

## sculpture

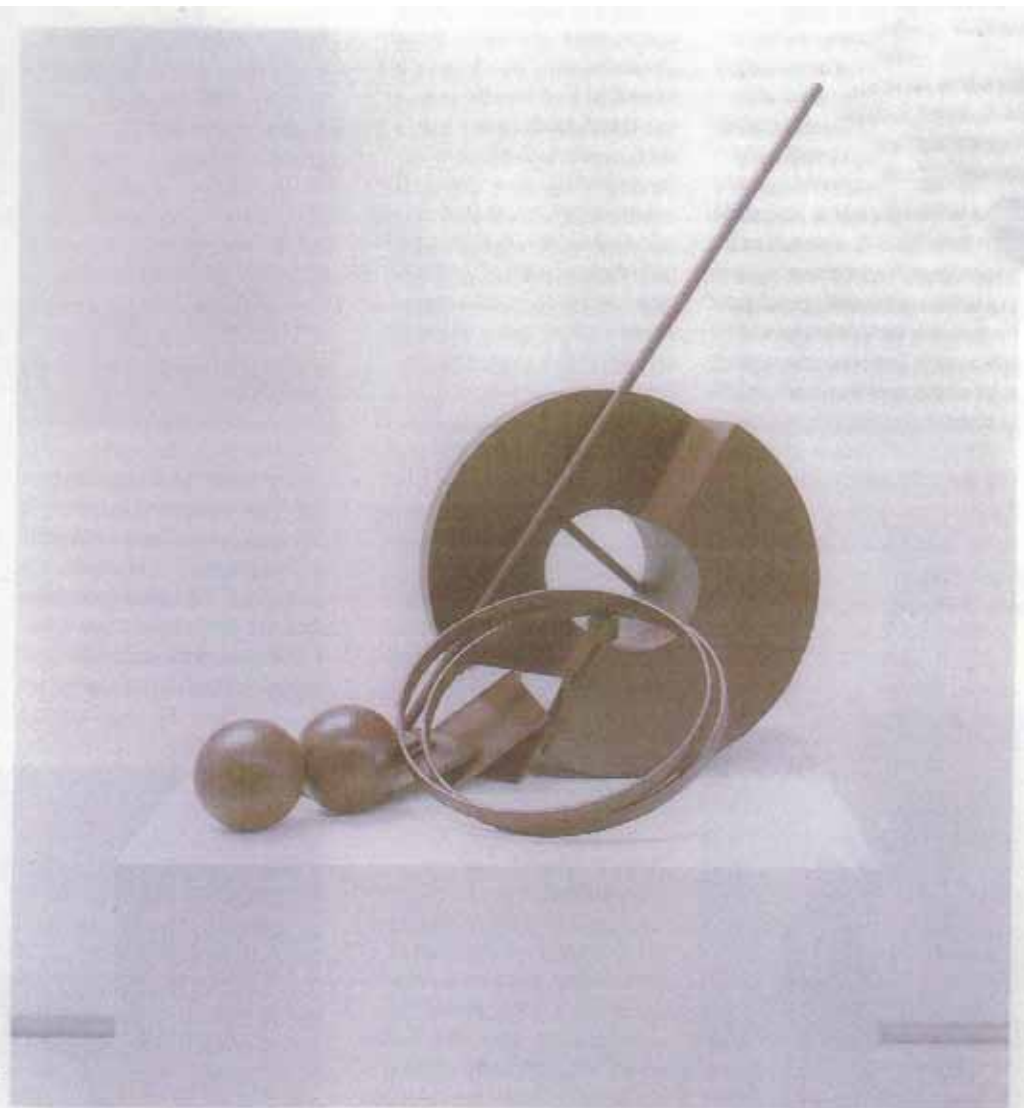
September 2001

**Los Angeles****Fletcher Benton**

Visual vigor, refined craftsmanship, and gentle humor continue to define Fletcher Benton's work. The close to 50 drawings, bas-reliefs, maquettes, and sculptures in his recent show, dating from the '90s, endow familiar leitmotifs with a new and edgy vulnerability. In contrast to his gargantuan corporate pieces of the '80s, the recent works are more intimate in scale, establishing a less intimidating though no less commanding presence. At the same time, their crafted precision and visual wit—familiar from the "Folded Circle," "Folded Square," and "Balanced/Unbalanced" series that occupied the artist during the late '70s and '80s—function as a conceptual touchstone. Grouping related studies with larger sculptures, the exhibition layout permitted glimpses of the artist's visual reasoning processes.

Benton emerged in 1961 with a solo exhibition at the California Palace of the Legion of Honor in San Francisco. Mingling the artistic premises of the '50s and '60s, his works were charged with a hybrid complexity that made them initially difficult for critics to classify. While extending a belief in artistic intuition that drew on such pre-Minimalist sculptors as David Smith and Jean Tinguely, Benton also embraced some of Minimalism's exploration of basic circles, spheres, cylinders, cubes, and squares, crafting sculptures that resemble sleekly finished industrial objects. But instead of suppressing freeform invention, Benton mingled the playfulness of improvisation with the rigor of reductive non-objective form.

By the early '70s he was poking at the seams of Minimalism's cubic certainties, creating anti-classical geometric configurations that foreshadowed by roughly a decade the questions raised by such mid-'80s artists as Peter Halley and Liz Larner. Not afraid to undermine logic with the inexplicable



irrationality of intuition, his images paradoxically evolved in series, without being driven by serialization. Instead of conceiving of sculpture based on theories of systemic progression that could be industrially fabricated by others, he retained a hands-on approach, integrating earlier Modernist interests in coincidence and chance with the object and material emphases of Minimalism. This striking difference in process has undoubtedly contributed to the ongoing freshness that has characterized his work for over four decades.

While creating what might be called ultra-baroque works, his new images nonetheless hauntingly acknowledge the legacy of classicism. Inherent in many of

the recent pieces is a precarious balance that emerges from seemingly random and chaotic circumstances. This construction of equilibrium from ostensibly unfeasible situations, against presumably unlikely odds, is what charges Benton's new work with a riveting vitality. Achieving poise with classically awkward cluster groupings of forms, these works capture attention through humor by making the unexpected appear. Gently playful even amidst perilous circumstances, Benton recalls Klee, endowing non-objective form with capriciousness and whimsicality. By wresting and reconfiguring the memories of classicism into a precarious state of grace and perfection, Benton grants viewers

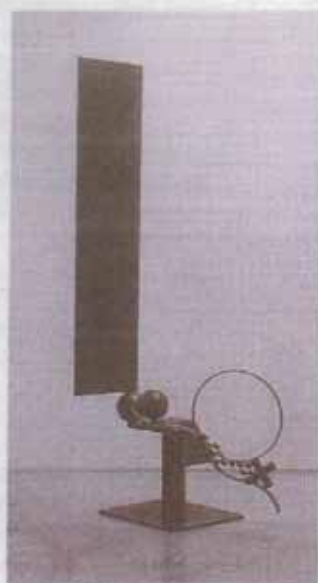
**Fletcher Benton, *Donut with Balls and Cube*, 2001. Steel with patina, 28.5 x 29 x 21 in.**

living in anti-classical times a sense of relief and even hope.

A stunning treatment of these themes appears in *Block on Blocks*, his new suite of drawings, maquettes, and sculptures. Rigorous and inventive, they convey the psychic uncertainties of contemporary existence. Playing mass against gravity and time, they relate to works by Tony DeLap, Anthony Caro, and even Richard Serra. Vertically aligned, these works usually rest on the smallest of footings, hoisting and balancing much heavier masses aloft. With cubes suspended to the right or



... a central axis in ways that... depict conventional sculptural compositions, these works introduce the potential threat of mass shifting or moving in space. By so doing, they unfurl time as an immaterial yet weighty sculptural dimension. With the exception of a few *Steel Watercolor* sculptures that continue Benton's penchant for painting various sculptural components in contrasting colors, most of the new works are robed in monochromatic ochre, sienna,



or gray, which lend unity, coherence, and harmony.

Probably the most rarefied of the new explorations of balance and imbalance, presence and absence appear in the thin and linear *Straight-Up 10* and the kindred *Pole Drawing* sculptures. Rather than using mass to allude to life's instabilities, these works rely solely on line. In some ways the *Pole Drawing* sculptures revisit the problem of the interrelation between flatness and dimensionality, exploring the nexus between two- and three-dimensional form that appears in Benton's planar, cut-out *Circle* and *Square* works of the '80s. More geometrically rigid, however, than those pieces or the whimsical linear sculptures of either Calder or Tinguely, these haiku works convey a mood that is

sparse, tense, and taut. Shooting slender vertical thrusts upward toward small clustered forms, the sculptural drawings toy dangerously with the equation between elegance and extinction, constructing forms that from certain angles seem to cut the air with the precision of a razor's edge. In such passages these works whisper of the precious and painfully imperiled nature of contemporary sculpture.

Benton's sculptures construct balance from conflict and disproportion, unfolding tales of life's struggles, compromises, and temporary solutions. Probing some of sculpture's most compelling riddles, Benton explores how sculptural mass can become a study of contour and line, how weight can become a synonym for movement and time, and how space can have as much force as mass.

—Collette Chattopadhyay

#### Newport Beach, CA

##### Howard Ben Tré

Orange County Museum of Art  
In his 20-year retrospective at the Orange County Museum of Art, Howard Ben Tré exhibited a breathtaking selection of innovative sculptures, drawings, and maquettes of individual freestanding forms and public art. His elegant work, which melds a sense of timeless antiquity with modern sophistication, is monumental in scale and yet delicately translucent, looking much like mysterious ice castles that glow a silent yellow green.

Ben Tré's glass surfaces appear polished and smooth because of his method of sandblasting the work to soften the edges and carve the glass into distinct shapes. A closer inspection, however, reveals the stresses of the intense cast-glass process—subtle irregularities, breaks in the surface, slight shifts while cooling, veins, and the inevitable roughness from having undergone enormous heat and months of cooling.

Visual contradictions are everywhere. The nature of these structures—their size, height, weight, thickness, and strength—endows each sculpture with a muscularity, contrasted by diffuse refracted light that emits an atmospheric solemnity. Shadows appear naturally from the depths of each glassy surface. Their transparent soft mirrored glow turns their beefiness into poetic delicacy, giving each piece a sense of masculinity and femininity, yin and yang all in one work.

Although three-dimensional, Ben Tré's works tend to have two views—the front and back being the same, as are both sides. With controlled orderliness, his forms have a powerful archaic presence, much like ancient stelae, altars, and columns.

Ben Tré became enraptured with cast glass in the '70s when he was a student at Portland State University in Oregon. Opportunities were limited, but his attraction to the unique physicality of the material galvanized him to develop what evolved as his contribution to the cast-glass process. A craftsman and son of a craftsman, Ben Tré had worked with almost every industrial material and was drawn to industrial objects and their unique shapes, purposes, and methods of manufacture. At first, because he could

**Left:** Fletcher Benton, *Plane to Edge, 2 Balls*, 1997. Steel with patina, 133 x 55 x 46 in.  
**Below:** Howard Ben Tré, *Double Wrapped Form*, 1998. Cast glass, lead, and patina, 57 x 18.5 x 18.5 in.

