

Gary Kuehn

THE ART OF OPPOSING FORCES

By Cindy Hinant

GARY KUEHN WAS BORN in New Jersey in 1939 and lives and works in New York and Wellfleet. He is an artist best known for his emphasis on materials in his approach to sculpture and painting, and his works all have a physical quality resulting from the process of their production. They aren't simply painted or sculpted; rather, they are squeezed, poured, cut, or trapped within a conceptual framework. His work reflects binaries or opposing forces and expresses a tension between forms.

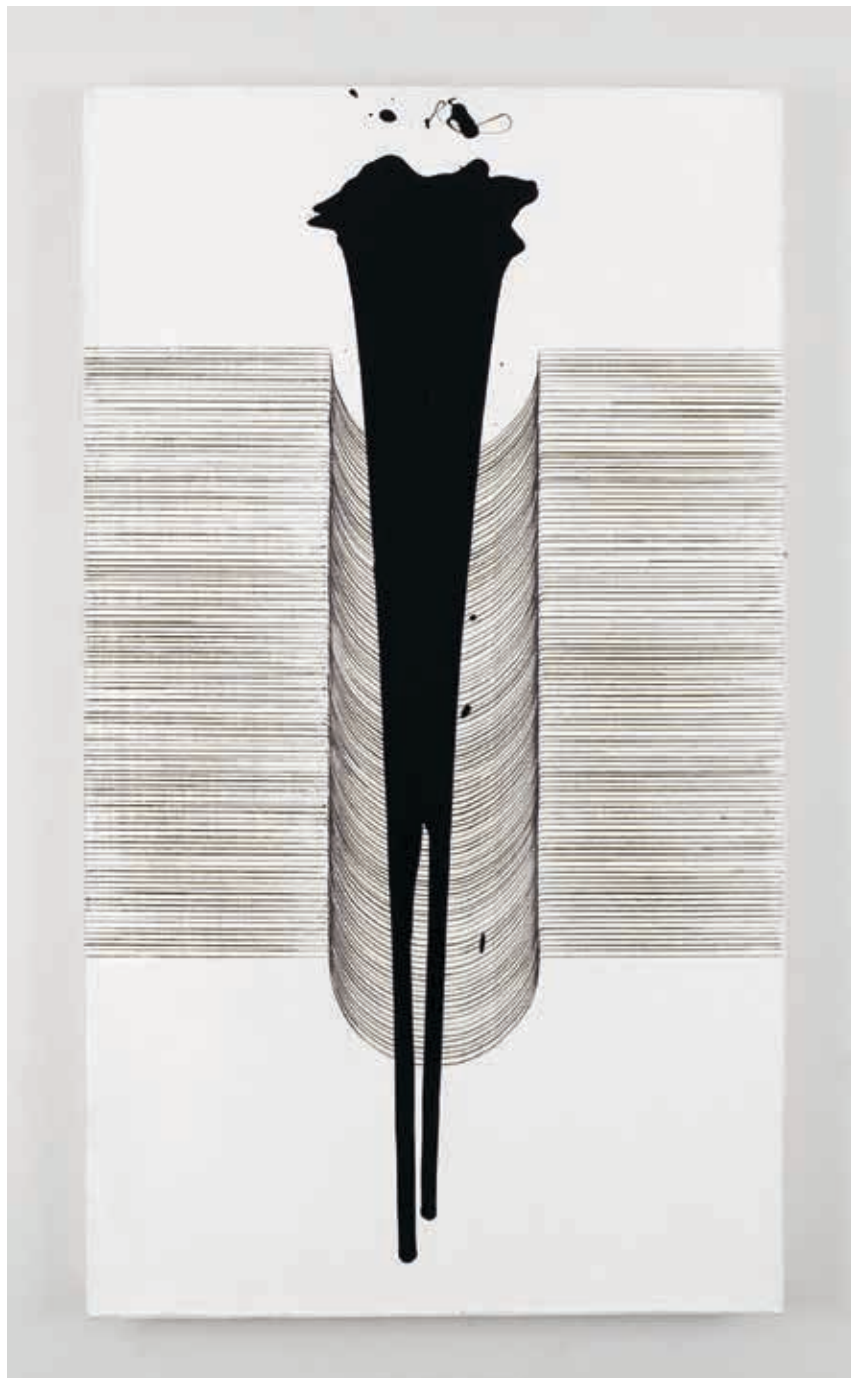


PHOTO BY CINDY HINANT, NEW YORK

Niagara, 2014, graphite and acrylic/latex on canvas, 42 by 24 inches

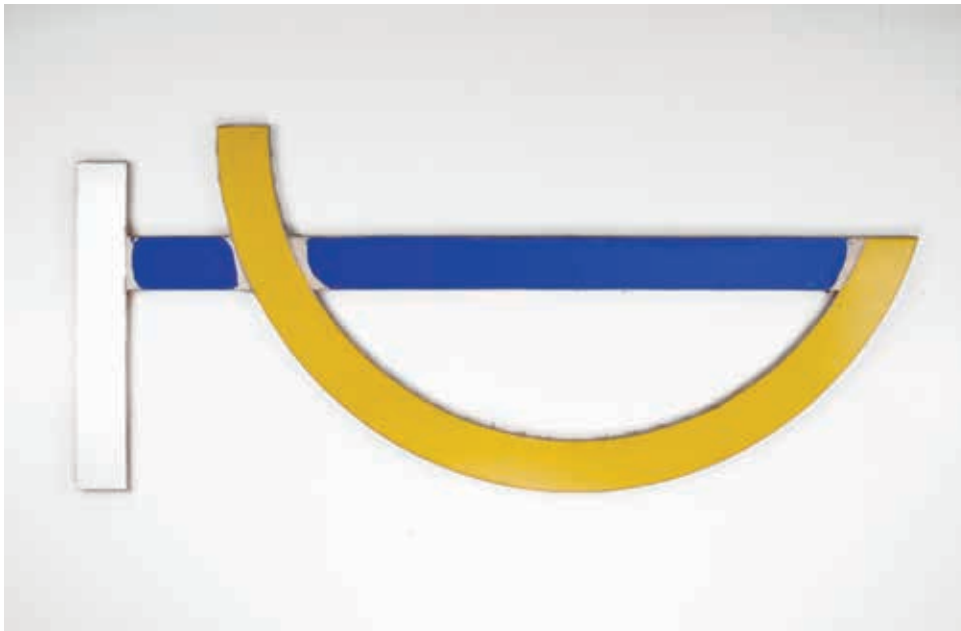
Kuehn has played a significant role in Process art and Postminimalism, having participated in the groundbreaking exhibitions *Eccentric Abstraction* in 1966, curated by Lucy Lippard, and *When Attitudes Become Form* in 1969, curated by Harald Szeemann. His work is held in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Hamburger Bahnhof, and the Museum für Moderne Kunst Frankfurt, among others.

A prolific artist, Kuehn has written very little about his own work. In 1965, when the Bianchini Gallery in New York published a catalogue for the group exhibition *Ten from Rutgers University*, Kuehn's artist statement was simply, "Gary Kuehn couldn't possibly write a statement about his work." The few statements he has published are often poetic and contradictory, much like his practice. Kuehn works intuitively, and knows that the rational mind is not always in sync with creative impulses, making it sometimes difficult to explain formal decisions. Recent events, however, have compelled Kuehn to begin processing the themes and ideas that have been present in his work since the 1960s. In 2013, the first comprehensive book of his work, *Gary Kuehn: Five Decades*, was published by Hatje Cantz, and in 2014, the Kunstmuseum Liechtenstein staged the retrospective exhibition *Gary Kuehn: Between Sex and Geometry*: both events have allowed Kuehn to reflect on the breadth and focus of his long career.

Gary and I often have leisurely conversations about his work over coffee and cigars in his Chelsea loft, where he lives with his wife, the writer Suzanne McConnell. I have worked for nearly five years as his studio manager and archivist, and our new project is to record these conversations for his archive. This is the first published interview from these talks.

CINDY HINANT: *Tell me about how you got started.*

GARY KUEHN: I studied art history in college. I took a painting class but never thought seriously about art until I met George Segal, who was really important to me as a young artist. He treated me like a serious artist, and he invited me to look at exhibitions in New York with him, which gave me a pretty good sense of what was going on in the early '60s. In graduate school, it became clear to me that Abstract Expressionism and also more formal ways of working had run their course. There was the sense that it was up to us to push the



Berlin Series, 1980, acrylic on canvas, 36 by 74 inches COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

envelope. I didn't have much faith in prevailing options in terms of a direction my work should take and rather felt that if I were going to do something of significance, I should best follow my gut instincts and explore every impulse that came to me in terms of a new way to proceed.

CH: *What was it like to be a young artist in the '60s?*

GK: It was a great time for a young artist. I remember the time as being wide open. One could do anything, work in any way. The art world as we knew it was reinventing itself. I felt no historical constraints—putting high value on the notion of doing something new, I began to make sculptures with the thought they shouldn't look like anything I'd seen before.

CH: *In those days, you were also employed as a construction worker. How did this influence your approach to materials?*

GK: In the '60s I worked as both a roofer and an iron worker on large-scale building projects. In the course of a day's work, I became interested in the commonsense fact and behaviors of materials and the rationale of how buildings are put together. The logic of construction had an expressive potential that became the focus of my thinking and suggested a way to proceed that did not rely on current aesthetic presets. I would go home after work and in my studio replicate some of the things I witnessed on construction sites. Most importantly, I came to realize the metaphorical potential of materials and procedures that were expressive in themselves without being personal or subjective. This was my way out of the subjectivity bind of Abstract Expressionism, and the way to proceed was wide open.

CH: *Could you talk about your process-based approach?*

GK: The reliance on process, as related to material, struck me as a way to do something without having to take personal responsibility for it. To depend on the process of how a material would

behave as opposed to actually making a representation was intriguing to me.

I was interested in avoiding the subjectivity of representation, or of an object or feeling or emotion, and I found that you could objectively accomplish the same thing by setting up a situation in which the materials would do it for you, and then I would be free to either accept it or reject it—but I wasn't really involved in pushing for one result or another. It is a work method that has served me well over the years.

CH: *Why did you want to set up a framework that would exclude personal representation?*

GK: I was looking for a way to give the work an aura of objectivity that was independent of subjectivity and personal taste. I was suspicious of a personal approach. If the question arose about why a work looked as it did, I wanted to be able to say that it just happened that way and as much as possible my hand wasn't in it.

CH: *I think it's interesting that you've made "the personal" into another boundary to work against. I see this in your most recent Niagara series. These works deal with seemingly free gestures that are subject to predetermined systems. Could you say something about these works and their process?*

GK: I think there is another layer of complexity or perversity in setting up a visual structure in which to play out and trap the so-called spontaneity of the pour, the splash in the material. In earlier poured pieces, they were mostly plaster and tar, so what happened happened, and there was no external force for them to work against—they just spilled out into space, and then were trapped by constructions to determine the course of their flow. So they seem predetermined and fatalistic to me.

CH: *You often work with contradictory impulses. Could you talk about your interest in binary forces?*

GK: The *Branch Pieces* that I made in 1964 were



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some of the first works to have this binary tension—that is, forcing a relationship between two elements that otherwise one does not find in close proximity. I found that there was enormous expressive possibility in bringing such objects together. These works pitted the authority of geometric forms against a volume of tree branches and seemed to be about the vulnerability of forms, the authority of geometry, and the messiness of life.

Working with binary opposites, such as solid/liquid, hard/soft, and strong/weak, inevitably creates a tension that I find interesting. I came on this intuitively in my early work and found it a fruitful line of inquiry, and later, by design, I continued to work within these parameters.

CH: *This summer you're showing part of your Berliner Serie (1979–1980) at Gaa Gallery in Wellfleet. I see this body of work as a shift in your practice; the Berliner Serie is perhaps your most formal and design-oriented work. Did this feel like a considerable change for you at the time?*

GK: Most of my sculpture up to that point had to do with compressing materials, squeezing things toward a center, a kind of density, mostly by force, constrained with wire, cable, bolts. It seemed, at some moment that I can't really account for, an impulse to work in the other direction emerged: open, expansive, time-related, and sequential. I became interested in how the pieces often read from left to right, and were drawn out as opposed to compressed and timeless. It seems to me that they have an expansiveness and openness that paved the way for my recent work. ❏

CINDY HINANT is an artist and a writer based in New York. She curated the show Gary Kuehn: Postures at Joe Sheftel Gallery in 2013 and contributed an essay to the catalogue for his 2014 retrospective exhibition at the Kunstmuseum Liechtenstein. Her work has been shown at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, the Indianapolis Museum of Contemporary Art, and the Lenbachhaus Munich.

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