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Harold Cousins: Forms of Empty Space

January 28–March 25, 2023

*One might say that art, like science, is a constant probing of the unknown—a seeking. I believe an artist should make art that he feels relevant to his day, taking into account the works of artists of the past. The empty spaces within and around a sculpture pose a challenge that has become for me almost an obsession.*¹
—Harold Cousins

*Whether forests, drawings in space, plaitons, or all the works in between, his sculpture... pulses with the imperfect, brittle dynamism of life. Cousins indeed created cathedrals that tremble, echoing across national boundaries and the passage of time, casting long shadows that speak to the miraculous, breathtaking ability of sculpture to reshape and re-envision space.*²
—Marin R. Sullivan

Michael Rosenfeld Gallery is pleased to announce *Harold Cousins: Forms of Empty Space*, the first solo exhibition of the artist's work in the United States in fifteen years. Comprising thirty metal sculptures executed between 1951 and 1975 as well as a group of related works on paper, the presentation is the gallery's first exhibition dedicated to Harold Cousins (1916–1992) since taking on representation of the artist's estate in 2020. Beginning with his first mature metal sculptures, *Harold Cousins: Forms of Empty Space* charts the formation and evolution of Cousins' major sculpture series, including his *forests*, *drawings in space*, *Gothic cathedrals*, and *plaiton* works.

The inciting event for Cousins' turn to metalworking occurred a few years after he moved from New York to Paris in 1949, where he joined a vibrant scene of fellow expatriate artists that included Ed Clarke, Beauford Delaney, Herbert Gentry, Lois Mailou Jones, and others drawn to the exceptional stylistic freedom enjoyed by the city's avant-garde. In Paris, Cousins was one of about ten students accepted to study sculpture at Ossip Zadkine's studio, where he absorbed the irascible modernist's lessons on sculpting in the round. However, it was another student at Zadkine's studio, the American sculptor Shinkichi Tajiri, who would have a formative impact on Cousins' early artistic development, when he taught Cousins how to weld with an oxyacetylene torch. Eager to learn more about metalworking, Cousins studied at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière from 1951–52; it was also around this time that Cousins discovered the work of Spanish metalsmith-turned-sculptor Julio González, an artist he came to revere as one of the greats of his era and whose work he cited as a primary source of inspiration for his initial foray into direct-metal sculpting.



Harold Cousins working in his studio in Paris, France, c. 1952; National Archives at College Park, Photographs of Marshall Plan Programs, Exhibits, and Personnel, 1948–67

It was in this environment of artistic enrichment and discovery that Cousins developed what would become one of the guiding conceits of his mature sculpture practice, namely a consideration of the negative space surrounding the sculpture as equal to that of its material components—in other words, he came to regard space as a compositional element. While his formal education and social network had provided him with the skills necessary to explore this avenue of thought, it was Cousins' deep engagement with the art of past cultures that brought about this key stylistic breakthrough. During these early years in Paris, he frequented the Musée Rodin, the Musée de l'Homme, and the Louvre, studying Rodin's *Monument to Balzac* (1892–1897) and sketching certain artifacts from ancient Egypt and 19th-century Hawaii, particularly the latter culture's human-hair-and-whale-tooth pendants known as *lei niho palaoa*. Contemplating the formal qualities that drew him to these works, Cousins explained: “[They] possessed the same basic quality: they gave one the visual impression of something existing that was not present in the forms of their material parts. I became convinced that this ‘something’ was the form of the empty space between the parts of a sculpture or around a solid.”³ The artist thus developed his own personal gestalt theory, in which the suggestion of form within or around a sculpture is tantamount to its overall structure, and that the evocative thrust of the artwork derives from the interaction between the two.



Harold Cousins (1916–1992), *Untitled (Suspendu Plaiton)*, c. 1968, steel, 35 x 78 3/4 x 22 5/8 inches / 88.9 x 200 x 57.5 cm

Harold Cousins: Forms of Empty Space features several highlights from Cousins' first decade in Europe, surveying the artist's seemingly endless experiments with the foundational formal elements of line, plane, and texture. While clearly grounded in abstraction, Cousins' sculptures from these years often reference specific subjects, including grand classical themes such as warriors and saints, botanical and animalic organisms, quotidian encounters such as musicians and dancers, and self-referential meditations on modernism, such as an homage to the neoplastic master Piet Mondrian. Describing his method for these works with a term coined by González—"drawing in space"—Cousins sought to activate the area around and within his sculpture, just as a draftsman would animate their paper through the delineation of positive and negative space. Composed with an emphasis on their linear elements, the artist executed these sculptures with a particular consideration of the interplay of light and shadow created by the works' forms and varying degrees of transparency. As art historian Robert Slifkin posits in his recent survey of postwar sculpture, "Welded sculpture's airy openness made its existence in actual space crucial to its visual appearance. The world, one could say, appeared within the work, just as its decidedly nonartistic materials and methods of assembly made it strikingly of the world."⁴

Only two years after creating his first welded-steel sculpture in 1952, Cousins was awarded a solo exhibition of recent sculpture by Galerie Raymond Creuze in Paris. A string of group and solo exhibitions followed, garnering the attention of critics on both sides of the Atlantic. Cousins' early successes propelled his practice in a new direction in the late 1950s, when he began producing a series of vertically oriented linear sculptures he referred to as "forests." The late 1950s also witnessed the advent of Cousins' famous *plaiton* series, which he would continue to expand for the rest of his career. A synthesis of the English word "plate" and the French "laiton" (brass), Cousins coined the term to describe, "the kind of sculpture that interests me, as well as my particular conception of it. The plastic expression consists of the repetitive use of metal plates of similar size and form welded together in a predetermined order. The concept involves giving special attention to the form of the empty space between the solid elements of a sculpture, as well as to the empty space surrounding the sculpture."⁵

Harold Cousins: Forms of Empty Space also includes a group of exemplary works from both the *forest* and *plaiton* series. Dating from 1958 through the mid-1960s, the plaitons on view demonstrate the wide variety of configurations, scales, and orientations in which Cousins executed these works, with some designed to be hung from the ceiling, some placed on the floor, and some mounted

on the wall. Complexly interconnected and exhibiting a rich array of patinas, these works are perhaps the most explicit manifestation of Cousins' understanding of his materials' relationship to dimensional space, and the nearly infinite possibilities contained therein.

Other works in the exhibition explore abstract concepts pertaining to the physical qualities of their materials, such as *Study in Masses and Tensions* (1964), or express a specific sense of movement in abstract terms, such as *Le Grand Pas (The Big Step)* (1964). The 1960s also witnessed the manifestation of another major influence in Cousins' work, namely the architecture of Gothic cathedrals. In many sculptures of the 1960s and 70s, Cousins transmuted the spirals, buttresses, arches, and a sense of spiritual transcendence found in the great cathedrals in Europe into a distinctly modernist expression of architectonic elevation. As 20th-century sculpture historian Marin Sullivan writes, "Cousins's Gothic *plaitons* were soaring achievements, evoking a transcendent, glowing magnificence, but for all their architectural and aesthetic monumentality there remains a kind of precarity, a sense that it could all tumble down at any moment. The *plaiton* pieces lent these sculptures visual weight and physical structure, while the thin metal rods seem to contradict such stability, a constant, beautiful reminder of the fragility conveyed through their metallic interconnectedness."⁶

Harold Cousins: Forms of Empty Space will be accompanied by a fully illustrated exhibition catalogue that includes a comprehensive chronology, new scholarship by art historian Marin R. Sullivan, and a trove of previously unpublished photos and archival ephemera.

About Michael Rosenfeld Gallery

Michael Rosenfeld Gallery is recognized for modern and contemporary art. Established in 1989, the gallery was born to promote American artists who have expanded the breadth and depth of modernism through contributions to surrealism, social realism, abstract expressionism, figurative expressionism, and geometric abstraction. For over three decades, the gallery has presented an ambitious and diverse exhibition program informed by a progressive vision and a broad understanding of art history. Through the rediscovery and recontextualization of works by a range of important twentieth-century artists, Michael Rosenfeld Gallery demonstrates an ongoing commitment to expanding the canon of American art.

Michael Rosenfeld Gallery is a member of the Art Dealers Association of America (ADAA).

Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC is the exclusive representative of the Estate of Harold Cousins and this exhibition has been organized with their cooperation.

For additional information, please contact Nicole Martin at 212 247 0082 or nm@michaelrosenfeld.com.

1 Harold Cousins, "'Plaiton' Sculpture: Its Origin and Developments," *Leonardo* vol. 4, no. 4 (Fall 1971) 353.

2 Marin Sullivan, "Trembling Cathedrals: The Sculpture of Harold Cousins," *Harold Cousins: Forms of Empty Space*, exhibition catalogue (New York, NY: Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, 2023), forthcoming.

3 Cousins, *ibid.*, 351.

4 Robert Slifkin, *The New Monuments and the End of Man: U.S. Sculpture Between War and Peace, 1945–1975* (Princeton University Press, 2019) p. 69.

5 Cousins, *ibid.*

6 Sullivan, *ibid.*