

# NEIL GALL AND DAVID GATES: BACKYARD SCULPTURE

The title 'BACKYARD SCULPTURE' was a reference to a handprinted 'backyard wrestling' sign I saw from the window of a train passing through Long Island, New York.

**Neil Gall:** So here we are, a couple of 'non-sculptors', talking about sculpture again (even though we have, and continue to do, that very thing – make sculptures, objects – in a very old school way, casting things and presenting them as art). However, I think it's fair to say that it was as a couple of sculpture 'novices' (I'm thought of as primarily a painter, whilst you are the much more contemporary sounding 'artist'!) that we embarked on our joint curatorial effort *Backyard Sculpture* (2019). Early on, you brought in the literary idea of us being like Bouvard and Pécuchet in the eponymous Flaubert novel, do you remember? And with that in mind, and me coming out of an intense period of collage-making with works featuring sculpture from front covers of *The Studio* magazine – collages that were shown at the Henry Moore Institute – we went together to see the show of Moore's *Helmet Heads* at the Wallace Collection. That's how I remember things...

**David Gates:** Actually, I think just before that, we had met briefly at a private view somewhere and had talked about Henry Moore in his garden in Kent pouring small lead casts. Bouvard and Pécuchet seemed relevant because they appear to operate in a space between knowing and not knowing, and that seemed somehow to get closer to what I felt *Backyard Sculpture* might be about. *Experts of Nothing* would have been a great subtitle for the show. Flaubert's

book is really about poking fun at the idea of being an expert, by taking a couple of characters who think they can learn everything from books, only to have them fall short each time at their chosen subject, be that archaeology, horticulture...

**NG:** I'd kind of become obsessed by Moore, for no real reason other than my involvement with the Henry Moore Institute, and that there was a wealth of material that you could get stuck into – huge amounts of written material as well as his vast oeuvre, not only of sculptural work but also a massive amount of graphic stuff – and I just loved his drawings: his sculptural imaginings. I'd read, in a biography, about him casting those early lead works in the mid-to-late-1930s, in the garden of his Kentish cottage, *Burcroft*, assisted by Bernard Meadows (amusingly described as the "boy" in a letter to friends at the time), using a saucepan on a Primus stove to liquefy the raw metal before pouring into a mould.

**DG:** A few years back, around 2016, I started using molten aluminium to cast pipes, using a DIY forge in my garden. Sand casting an old pipe, again and again, my rough skill and setup made it impossible to make the same thing twice. I didn't really have a motive but I was willing to follow the process somewhere.

**NG:** I remember your exhibition *Found & Forged* at domobaal. That was a great title, perfectly encapsulating where you were at, at the time. You were characterised as an art collage/scavenger who did 'casting'. One part of the show consisted of a row of shelved, sculpturally-evolving pipes set against a bright, free-standing, wall painting by Lothar Götz, leftover (on your instructions) from the previous show. Effectively, you arrived at the gallery with a bunch of small, very humble objects which you turned into quite a big 'showy' installation. Can you say a little about the contrast between the *making* and the *showing*?

Opposite:  
Anthony Caro with *Woman in Pregnancy*  
in the garden of his home in Hampstead  
1955  
Plaster  
(since destroyed)



**DG:** Well it was a collage of a show. I knew the length of the shelf I had to fill before I started making the pipes (the length of Lothar's wall work), so I set about making multiple casts. I was intrigued by the overlooked, or surplus, bits of the process – the two legs leftover from the casting – so I changed their position each time and that eventually transformed the object from a pipe into a seashell. It was about avoiding boredom, avoiding narrative, exploring the possibility of the material.

For the *Blow Your Sculpture* exhibition, geography was key. You had been travelling daily from the outskirts of London to your Soho studio: this was a central theme. Then there was your scavenging of *The Studio* magazine, mirrored with your physical cuts through Hampstead: your time travelling; your use of fragments of established ideas. A film about Peter Laszlo Peri became important – the planned clearance of his studio, almost rural but in Camden – he seemed somehow out of place there, like Peri on an island, or a peninsula. And then John Berger's essay on him – and so on – it became a trail. Our paths seemed to cross – Upstate New York and rural Essex via North London: away from, but always in relation to the Metropolis.

**NG:** Yes, geography and location, location, location. I suppose when I moved up to East Finchley in 2011 (next tube stop from Highgate), I felt I'd almost retired after the hullabaloo of living in Shoreditch. So I searched for anything literary that would justify my new suburban life. First up was the psychogeographical novel by Nick Papadimitriou, *Scarp*, which kind of 'animated' the seemingly-dull part of North London where I now lived. But it was reading the John Berger essay on Peter Laszlo Peri, in which he describes his spying of odd sculptures in the front of a Hampstead garden sometime in the late-1940s, that started to make me believe that art could flourish up here in

the outer reaches! By this point, I'd given up my Soho studio and had evolved into a one-hundred-percent suburban artist working from a small back garden studio at home.

I went to visit Laszlo Peri's grandson, the artist Peter Peri, who handles the estate, and we selected a portrait head, *Woman with Red Hair* from 1939, a sculpture created in what is seen as Peri's signature material of polychrome concrete – a hard unforgiving substance which Laszlo somehow mastered. I just found the whole Laszlo Peri story very moving. You can watch the movie on the demolition of the studios on the British Film Institute website for free. This old man who, although he had been at the centre of the avant-garde whilst working in a Constructivist style in 1920s Berlin, exhibiting at *Galerie Der Sturm* with Moholy-Nagy, etc., was by then, in 1960s Britain, a neglected (though not completely forgotten) figure, stubbornly creating figurative sculpture in an unfashionable social realist manner with very little encouragement. The movie has this evocative, very eerie abstract music soundtrack, and tells the story, narrated by Peri in his heavily accented Eastern European burr, of this oddball bunch of artists who were completely out of kilter with the pace of the oncoming decade of London's swinging sixties: Pop and the world of the Kasmin Gallery, Hockney, Blake, et al. Peri seemed not to care. He makes his tiny little sculptures – scores of them – for who? I don't know. He did not seem to exhibit much by this stage, but he has such confidence, authority, and belief, it's hard not to admire him. Berger also partly based his novel *A Painter of Our Time* on Laszlo Peri, and it is well worth a read.

Didn't we have the title for our show even before we had an idea for a show?

**DG:** The title *Backyard Sculpture* was a reference to a hand-printed 'Backyard

Opposite:  
Neil Gall  
**Fold-and-Cut**  
2019  
Acrylic on cast Jesmonite  
Top part 16 x 15 x 15 cm  
Bottom part 15 x 14 x 15 cm

Courtesy of the artist and Aurel Scheibler, Berlin  
Photo by Andy Keate

Wrestling' sign I saw from the window of a train passing through Long Island, New York. I found that the sign opened up a lot of parallels: parallels with groups operating outside of conventions; with different sets of rules; with weird unbalanced mixtures of fantasy and reality. The journey from rural to urban and back again – the transition, that shift – seemed to be part of it all somehow.

**NG:** Okay, so that was when you were working on the Ray Johnson archive right? Is Johnson an artistic hero? Or is he more of a model of how you might live and work as an artist?

**DG:** Both. I was stuck on mail art. I loved its freedom, its levelling of values, and I was just absorbing all that New York stuff, so far removed from English twittery.

**NG:** However, I think of you as a totally 'rooted' kind of artist, interested in place as a kind of creative driver and you are also quite English! You live in Manningtree, rural Essex, at the edge of Constable country, which of course conjures up all sorts of stuff. From where you live now, it is just a hop and a skip to Thorpe-le-Soken right? It's where Eduardo Paolozzi and Nigel Henderson lived for a bit. (A bit of Essex that popped up for me during my *Studio* project research.) They were collaborating on their *Hammer Prints* commercial venture as well as various sculptural endeavours, whilst continuing to teach in the textile department, though surprisingly not the sculpture school, but at Saint Martin's.

**DG:** Well, I grew up in Thorpe-le-Soken, and the Henderson family still live there. Paolozzi's process was important – found objects pressed into clay and accumulated over days – a material scrapbook. Then, a layer of soft wax was poured on, manipulated into something else, and cast in metal. This says a lot about me: I could relate to it as an untrained sculptor who was enjoying 'process as meaning'. My understanding of the Essex landscape

was defined by returning to it. Escaping to art school only to then find that the place I'd left had a rich artistic history. Previously, you had sculptures produced of your constructions. You sent your constructions to model makers and then to bronze foundries for fabrication.

Originally, those constructions had been the source for drawings and paintings, and I remember being captivated by a ping pong ball thing you'd made at domo's years before I met you. More recently, you've started to take control of the means of production, why is that?

**NG:** I started doing my mould-making and casting myself (with resin and Jesmonite) a few years ago, out in the back garden, because it is too messy to have that sort of thing going on inside. Partly it was financial; sculptors have to sell reasonably well to have galleries put up cash for foundries, etc., and I don't sell many sculptures. Secondly, I think I just liked the romance of it – the DIY-ness. Were I now 'retired', perhaps I could just potter around and dabble with object making. No one cares anyway! I hired a proper sculptor for a few days to show me the rudiments of silicone mould-making, and from there, combined with a bit of YouTube watching, I was off. My sculptures are all pretty small and hand-painted, so there is an element of the 'model' in there – model-making, you know – like a hobby. I liked the idea that I was suddenly a kind of amateur. This only works for a bit. Like many artists, I go from feeling totally out of things, and partly enjoying being a kind of outsider, to having a huge desire to be at the centre, enjoying a proper career and feeling important. But being an amateur is kind of liberating: no-pressure, etc., and you can sort of reinvent yourself.

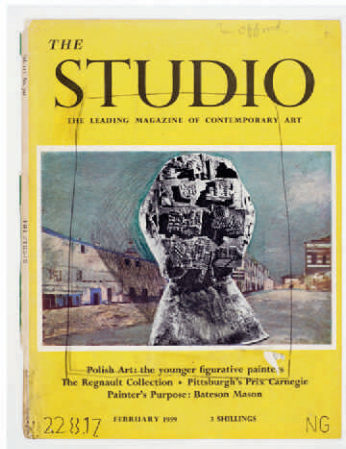
During my *Studio* collage project and my research engagement with post-war British sculpture – my ploughing through loads of material – another North London garden image popped up: that great photo of Caro standing

Opposite:  
David Gates (The Rural College of Art)  
**Found & Forged (detail)**  
2016  
Cast aluminium  
14.5 x 5.5 x 4.5 cm

**Backyard Sculpture Exhibition (detail)**  
domobaal, London, 2019

Photo by Andy Keate





Peter Laszlo Peri in his studio at 22B Camden Street  
c. 1950

© The Estate of Peter Laszlo Peri

The Rural College of Art Foundry & Forge, Essex  
2016

Courtesy David Gates

Neil Gall  
**Iron Man**  
2017  
Pencil, pen and collage  
24.3 x 18.9 cm

Collection of Leeds Art Gallery  
Photo by Andy Keate  
Courtesy of Neil Gall and Leeds Art Gallery

proudly next to *Woman in Pregnancy* in 1955, Hampstead. He was also working in his garage, and it is actually taken in the back garden. It's a total mess: bricks; tools; pots and containers for mixing stuff; tarpaulin; mud. But what's great is that Sheila Girling (herself a painter and Caro's wife), can be seen in the kitchen window doing the dishes (or maybe filling the kettle to make a cuppa for her thirsty 'man' sculptor). I suppose this image that combined an artist's practice juxtaposed with his domestic life hit a nerve and made me reflect that 'suburban' did not mean 'retired' after all. Maybe, you could make your best work by being low-key and not farming things out to others. Anyway, this is all mind games stuff to make you feel okay about working.

**DG:** How do we talk about the unmentionable? To retreat to the countryside and make some old-fashioned sculpture feels part of a movement due to the new circumstances, and instantly not 'backyard sculpture'. I guess 'backyard sculpture' is more an attitude than a location.

**NG:** The unmentionable? Do you mean the pandemic and where we are now? Yes, I suppose it would seem a bit different doing *Backyard Sculpture* now: a different kind of political statement. I think way back in 2019, it was more about putting together a bunch of sculptures that had not been

manufactured in a big warehouse in Switzerland. I'd heard a story / artist urban myth / whatever, that eighty percent of big-time 'Art' is made by fabricators.

**DG:** To bring this discussion up to date with my current interests, it seems that this was a geographical project, but that once you start to fix on a location it shifts. You can make backyard sculpture in the city, and you can make academic sculptures in the countryside, so it's more about not standing still: it's temporal and in motion; it's about side-stepping and not being fixed.

**NG:** I enjoyed visiting artists' studios with you – our journeys to bits of London I'd never been to before. I got to see that other people were working in a similar mode: studios in the garden rather than in the more conventional industrial studio block. Ian Dawson's crazy sculpture laboratory springs to mind. Other artists selected were simply friends or acquaintances; we shared lovely visits with Carol Robertson, Trevor Sutton, and Dan Knight. Some works were suggested by the artists themselves. Cathy de Monchaux proposed her precious, first-ever, delicately-formed wire figurine (a prototype for the multiple figure low-relief sculpture *Mise-en-scène* she has devoted herself to in recent years).

We had three Americans in the show: Carl D'Aliva; Mel Kendrick, and Michelle Segre. Michelle, I knew a bit, and also her partner, the painter Steve DiBenedetto. She kind of became an archetype for my Upstate-New-York-hippy-sculptor idea. It's not actually true, just a fantasy! (Apologies Michelle if this is offensive!) I fantasise that there is a special place where New York artists let it all hang loose as the city heats up during the summer. I see them heading off in a camper van to a rural retreat where they all unleash their creative energies to make strange, probably hippy-ish junk sculptures – away from the pressures of the commercial art world, and making

stuff that is, if not unsellable, then at least probably pretty difficult to sell.

**DG:** The ‘Upstate hippy thing’, indeed. The whole thing walks a fine line. I mean, it is all so unresolved; where is the boundary between what’s good and bad art? Is it a question of taste, of style, of things that I’ve tried to avoid in my work? There is a lot of backyard ‘art’ that is rubbish, or, I mean, I just don’t know exactly where judgement comes in. To celebrate people doing their own thing but then grading it? The show created questions rather than answers, and in that way, it was a total success.

I don’t know how we single out any artists for discussion, and how we avoid the others becoming conspicuous by their absence. I mean, certainly, Simon English’s work was perfect in terms of its economy and lightness of touch. Also that amazing visit to Drew Edwards’ slaughterhouse farm studio, next to Mike Ashley’s mock Greek mansion and helipad up on Totteridge Fields.

Another artist that you introduced me to, and who became important to me, was Joel Tomlin. In a literal sense, we had his work titled *Bouvard and Pécuchet* already cut out for our future show. But the whole story with Joel – the material, the cabin in the woods, and his general character – he seemed part of something that wasn’t on the lookout for something; he was already on a path and we were just following him for a moment.

**NG:** Oh yes, the great coincidence that Joel had a beautifully-carved, subtly-hued polychrome sculpture with the exact Flaubert title we’d focused on. It seemed all meant to be. I suppose Drew Edwards, as an ‘untrained artist’, could be construed as a true ‘backyard sculptor’.

Again I find his whole enterprise hugely moving: hundreds of sculptures hewn from impossible materials. I mean, who carves from flint and granite these days?! It’s mad stuff, and I suppose this moves us into the area you just mentioned, about taste or quality: the

equally very tricky and contemporary preoccupation with authenticity. Drew Edwards is nothing if not authentic right? Years of sculpture-making and this was pretty much his first showing in a gallery. I find all these questions fascinating and problematic.

But as you say, that’s what making exhibitions and art should actually be about. It was your idea to ‘shelve’ our curated selections for the *Backyard Sculpture* show – shelves, all slightly rustic and hand-cut – for each individual object. There were larger, free-standing pieces like Dan Knight’s yellow inflatable bottle organ, as well as works outside in the gallery’s garden space. Jack Lavender’s concrete cherubs with flags... Alice Wilson’s fifteen-foot Constructivist tower was there for example, but it was the great wall of stuff that dominated the gallery. It was non-hierarchical in a way that made me think of an exhibition that I only know from its catalogue: Eduardo Paolozzi’s *Lost Magic Kingdoms* at the old Museum of Mankind, in 1985. A show controversial in its display of the anthropological with the personal and sculptural... do you have any closing thoughts on how the actual spectacle of our show worked or failed?

**DG:** Well, it had to fail somehow. I could only hope it would be allowed to fail somewhere. Failure would mean that it was open to possibility, and that failure – in its many disguises – would be at least a subplot of a very open-ended structure. It was, in many ways, about stuff – the *thingness* of things: bits; bobs; orts; scraps; economy; making do; removing value judgments, and being forced to relook. I guess Paolozzi was a central figure in all this: his use of junk; his escape to the backwaters; looking for new ways to use old things.

The private view was a real treat: a warm summer evening, artists everywhere, a real sense of togetherness. It feels unimaginable now.