

B R A D R U D E

Original Nature

Holter Museum of Art, Helena, Montana

March 6–April 15, 1998

Yellowstone Art Museum, Billings, Montana

June 15–July 31, 1998

Gail Severn Gallery, Ketchum, Idaho

August 7–September 3, 1998

Sheehan Gallery, Whitman College, Walla Walla, Washington

October 2–November 1, 1998

Missoula Museum of Art, Missoula, Montana

January 9–February 27, 1999

Boise Art Museum, Boise, Idaho

May 22–August 15, 1999

IN OUR TIME such natural occasions as the cadence of river noise, the intricacy of the weather, the arcane gathering together of birds' nests—so much of the elegant complexity of the world's signs and lore—are more and more hidden from us, quilted under our frantic hurrying and layers of machine noise. With his respect for all these natural forces, Brad Rude's art transports us into

their sensuous, sentient world. The feeling of movement that fascinates him, the flow of time and

Original Nature

evolution in all its meandering currents, is a record of the natural world's inherent harmony, a harmony that our culture no longer understands. His art, for all its complexity, is approachable and inviting, like the world around us. Each of his works contains stories constructed out of an idiosyncratic, personal alphabet of forms that are chosen for their intrinsic weight as well as for their universal familiarity. And if the stories he constructs are really very old tales, they are nonetheless intensely contemporary—that is their gift to us.

For instance: In *Scientific Tradition* (see p. 17) a large ram inhabits virtually the entire picture plane. This is not the stuff, though, of a PBS-led leisurely stroll through any Edenic "nature," as the ram stands oddly, provocatively, on a four-wheeled metal or perhaps wooden cart. His two muscular front legs are transparent: in the left we see through the hide to the actual skeletal structure of bone and joint beneath, while in the right, mimetic of the bone, a bamboo stick is the support. Floating in a space that seems both inside the animal and yet somehow also free in the air that surrounds it, there is a simple vessel, an elegant, triangular-shaped bowl, positioned near the ram's heart. The vessel floats above shimmering lines of deep, bright blue pigment—water, yes, but not a pool or a pond, more like an ele-

mental water-to-be. And like water, flowing away from the ram is a road, as if the ram has just come down to us, or might well turn and disappear up that ramp-like pathway.

Rude sifts through a personal catalogue of these and many other visual elements—selected from the near-infinite resources available to us all—looking for images saturated with symbols, metaphors, talismans, totems, analogies, and contradictions, combining the utterly fantastic with the commonplace, the close and the distant, the inside and the outside, the past and the present, and by arranging these elements creates narratives giving substance to history, and form to the invisible. What we see, not just in *Scientific Tradition* but in all his paintings and sculpture, is an intricate harmony that intuitively seeks to understand both relationship and transformation. By exploring transformation, which is ineffable, his work digs at the margins of those passages of day to night, stone to soil, stillness to motion, life to death, perception to image. His paintings and sculpture combine the everyday and the extraordinary, science and poetry, narrative and discourse—not reproducing reality, but suggesting action and transformation, the dynamic pulsing and stirring that underlies all life.

Long ago when the mountains were people, many Northwest Indian stories begin. When we read or hear the oldest stories, we understand that for their original audience they offered an unwritten natural science, history, and geography, as well as philosophical and ethical wisdom. Once upon a time stories taught one how to behave, how to see. And how to know. Though Brad Rude's art is not based on or in any way illustrative of Indian myths, his work shares a remarkable affinity with the art of the storyteller, with the sensibilities, rhythms, and compositional strategies of the oral tradition. A story is another way to begin exploring this work. So, a tale . . .



Time and Again 1998. Cast bronze with enamel paint and patina, edition of 6, 36 x 55 x 23 in.

place. The next instant, there might have been a flock of a hundred birds swooping down, or a thick smoke filling the air. Every moment frozen, though, is a story in itself."



Untitled 1987. Oil on canvas, 72 x 96 in.

Exploring the concept of a complete *record of a place* is how he came to storytelling—though he of course doesn't call it that. His paintings and sculpture, like the old stories, are an intricate series of connections, of relationships. His art seeks a continuity between perception, which is experience, and possibility, which is the imagination. But to literally put *everything* in—to visually document all the things that had passed through or occupied any momentary imaginable space — results in an impenetrable density of overlapping images, a indecipherable blackness. To tell the complete story of any given moment is impossible. So his strategy has evolved into a sifting and sorting through possibilities, making a selection of images

chosen to suggest varieties of narratives of what may have happened, or what may happen yet. His work is a weaving together of selections, potential connections, a complex web of relationships made across time and space. These are maps he's made for us, maps constructed of personal experience, history, science, evocations of the future, a spiritual journey based



Untitled 1983.
Oil on paper, 22 x 30 in.

upon watching the world as it unfurls across the broad valley he lives above, watching animals and weather move up and down the draw that curves around the back edge of his house. And watching, as well, his family and friends, both the intimate and the larger worlds we all inhabit, carefully practicing the old, social animal behavior we live out in our day-to-day lives. These works are records of moments, yes, the observable and the hidden intricacies of the world, but moments layered and piled one atop another, laminated as time, as experience.

We are all makers of images and stories, and share a kinship with those two sisters in the Puyallup tale, forever wondering what it is that is above and below us, and how we are linked to those worlds we do not know. And just as the sisters longed for home once they realized what it was they had missed, today we long—whether we know it or not—for our "home," that is, a vivid connection to the natural world, to the mystery of the animals and plants that surrounds



The Talk 1991. Bronze, 9 x 15 x 10 in.

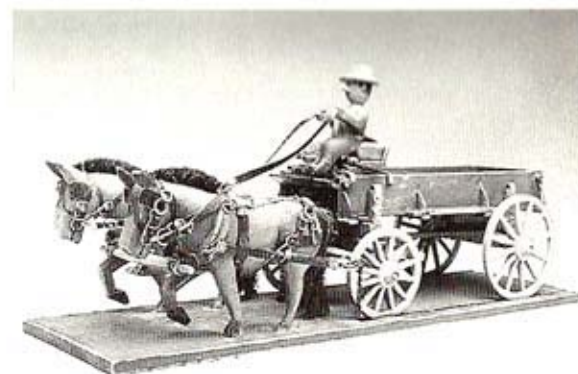
us, to the essential rhythms of season and estrus, tide and flood, planting and harvest. Life and death. Brad Rude senses, deeply, that we seem to know little anymore of the animals' voices, of the intricate and extraordinary rhythms of the natural world, and of our relationship to those voices and rhythms. "I'm in love with the idea of things

coming together," he says. These works address the very real and increasingly deep rift between the natural world and human culture and behavior. These sandblasted and layered paintings, and the cast-bronze sculptural constructions, comprise a visually rich stew of narrative, of imagining, and of faith. Faith, that is, that we may relearn through art and experience how we are a part of, and how we may be connected again, to the worlds of animals and plants and stones and water. It's like the story: married to a star, longing for home, and swinging from that woven bark ladder connecting the known with the unknown. *We are always in both worlds, because there aren't really two*, Gary Snyder reminds us.

I've Always Hated New Shoes

When he was ten or eleven, Brad remembers going on a school trip to someone's home museum in Great Falls or Conrad, Montana. As they were leaving, and for no reason that he can now recall, the host handed him a wooden-tipped arrow, a shaft as tall as he was then. That began his collecting, which continues to this day. In his Walla Walla, Washington, studio there are shelves of artifacts: two small Anasazi pots, shards, bones and skulls, bird nests, rusted parts of old tools, even his daughter's toys that he's taken up temporarily to study. Earlier, after that Montana school field trip, he had gone home and set up shelves in his bedroom to hold the odds and ends that drew his attention: rusted tools, miniature flags, wooden cheese boxes, arrowheads, bottles, coins—almost anything, he remembers, as long as it was *old*. Soon he advanced to a lighted display cabinet. He turned his bedroom into a formal museum. While still quite young, he also helped his maternal grand-

father, Dave Ratzlaff, a Great Northern Railroad mechanic, and a folk artist then living in Great Falls, Montana. He spent hours in his grandfather's workshop carving parts for small horse-drawn



David Ratzlaff, **Wagon and Driver** ca. early 1970s. Carved wood, leather, and tin, 8 x 19 x 6 in.

wooden wagons, helping him build windmills out of cast-off metal parts and wheels, and putting together, under his grandfather's directions, willow-stick log cabins with doors and windows and gates that opened. Later, he left the collecting and building behind for a time, taking up sports and bikes. But even then, he set up in his basement a complete bike shop with all the tools and parts organized on pegboards and shelves so that he could put a bike together as easily as taking it apart.

Beginning in middle school and continuing through high school, he was the school photographer and spent countless hours in the darkroom. Toward the end of high school he began working in clay and set up a full pottery studio at home. Intimate, contained space, a space that can be controlled, a world set apart for working and dreaming, has always been necessary for him. So serious collecting, studio pottery, photography, and an abiding curiosity with mechanical intricacy are at the beginnings of the art he makes today.

Meanwhile, another, more significant change was taking place. Rude was raised a Christian, but he began to question its philosophy, what he felt were contradictions. "I felt limited by how I was looking at the world," he says,

"limited by trying to wholeheartedly participate in a religion that is essentially focused on only humans. I also didn't want to define or make the ideas surrounding the spirit/energy world into absolutes. I wanted to enjoy the immense splendor of its natural mysteriousness." His earlier Christianity has become an unabashed spirituality, a totemic, pantheistic inquiry into our relationship with other animals, plants, the mineral world, and the unknown.

Today, Rude's art incorporates the bones of things. The pictures and sculpture are an amalgam of layered essences—the animals, fossils, stones, the near-constant presence of moving water, sky, simple machines, beautiful vessel forms, bridges, arches, and the idiosyncratic open space that contains all these parts. His work makes its own soil and weather, creates its own time at the intersection of the momentary and the eternal.

And Animals Dream

The natural world is infinite and saturated with relationship and potential. Nature in all its complexities is the ground upon which these visual stories are constructed. And we are always made a part of the story, welcomed into the narrative by an evocative, haunting *presence* of the human, though not, curiously, through any rendering of the human figure itself.

Animals, either singly or in groups, are the first and strongest presence in this work. "Using images of various animals," he says, "I can touch on human emotions and interests. Because all animate life is basically the same: it's born, breathes, sleeps, wakes up, eats, shits, has sex, works for food, seeks shelter, plays, rests, feels sad and angry, runs from danger, likes to be touched and feel the company of others, and eventually dies. I rarely use the human figure because there is so much tiresome conceptual bag-

gage that goes with the figure. And there is a huge, endless inventory of references and ideas in nature where I have a much broader possibility for selection, for response. There is so much more in the world than human perception, so much more out there than simply human experience." The paintings and sculpture, his response to what's *out there*, are a journey, a deepening sensual, emotional, and mystical relationship to the natural world.

Though separated by time and culture, Brad Rude's newest work somehow makes me think of Chagall. So many of Chagall's paintings, especially his earliest work, explore his relationship to Vitebsk (his beloved rural Russian village), his identity as a European Jew in horrifying times, and evoke the intersection of the human and natural worlds as a place of infinite fantasy and celebration. In Chagall's paintings, too, we often find animals, imagined landscapes, places where the close and the far are reordered, are transformed, where the sky can hold up a goat pulling a cart or a floating woman as easily as the



Marc Chagall, *I and the Village*
1911. Oil on canvas, 75 1/8 x 59 3/8 in.
The Museum of Modern Art, New York
Mrs. Simon Guggenheim Fund

moon. Chagall's paintings are perhaps the most openly narrative and unabashedly mystical of any of this century's art. *All one needs to do is to look at the world with individual eyes, as if it had just been born*, Chagall said. And with the

same generous spirit of openness, with an unselfconscious sense of wonder like that which Chagall brought to his art, Brad Rude explores identity and relationship, paradox and mystery, time and space, creating visual stories by bringing into being a universe with its own laws, forms, and poetics.

Of all that intrigues me in these pictures and sculpture—and everything does—one of the most compelling images is the repeated vessel form. With deep roots in his younger days as a studio potter, and a recollection also of human history and culture, these beautiful and haunting

vessels—simple, functional, made by someone's hands, loaded with history, deeply metaphorical—are an important talisman in this work. The vessel form was one of the first images that Rude worked with seriously, when, as a beginning artist just out of college, he made a group of ten drawings, the *Spiritual Vase Series*, and he continues working with the form today. The vessel is a prehistoric form. There was a time when a container lined with leaves or moistened moss was used to carry precious fire from one camp to the next. The early Egyptians made canopic jars, containers to protect the vital organs on the soul's journey from one world to the next. The vessel has a lip, a neck, a foot, a belly, a body, as we do. Head, torso, womb. At all times empty and full,

containing so much and so little, everything and nothing, the essence of what was once contained there is always present, vibrant, in the emptiness. A coming together of earth, water, fire, air, and the human hand, the vessel has always been a thing of the imagination, shaped in imitation of the belly and the hive, grown out of the older basket forms, and carrying, along with the foods and goods which sustain us, the essential metaphor of life and death.

Ours is the century of disappearances, said John Berger. In his art, Brad

Anasazi vessel, ca. 700 to 1200 B.C.
Ceramic, 3 x 5 x 5 in.

Rude argues against this frightening force of forgetting, of disappearing. Like the sometimes haunting presence of the vessels in the pictures, the machines, too, stand for us, for history. Note for instance that they are all *simple* machines, the ones we learned about in early science classes, the ones that have been with us thousands of years, like vessels and stories. They are also the tools—these wheels, inclined planes, screws, and levers—that underlie or are hidden within the machines we use today. And their presence in the paintings and sculpture marks time—that is, they are both wholly material, of this moment, and yet fully symbolic, representing a kind of absence, a bridge between the animal world and the world of natural forces. Our earliest machines imitate natural forces—the hinges in finger, elbow, and knee joints; the circular motion of a running



Spiritual Vase #3 1990. Pastel on paper, 22 x 30 in.



Spiritual Vase #6 1990. Pastel on paper, 44 x 30 in.



EXISTENCE 1995. Cast bronze, steel, and wood, 32 x 72 x 15 in.

From the collection of Gerard L. Cafesjian

animal's legs; a heart's pumping action; the twisted screw-shape of rabbit fur at the end of coyote shit. The ladder, like the Puyallup sisters' woven cedar bark ladder, is mimetic of tree branches. These objects, when present in the paintings and sculpture, don't merely stand for or celebrate an idealized mythic past, they remind us of a present that we have nearly forgotten exists. "History is the groundwork for everything that's taking place now," Rude says, "in this moment, in the moment I wish to paint. History affects everything that we do now—the things we are not aware of, the way we live today, all that has come before affects what we do at every moment." All these elements, the animals and plants and stones and tools, combine to infuse his work with a symbolic "otherness," spanning epochs, and continents, exploring the phenomena of existence.

In 1996 Rude constructed the bronze sculpture, *Into the Calm* (see p. 32), an eight-spoked wheel over seven feet tall, supported at its base by a cow standing atop a stump. Around the wheel, following its curve like a medieval astrological chart, are bison, deer, a lion, an elephant, a wolf, and other animals. And also a stone, a rope, a toy tractor. Without consciously knowing it, he created a *mandala*. The *mandala* (Sanskrit for "circle") appeared in India in antiquity and spread East, West, and North throughout the world, perhaps through the migration along trade routes of Buddhist belief systems. The *mandala* is the wheel of life, the eternal circle we all revolve within. A diagram of reality, a cosmogram. The Buddhist *Dharmachakra* ("Wheel of Truth") usually has eight spokes, representing the Noble Eightfold Path, and is named for the Buddha's first sermon, *The Sermon That Turned the Wheel of Truth*. *Into the Calm* is even more reminiscent of one particular *mandala*, the moon stone, a characteristic ornament affixed to Buddhist

sites throughout Sri Lanka. The moon stone is a semicircular stone carving which sits like a doormat at the base of the stairs leading up to a stupa, monastery, or other shrine. Consisting of concentric circles on which are portrayed stylized representations of the cosmos becoming ever more refined as one proceeds inward, the moon stone usually contains at its center the lotus, symbol of purity. The outer ring of the moon stone, representing earthly materiality, is typically adorned with animals symbolic of the four directions—bull, elephant, lion, and horse.



Moonstone and steps, Anuradhapura, Sri Lanka.

One enters the temple by carefully stepping on each of the moon stone's successive circles, meditatively crossing beyond the material world toward the lotus, purifying the mind to enter the temple.

Prior to creating *Into the Calm*, Brad Rude knew a bit about *mandalas*, but not their history or any specific attributes. "Using eight spokes seemed the strongest way to construct a lightweight wheel," he said, matter-of-factly. As a concrete form of transport, represented in the pulleys, in the form of the vessels, symbolically seen in the movement of life forms—swirling water and constellations, the bodies and mouths of jars, the paintings' and sculptures' often circular compositional strategies—the wheel is one of Brad Rude's essential forms, a key part of speech in his visual vocabulary. *Into the Calm* visually taps the wheel's rich history, and its intuitive depth is astonishing. It

reminds us, simply and directly, of motion, of the potential for change, for transformation—all the transformations surrounding us in the natural world. And it reminds us of the enduring depth and presence of symbols, of images in our shared stories.

An Unsung Land Is a Dead Land

Brad Rude is not a painter of light, rather, he is a painter—with pigments and patinas—of the intense, subterranean glow of stone and earth, bone and skin. It's as if he paints with raw soil, with blood, and rust. *Rust never sleeps*, Neil Young said. Rude has affection for the earth itself, a causal, experiential, mystical sense of connectedness. "I started thinking about what we are made of, so I started investigating back to the molecular structures that *everything* is made of. Realizing that all living things, plants and animals and insects and stones, all share virtually the same molecular structures made me feel less alone." In his inquiry and discovery, the record of which is this work, there is an intuition of common ground, of the meeting place where all living things share an arena of interaction. Beyond the "animate" and "inanimate," in our own reductionist vocabulary, this work is about the shared language of all things—and this includes rock and ice and air—the many voices of living phenomena. Storytelling again.

I keep returning to language—in this art a physical, visual language—to understand and make a place for myself in this work. Why? Partially, I think, because one senses breathe and because of the synesthesia, the feeling of life pulsing in these images. Also, surely, because each of the pieces is narratively mysterious, loaded with possibilities, with potential: Where will the hawk land? Where do the stairs lead? If the deer crosses that board bridge, what's over there? What does it mean that amoebas are floating in the air? Where is the water flowing from and where will it flow to? This work makes visible for us the magician/philosopher David Abrams's telling insight that *it is the animate earth that speaks; human speech is but a part of that vaster discourse*. All these questions—and their answers as well—compose the voices of the *vaster discourse* that is, today, the essential discourse. In its exploration of an imaginative record of the past, the present, and the future, Brad Rude's work speaks for the presence of what otherwise is inarticulate for us—the animals, containers, and machines, and the intricate, mysterious structures of the landscape. In its multitude of elements, focal points, and events, we experience motion, transport, the revolution of the wheel, the rush of water, the force of evolution, history's journey. These images welcome us to feel again our *original nature* as an abiding mystery, a mystery not yet too distant for us to feel again.

Ben Mitchell

Northeast Oregon, Winter 1998



VISIONS WEST GALLERIES

www.visionswestgallery.com

108 South Main St. Livingston, MT 406-222-0337

34 West Main St. Bozeman, MT 406-522-9946

1715 Wazee St. Denver, CO 303-292-0909