

EDEL ASSANTI

SOREL ETROG: THE EVOLUTION OF THE FIGURE

Sorel Etrog (1933–2014) was arguably the most prominent and influential force in Canadian abstract sculpture post-Second World War. Among other accolades, he represented Canada at the 1966 Venice Biennale, and participated as an artist in Expo 67. His works have been featured in major exhibitions and collections around the world.

Born in Romania, Etrog immigrated to Israel in 1950 and began his studies at the Tel Aviv Art Institute in 1952. Assisted by his compatriot and mentor, the Dadaist Marcel Janco, Etrog moved to New York City in 1959 to study on a scholarship at the Brooklyn Museum of Art, where he was inspired by Oceanic and African artefacts he saw in the collections there. It was in that same year that, with the encouragement and support of Toronto collector and philanthropist Samuel Zacks, he had his first Canadian solo exhibition at Gallery Moos in Toronto. A 1959 sculpture, *Haielet*, is included in this exhibition; a work from the edition is in the Beaverbrook Art Gallery collection. In 1963, Etrog left New York and moved to Toronto and later became a

Canadian citizen. He quickly became a dominant fixture in the cultural life of Canada. Just three years thereafter he was selected along with Atlantic Canada's Alex Colville and Montreal's Yves Gaucher to represent Canada at the 1966 Venice Biennale. Recognition of Etrog as the nation's preeminent creator of outdoor sculpture was secured by his colossal bronze works displayed at Expo 67, such as *Flight* (today at the Bank of Canada Plaza, Ottawa) and *Moses* (today at the University of Lethbridge). Etrog designed the statuette presented to award winners at the ceremonies of the Academy of Canadian Cinema and Television. For years it was referred to as *The Etrog*; we now refer to it as the iconic *Genie Award*.

Etrog's sculpture has covered a wide range of formal territory. However, the underpinning of his aspirations aligns with the long legacy of surrealist abstracted figuration associated with Alberto Giacometti of the 1930s and Max Ernst circa 1940s. An underlying element of this aspect of surrealist sculpture is the capacity to 'shape-shift' or transfigure. Picasso collages together a bicycle seat and handlebars to create a 'personification': *Bull* 1942. This type of visual punning, allowing forms to simultaneously be their benign prosaic selves while also being capable of being read as a secondary form. This device is a mainstay of much tribal art, as it was with Etrog throughout his career. This mechanism permitted many witty and playful formal explorations. Most certainly Etrog's sculpture of the early 1970s embraces this approach. He created these 'personages' such as *Mannequin* and *Baluba* by tinkering with common hardware store nuts, bolts, screws and wing nuts, building mock heroes from mundane, everyday materials. I suppose too he was having fun with verbal punning, particularly when he impishly crafted figure groups, literally coupled, with all their attended implied sexual connotations.

Yet, at its heart, the surrealist preoccupation with transformation reveals deep-seated concerns about the darker side of humanity. The horrors remembered from the Second World War morphed into the anxieties and uncertainties of the cold war. Many artists were deeply troubled by the prospect that the human animal was intrinsically damaged, or at very best quixotic and unstable. Are we individually and collectively, Janus-like beings that could turn from benevolent to malevolent upon a pivot? It is an idea that most unhappily remains poignant. Despite our human magnificence, our endless progressive

EDEL ASSANTI

inventiveness and marvelous attainments of technology and the intellect, just below the surface perhaps resides our troubling animistic side. Etrog's figures are part human, animal, technology and abstraction.

The touchstone for this proclivity was identified by British art historian Sir Herbert Read. He gathered together a group of young British artists for exhibition at the British pavilion at the 1952 Venice Biennale. He termed the tendency *the Geometry of Fear*. It launched the careers of Kenneth Armitage, Reg Butler, Lynn Chadwick, Eduardo Paolozzi and William Turnbull. It paid homage to the seminal contributions of Henry Moore. Meanwhile, it was mindful of Graham Sutherland and the British Neo-Romantics.

Etrog conjoined with this international artistic obsession. His works too reflect a dualism. His works profess his romantic embrace of the enduring values of civilization reflected in his admiration of the art dating back to classical antiquity. Yet, the human race is capable of unspeakable atrocities; individuals are caught in the web of national ideologies. Many of the surrealists, including Etrog, made their own hand-carved chess sets fashioning their own versions of chessboard characters enacting all the roles of human conflict and literally the 'theatre of war'. His figures simultaneously pose as magisterial guardians as well as potential aggressive combatants. Thus, *Haiet* (a Hebrew word for a female soldier) is comic and tragic, satirical and majestic. His regal elongated figures implore us to remain skeptical yet cautiously optimistic that our better angels will prevail. They are fitting companions to the finest existentialist Giacometti sculptures of the 1950s.

Throughout his career, his work professed an abiding commitment to creating abstracted figurative art to elevate the spirit, an appeal to our basic humanity and honour the dignity of the achievements of civilization. His bronzes of the 1950s bear the empathetic scars of pitted textural surfaces and all the gravitas mustered by the time-honoured material itself, sensitively applied patina within the grand historic tradition. In the 1970s he turned his attention away from an appeal to the ancients. He fashioned works specifically to interface sympathetically with the architecture of our modern urban spaces. Laced with impish, devilish humour he created figurative images in symbiotic material harmony with their polychrome surroundings. Levity can sometimes be a more effective path to profundity.

During his illustrious career, his work was exhibited at and added to the collections of some of the world's most prestigious art museums such as the National Gallery of Canada, Art Gallery of Ontario, Museum of Modern Art, Guggenheim Museum, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Centre Pompidou and the Smithsonian. He received several important commissions, including a monumental-scale work for Olympic Park in Seoul Korea. "5 decades", a retrospective exhibition was organized at the AGO in 2013. This year an extraordinary tribute to his work was unveiled by the creation of the Hennick Family Wellness Gallery at Mt. Sinai Hospital, Toronto.

Jeffrey Spalding C.M., R.C.A.
Senior Curator
Beaverbrook Art Gallery