

Richard Baronio: Garden Events

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In their gentle and unforced evocation of the garden, Richard Baronio's suite of most recent sculpture brings us to a very particular encounter with nature -- brings us, that is, not just to the look and feel of it, but to nature as idea and process. And the garden, as metaphor, makes nature at once something domestic and nearly intimate while also opening up the possibility that nature could just as well be that which -- though we find ourselves in the midst of it -- we remain mostly unacquainted with. These sculptures thereby embody a specific achievement: they allow nature to come to an appearance untainted by our determined interventions. And the achievement is all the more remarkable because it occurs in just this historical moment when nature otherwise appears to us, and most forcibly, as environmental catastrophe.

Baronio's sculpture provides an image of nature that also serves as a rejoinder to our having fashioned the catastrophe we wittingly and unwittingly engendered as an image of, perhaps even in homage to, ourselves. And yet these sculptures do not rebuke or chastise us, they do not engage in polemics or the adversarial. They instead provide an example, illustration and image of what nature might indeed come to be like if we somehow allowed it to come to fruition without our incessant mastery over it. The gardener might thereby provide a model of how things other than us are allowed to come into existence. And Baronio sculpts as a gardener who transforms non-living materials into forms that nonetheless suggest how material life comes into existence. Perhaps Baronio is thereby an alchemist as well as a gardener.

One way to understand what these sculptures achieve is to follow the process by which Baronio brings them into existence. They are not built things. They are instead forms that are arrived at through a long, even meditative process of addition and subtraction. Baronio begins by welding, bending and shaping metal rods. As forms begin to arise and appear, Baronio cautiously withholds any inclination to push or lead the shapes in one direction or another, toward a particular image or goal. The form is to arise, as much as possible, from the material and from the unintentional guidance of Baronio's hands. This is no easy chore: to provide the minimal human addition to the process of aiding the transformation of one thing into another. The minimalist procedure of Baronio's work is best appreciated in understanding the large share that subtraction plays in his work process. Baronio's cautious adding and extension of one element to another is complemented by the stripping away and scaling back that each piece also undergoes.

The work *New Growth, Old Vine* provides an entry to Baronio's dynamic of building a sculpture through addition and subtraction. Note first how the energy of the sculpture travels simultaneously both upward and downward. The lower half, the old vine, serves not only as a base upon which the new rises but also performs the downward motion of old growth sinking itself further into the earth. The most striking aspect of the balletic pose of the new growth is its tenuousness. The vulnerability of the new vine is a manifestation of the elusiveness of Baronio's additive procedure: it is as if the fragility of new growth is recognition that to add to what is already established is always a questionable, or better: a questioning enterprise. This dynamic interplay of the forces of addition and subtraction in human making is also richly apparent in Baronio's *Ancient Post* sculpture. This piece shows too that the balance to be achieved must be sought in the judging of which additions indeed belong and which do not. Here the problem of what to add and what to subtract is translated into the relation between the vertical and the horizontal.

To return to the image of Baronio's work as a garden would mean that as the gardener Baronio spends at least as much time pruning as he does planting. Pruning is called for, according to Baronio, because by dint of the human aid appended to natural growth, things quite quickly become overgrown. The form and meaning of things, in this case sculpture, thereby become enmeshed in the overgrowth that the human share can't help but bring with it. It is as if we all too readily enhance and extend far beyond what is called for by things themselves. So it is not the human element of any artifact that needs excising, for that human element is the crucially necessary catalyst allowing for the coming into existence of something. So too is it as well the transformation of material into form. It is rather the excess that the human share can't help but carry with it that calls for subtraction. Baronio puts it well himself when he remarks that his sculpture is the product of his having let things grow, as though the very garden planted by the gardener, when nonetheless left to its own devices, exceeds what the gardener intended.

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