpture.⁹

As the later “Cut-Outs” evolved through 1965, they solicited greater perceptual engagement from the mobile spectator, who gradually apprehended their latent figuration as he or she moved through time and space. Such are the demands of *Head Columns I and II*, a pair of 8-by-3-by-3-foot aluminum sculptures that were first presented in Jacobs’ third solo show at the Kornblee Gallery in October 1965 (Figure 5). A quick glance might suggest two similar abstract forms, each opposing geometric hard edges to a contrasting line of scalloped curves. Yet as one travels around these units, their near and far contours fall in and out of alignment, circumscribing a simplified head shape that appears to contract and expand. Though conceived as a preparatory *maquette*, a smaller version of *Head Columns I and II* is no less effective (Plate 3). When placed on a tall pedestal, the sculpture matches the size and height of a human head, and thus seems to dramatize a central tenet of phenomenology: that the mind’s *a priori* knowledge of an object is quite distinct from one’s constantly shifting perception of the same form.¹⁰

At a gallery opening in spring 1964, Jacobs met K.C. Li, whose family owned and operated the Wah Chang tungsten refinery in Glen Cove, New York. Upon learning that Jacobs had outgrown his current studio, Li offered him a much larger workspace in the Wah Chang factory. After moving there in the summer, Jacobs was able to construct his large-scale aluminum sculptures with greater ease, but the new environment eventually influenced his work in other ways. Especially when working late at night, he was sometimes startled by factory machinery that rumbled into operation, as if by its own volition. The experience inspired him to create *Mother* (1967), the first of his kinetic and clamorous “Wah-Wah” sculptures. Mounted on an aluminum drum, this stack of conjoined rubber inner tubes and ventilation hoses is flaccid when at rest, but inflates to wriggling and wheezing life when a hidden vacuum cleaner motor is activated.¹¹

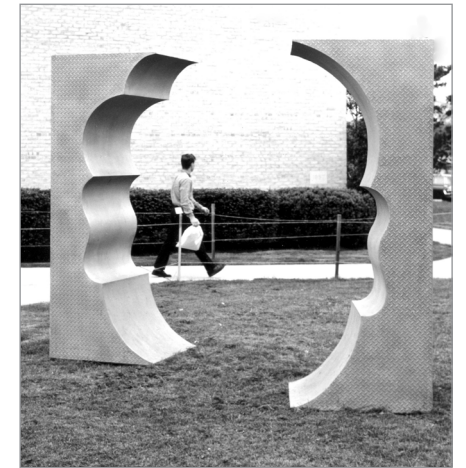


Figure 5. *Head Columns I and II*, 1965

⁴ Having participated in some of his early Happenings, Jacobs formed a particularly close friendship with Allan Kaprow at this time. While not a decisive influence on any one sculpture, Kaprow’s commitment to a highly interactive art is reflected in Jacobs’ evolving concerns with sensory engagement.

⁵ See, for example, Lucy Lippard, “New York Letter,” *Art International* (November 20, 1965), 43.

⁶ The August 1963 issue of *Harper’s Bazaar* featured several photographs of fashion models posing among Jacobs’ sculptures.

⁷ Donald Judd, “David Jacobs,” *Arts Magazine* (April 1963), 57.

⁸ Judd’s first solo show took place at the Green Gallery in December 1963, following that of Robert Morris in October, and both demonstrated a minimalist aesthetic in formation. Jacobs’ *Diamond Box* (1963) is perhaps his most minimalist statement, and was included in the notable “Boxes” show at the Dwan Gallery in Los Angeles in February 1964 (Figure 3). See Walter Hopps, “Boxes,” *Art International* (March 20, 1964), 38-41.

⁹ Likely referring to Rene Magritte’s repeated depiction of a man in a bowler hat (sometimes in uncanny reverse silhouette), Brian O’Doherty described *Man Monument* as “a walk-in headspace [that] makes one feel that a Magritte is happening to you.” O’Doherty, “Iolas Gallery Displays Some Unusual Ideas,” *The New York Times* (May 30, 1964), 14.

¹⁰ Informed by his reading of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Robert Morris succinctly described this contrast in reference to a simple cube: “There are two distinct terms: the known constant and the experienced variable.” Morris, “Notes on Sculpture, Part II,” *Artforum* (October 1966), 23.

¹¹ The experimental nature of *Mother* was recognized by Lawrence Alloway, who included the sculpture in “Options,” a group show he curated for the Milwaukee Art Center in 1968. The show’s title was meant to reflect the diverse and unorthodox media used by numerous artists at the time. See Alloway, “Introduction,” *Options* (Milwaukee: Milwaukee Art Center, 1968), 3-7.



Figure 6. Wah-Wah installation, 1967

Eight additional “Wah-Wah” sculptures were created in 1967, and were given titles like *Pop*, *Sis*, and *Baby* to underscore their family resemblance. In each case an aluminum base or scaffold supports inflatable rubber elements that are electronically programmed to move and make noise with great vigor. Realizing how their sonorous gyrations were complementary, Jacobs began showing these nine “Wah-Wahs” as an orchestral group, first in the Emily Lowe Gallery at Hofstra University, and later, in December 1967, in Allan D’Arcangelo’s studio in New York (Figure 6).¹² Based on their pneumatic character, the “Wah-Wahs” were also featured in the “Inflatable Sculpture” show at The Jewish Museum in 1969. Reviewing this group exhibition for *The New York Times*, Peter Schjeldahl singled out Jacobs’ sculptures as “the show’s most amazing and vociferous creations,” and took special note of their musicality. “Turned on, the works swell, quake, writhe on the floor, wave funny antennae and bump up and down,” he wrote, “meanwhile emitting a preposterous cacophony of rumbles, toots, moans, hisses, trumpetings, wheezes, squeaks and thumps, which is, at times, surprisingly musical and quite affecting.”¹³

As Schjeldahl’s observations make clear, the early “Wah-Wahs” were strongly anthropomorphic, highly animated, and performed their noisy movements at a theatrical remove. But as Jacobs’ interest in sound sculpture evolved, he traded this amusing kineticism for more nuanced and immersive sonic environments.¹⁴ This transition began with *Ground Floor*, a 1969 sculpture that connects dozens of black rubber inner tubes into a massive serpentine form that shares the viewer’s space. Twisting and coiling across the floor, it terminates in a clutch of aluminum pipes that release a sustained vibrato when the sculpture is mechanically inflated and deflated. By 1970 Jacobs had reconfigured these same elements into a series of “sound columns” that stack multiple inner tubes into bulbous vertical shafts (Plate 4). The rubber columns are suspended from the ceiling, where hidden vacuum cleaner motors pump air downwards, ultimately sending the currents through long aluminum pipes that stretch across the floor. Each of the sculptures hums in a unique pitch determined by the length and circumference of its pipes.¹⁵

From their earliest installation in 1970, Jacobs has consistently presented multiple sound columns in a given space, ensuring interference among their different pitches or frequencies, and creating an almost palpable acoustic phenomenon known as beating. As visitors move through these sonic environments, gaining proximity to some columns over others, the pitches may coalesce into harmonious chords or trouble the ears in more dissonant combinations. Thus, while remaining compelling as sculptural forms, the columnar “Wah-Wahs” transcend their status as sources of sound and ultimately facilitate a heightened awareness of the surrounding space. As the artist explained in 1973, “Sound is an integral part of my sculpture at this time, shaping space as effectively as any visual elements.”¹⁶ Many viewers experienced this phenomenon in the early 1970s, when Jacobs accepted numerous invitations to install the “Wah-Wahs” in university art galleries across the country. His innovations were further recognized in 1973, when *Ground Floor* and several sound columns were prominently featured in the pioneering “Sound Sculpture” show at the Vancouver Art Gallery (Figure 7).¹⁷

The stacked rubber units of the sound columns bear a strong resemblance to the carved rhomboids of Constantin Brancusi’s *Endless Column* of 1918, especially when three variants of the original oak sculpture were installed at New York’s Brummer Gallery in 1933, where they stretched from floor to ceiling.¹⁸ Brancusi’s influence can also be felt in *Breather* (1967), an early “Wah-Wah” that sandwiches inflatable inner tubes between two metal barrels, essentially restaging *The Kiss* (1908) with industrial materials.¹⁹ In the mid-1970s, after Jacobs had scaled back his itinerant exhibitions of the sound sculptures, Brancusi remained a touchstone for several columnar works that were sited outdoors. In the bronze *Cloud Column* (1974), for example, a repeating curved unit ascends to a height of 8 feet (Figure 8). A pair of *Box Columns* followed in 1975, both of which stack several stainless steel blocks at slightly irregular angles, so they appear to verge on collapse.



Figure 7. Sound sculpture, Vancouver Art Gallery, 1973

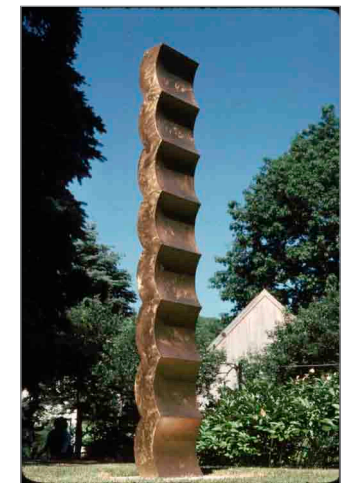


Figure 8. *Cloud Column*, 1974

¹² Both performances were titled “Wah Chang Box Works Assyrian Air Fair.”

¹³ Peter Schjeldahl, “When It’s All in the Bag,” *The New York Times* (July 13, 1969), 27.

¹⁴ Describing his visit to the “Wah-Wah” performance at Allan D’Arcangelo’s studio, Richard Kostelanetz seemed to anticipate this evolution: “With coherence both visual and aural, I liked what I saw, however thinking that these machines would be more effective in an environmental situation, with the sculptures surrounding the spectators, instead of sitting before us.” Kostelanetz, *On Innovative Performance(s): Three Decades of Recollections on Alternative Theater* (London: McFarland & Company, 1994), 57.

¹⁵ The mechanics of the sound columns were informed by Jacobs’ study of pipe organs and other musical instruments during a sabbatical leave from Hofstra University in fall 1970. See John Grayson, ed., *Sound Sculpture* (Vancouver: Aesthetic Research Centre, 1975), 65.

¹⁶ This quote derives from a longer artist statement published in Grayson, 35.

¹⁷ Other notable artists in “Sound Sculpture” were Bernard and Francois Baschet, Harry Bertoia, and Stephan von Huene. While Grayson’s catalog provides an expansive discussion of the medium, sound sculpture has elsewhere been defined as “a sculpture or construction that creates sound, not always of a musical nature, by means of its own internal mechanism, or when it is activated by environmental elements, or when it is manipulated.” Hugh Davies, “Sound Sculpture,” in *The New Grove Dictionary of Musical Instruments*, ed. Stanley Sadie (New York: Macmillan Press, 1984), 429. Alan Licht has proposed that “sound sculpture is not an instrument, but sculpture that is made with an inherent sound-producing facility in mind or a machine made for the same purpose.” Licht, *Sound Art: Beyond Music, Between Categories* (New York: Rizzoli, 2007), 199. Jacobs’ work is discussed in both texts.

¹⁸ A photograph of this installation is reproduced in Friedrich Teja Bach, *Brancusi* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1995), 224.

¹⁹ Jacobs acknowledged this precedent in one of his notebooks, where a preliminary sketch for the yet-to-be-named *Breather* is annotated with “Homage à Brancusi.” See Grayson, 41. Less explicitly, nearly all the early “Wah-Wahs” blur distinctions between supporting pedestals and surmounting sculptures, thus betraying another debt to Brancusi.



Figure 9. *Skater Gate*, 1979

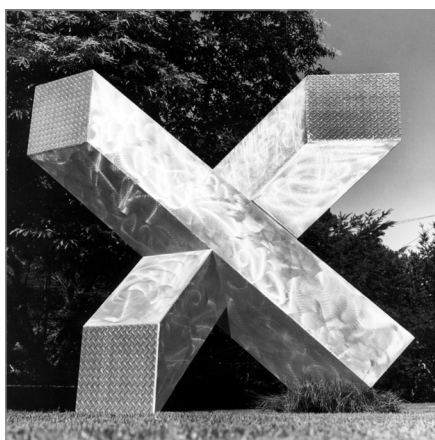


Figure 10. *Oxnard Gambler*, 1980

While invoking Brancusi, these recurrent columns are also symptomatic of a larger shift in Jacobs' work of the 1970s, when he frequently created architectonic sculptures from bronze, steel, and aluminum. A significant impetus was the artist's decision, in 1972, to build a large, barn-like studio adjacent to his home in Sea Cliff.²⁰ A subsequent series of tabletop "Studios" were clearly informed by this project, and are poised between architectural maquettes and geometric abstractions. Conceived in 1975, these schematic structures appear to describe the walls, windows, and rafters of an atelier, while some of the linear elements suggest penetrating shafts of real and metaphorical light. Jacobs also received numerous private and public commissions during this decade that allowed him to explore architectonic forms on a larger scale. The monumental *Skater Gate* (1979), for example, reinvents the classical arch for the campus of Hofstra University (Figure 9). While two of its enormous aluminum wedges pinch a third element into a post-and-lintel structure, the beveled square tips generate contradictory moments of apparent flatness as viewers move around the sculpture.

These kinds of structural and spatial ambiguities were on display at the Hofstra University Museum in 1981, when Jacobs presented some of his recent aluminum sculptures alongside paintings by Richard Pugliese. Reviewing the show for *The New York Times*, David Shirey stated, "Mr. Jacobs's nature, it seems, is to find an aesthetic solution and then attempt to negate it. Seen at one vantage point, [his sculptures] are full of depth and density, but seen from another, they're flattened to the point where their mass and volume seem reduced to a two-dimensional composition."²¹ Shirey's observations may be applied to *Off the Wall* (1979), one of many aluminum sculptures from this period that derive from typographic symbols like X marks, check marks, or, in this case, a pound sign (Plate 5).²² Because such characters are typically printed on flat surfaces, these sculptures possess a familiar clarity when viewed from the front. But the mobile spectator encounters a number of unexpected spatial illusions that confound the legibility of these signs and test one's perceptual faculties (Figure 10).

One is lured around a sculpture like *Off the Wall* due, in part, to its shimmering surface. Following the example of his friend, David Smith, Jacobs had used a grinding wheel to abrade metal elements in his sculptures as early as 1962, but

refined this technique after 1973, when he worked in bronze, steel, and aluminum more exclusively. He developed a lexicon of strokes, swirls, and other gestural marks to create beguiling reflections that emerge or dissolve as the viewer moves around the sanded sculptures or lighting conditions fluctuate. Additionally, and often in striking counterpoint, Jacobs continued to incorporate the aluminum tread plate he had discovered in 1963. Not unlike its practical application as a skid-proof surface, the raised diamond pattern can often arrest the roving eye. The two surface treatments are expertly combined in *Star Wars V* (1980), one of several relief sculptures that stack tapered wedges of aluminum into rectangular compositions (Plate 6). Fluid stretches of painterly abrasion guide the eye along the sculpture's horizontal axes, while terminal squares of tread plate compel pauses before leading one's gaze in the opposite direction.

Though it did not occur to him in 1963, Jacobs eventually came to appreciate the striking similarities between the raised patterns of aluminum tread plate and the wedge-shaped characters of cuneiform script, which were typically inscribed on clay tablets by the ancient Assyrians. While those pictograms are indecipherable to all but a few scholars, the modern Syriac language was also cryptic to the young Jacobs, who, despite being the son of an Assyrian immigrant to the United States, never learned the language that was sometimes spoken and written in his midst, and was left to intuit its meaning through abstract sounds and marks. This aspect of Jacobs' biography may have influenced a late phase of his work, when he premised many of his sculptures on calligraphy. Typically starting with his own elegant ink drawings, Jacobs would enlarge individual brushstrokes and translate them into aluminum (Figure 11). Beginning in 1982, these units functioned as building blocks for dozens of sculptures that stake no claim to linguistic expression, but nonetheless communicate through suggestive forms and reflected light.

Jacobs welded some of these aluminum strokes into freestanding and vaguely figurative sculptures, invoking not only his own metal assemblages of the late 1950s, but also those of Julio Gonzalez, which were surveyed in depth at the Guggenheim Museum in 1983. But in works like *Bunch* (1984), *Don* (1984), and *August* (1985), where the calligraphic sources of the aluminum units are more



Figure 11. Drawing, 1986



Figure 12. *Don*, 1984

²⁰ Jacobs had maintained a studio on East 13th Street in New York between 1968 and 1971.

²¹ David Shirey, "Art: Where Largeness Is a Dominant Function," *The New York Times* (September 27, 1981).

²² Jacobs has also expressed an interest in the pictographic system of "hobo" chalk marks.

explicit, the sculptures approximate abstract paintings in the round, as the brushstrokes are liberated from any support to cut, curl, and cascade through space (Figure 12). Not unlike Roy Lichtenstein, who was also translating his iconic brushstroke paintings into freestanding sculptures during the 1980s, or Elizabeth Murray, who was pushing her shaped canvases into sculptural territory during the same decade, many of Jacobs' later works combine and contrast the aesthetic properties of painting and sculpture, as if serving as latter-day *paragones*.²³ This hybridity also characterizes numerous wall-mounted works, like *Big Dipper* (1987), where four brushstrokes have been greatly enlarged into aluminum sheets and clustered together on the wall (Plate 7). Though their darkly painted edges underscore their calligraphic origins, the once flat strokes are creased at sharp angles and thrown into literal relief.

The angular creases in *Big Dipper* also connect to form a skewed rectangle that reiterates the sculpture's central void. Similar apertures appear in many of Jacobs' later works, where calligraphic units are arranged into squares and rectangles that suggest empty picture frames. In *Dream* (1986), for example, 15 aluminum strips are linked at sharp angles to roughly describe a 5-foot square (Plate 8). While the vacant interior may offer a space for contemplation, quietude is countered by the frame's jagged contours, as well as the scribbled abrasions that distract the eye with glistening reflections. Though more abstract, Jacobs' late frame works are clearly rooted in his figurative "Cut-Outs" of the 1960s, where the definition of negative space was of paramount concern. But these crooked enclosures also relate to his extended investigation of sound sculpture, when he created tremulous sonic atmospheres to heighten awareness of otherwise empty spaces.

Shrewdly selected from decades of work, the present exhibition confirms the breadth and diversity of David Jacobs' oeuvre. Since the late 1950s his sculpture has evolved in dynamic dialogue with some of the most advanced art of the postwar era, including assemblage, pop, minimalism, kinetic art, and the intermedia experiments pursued by many other artists of his generation. But if such a varied list implies a fickle restlessness, the work itself provides ample evidence of Jacobs' sustained and generous attention to the spaces his sculptures occupy, define, and ultimately share with their audiences. By activating those spaces with carefully considered objects, outlines, sounds, signs, strokes, and frames, Jacobs has sharpened the senses of many viewers, and guided them to an affirmative understanding of their place in the world.

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²³ This Italian term, which literally translates to "comparison," dates back to the Renaissance, when the relative merits of different art mediums were fiercely debated.



Ursula
 1959
 Assemblage
 19 x 19 x 17 in.
 Plate 1

G Man
1962
Painted Masonite
60 x 48 x 3 in.
Plate 2



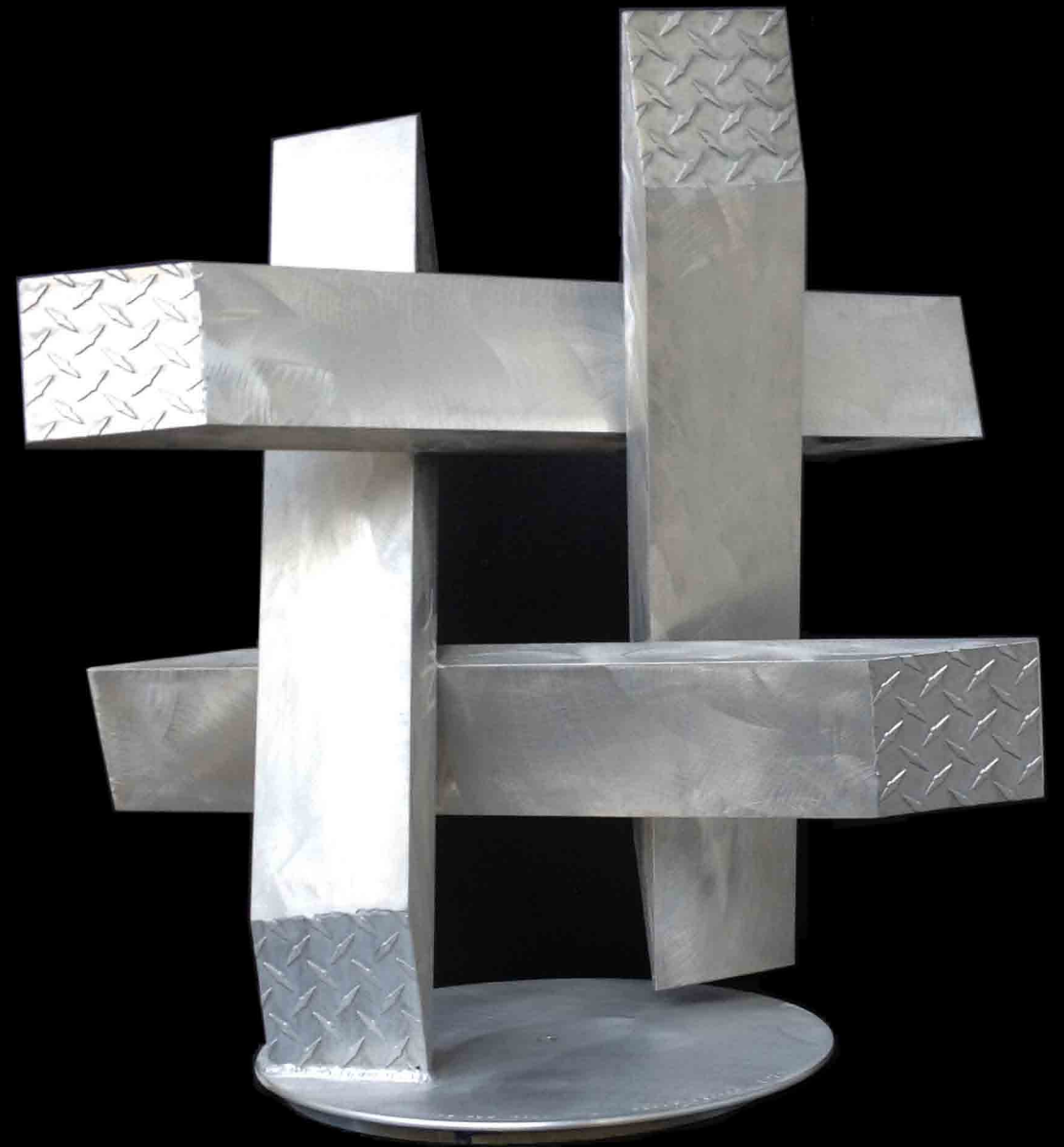


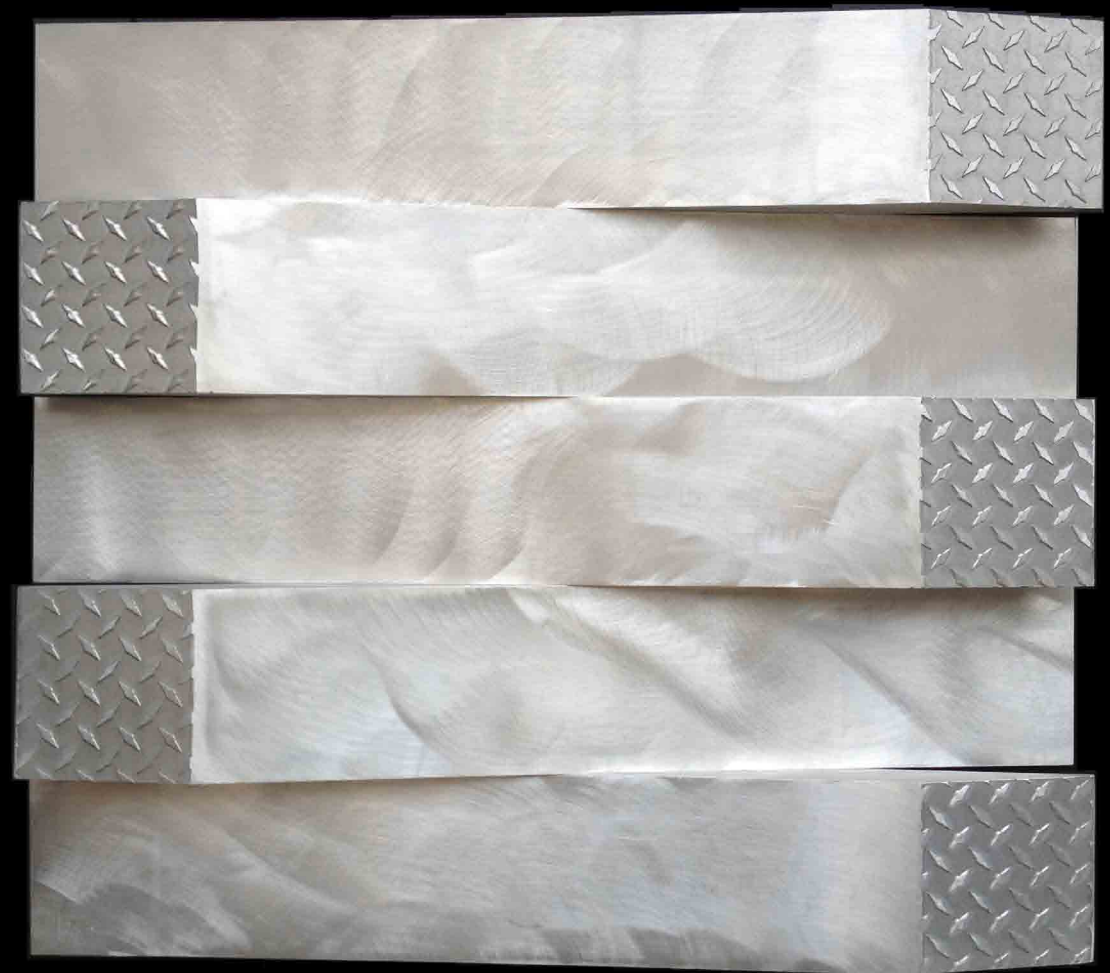
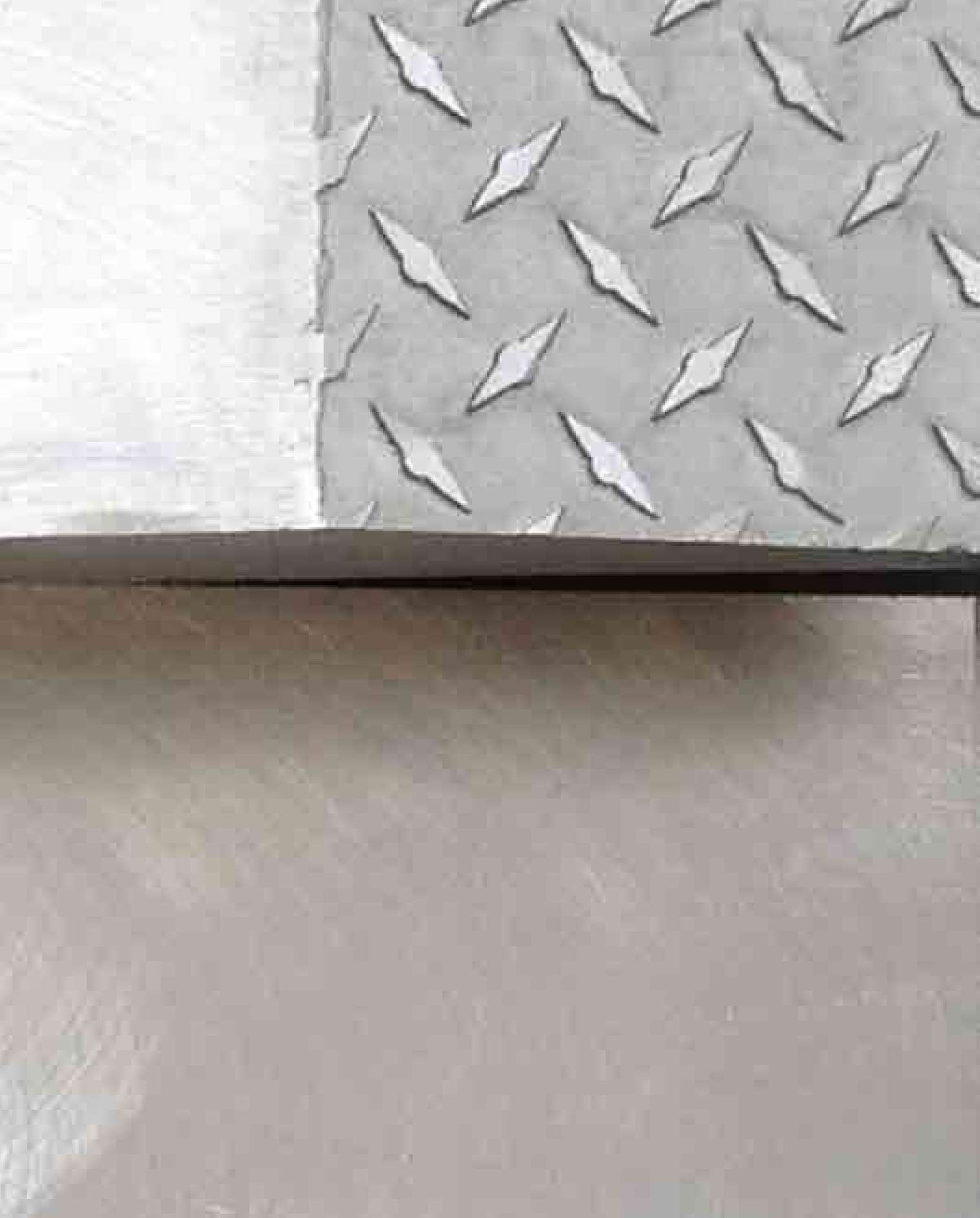
Head Columns I and II
1964
Aluminum
21 x 23 x 7.5 in.
Plate 3



Sound Column Environment
1970-73
Aluminum and rubber
Dimensions variable
Plate 4

Off the Wall
1979
Aluminum
31 x 31 x 12 in.
Plate 5





Star Wars V
1980
Aluminum
30 x 30 x 4 in.
Plate 6

Big Dipper
1987
Painted aluminum
50 x 85 x 5 in.
Plate 7



Dream
1986
Aluminum
64 x 64 x 10 in.
Plate 8



Exhibition Checklist

All works are courtesy of the artist. Further information about the artist and his work is available on his website: www.davidjacobssculpture.com

<i>Ursula</i> 1959 Assemblage 19 x 19 x 17 in.	<i>Off the Wall</i> 1979 Aluminum 31 x 31 x 12 in.
<i>G Man</i> 1962 Painted Masonite 60 x 48 x 3 in.	<i>Star Wars V</i> 1980 Aluminum 30 x 30 x 4 in.
<i>Head Columns I and II</i> 1964 Aluminum 21 x 23 x 7.5 in.	<i>Big Dipper</i> 1987 Painted aluminum 50 x 85 x 5 in.
<i>Sound Column Environment</i> 1970-73 Aluminum and rubber Dimensions variable	<i>Dream</i> 1986 Aluminum 64 x 64 x 10 in.

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