LIGHTNESS OF BEING

NEW SCULPTURE

HOWARD BEN TRÉ
I first encountered the work of Howard Ben Tré in the early 70s when visiting Habatat Galleries, then on Ford Road in Dearborn, Michigan. Ferdinand Hampson and Thomas Boone were beginning to show artists who were producing works in the medium of glass. Among those were the likes of Harvey Littleton and Dominic Labino, who led the beginnings of the studio glass movement, and Dale Chihuly, who would later become a household name associated with the medium. Their work explored the beauty of glass with its colors and fluid-like forms.

Amongst this group was an artist who was different. His work, instead of being blown and formed, was cast in a mold, heavy in appearance, and industrial in character. Yet it was filled with an internal glow from the captured light within it. Often surrounding that glow was the shell of patinated metal that encased portions of the forms. This work was sculpture made from a seemingly fragile medium that was solid, having the integrity of bronze or other cast metal.

I have always found this an appealing characteristic in Ben Tré’s work, a characteristic that made him stand out from many of his contemporaries in the use of glass as a medium for artistic expression. After these many decades of artists exploring this media, I am still drawn to the work of Ben Tré, finding in his work the same excitement that intrigued me upon seeing it decades ago.

It is with that excitement that I pursued the opportunity to exhibit his work in the galleries of the Dennos Museum Center at Northwestern Michigan College in this 50th anniversary year of the contemporary studio glass movement in the United States.

I am pleased to have the collaborative support of Marilyn Wheaton, Director of the Marshall M. Fredericks Sculpture Museum at Saginaw Valley State University, along with Ferdinand Hampson at Habatat Galleries and Howard Ben Tré in realizing this effort.

EUGENE A. JENNEMAN, Executive Director
Dennos Museum Center
July 1–September 16, 2012

The Marshall M. Fredericks Sculpture Museum strives to bring exhibitions of great interest, diversity and excellence to our museum visitors, keeping in mind the desire to connect temporary exhibitions to the permanent installations of Marshall Fredericks. Showing the work of living sculptors is of primary importance to us in terms of juxtaposing the work of a traditional figurative sculptor working in bronze with that of contemporary sculptors working in other styles and mediums.

Howard Ben Tré’s work is especially intriguing and noteworthy in that he excels at creating small to monumental size cast glass sculptures for both public and private spaces. Watching a 2008 video, I heard Ben Tré talk about drawing being the first realization of an idea and a feeling, combining them, starting to draw, and then it’s out of him, existing in real time in a real space. Once a sculptor’s concept leaves his mind and a drawing is on paper, a template can be made and a sculpture created.

For me, the most exciting and educational way to exhibit sculpture is to show the artist’s drawings in close proximity to the sculptures that evolved from those drawings. I am thrilled to have the opportunity to host an exhibition of the drawings and sculptures of a great American contemporary sculptor at the Marshall M. Fredericks Sculpture Museum. Making a connection between Howard Ben Tré and Marshall Fredericks during the Museum’s 25th anniversary in 2013 is particularly satisfying.

MARILYN L. WHEATON, Museum Director
Marshall M. Fredericks Sculpture Museum
April 13–June 29, 2013

My appreciation to Ferdinand Hampson of Habatat Galleries for arranging this exhibition and for his support throughout my career.

My thanks to David Austin of Imago Galleries whose support made this new work, The Lightness of Being, possible.

HOWARD BEN TRÉ
We’re vertical. Yes, we usually spend a good deal of our lives in a horizontal position, and yes, we’re interestingly hinged at our knees, waist, and neck, but we’re mostly vertical, columnar, erect, and perpendicular to the ground. I raise this issue of verticality because I know of no other contemporary artist who is so attuned to the vertical as Howard Ben-Tré, so skilled in the nuances of the progression of forms in a linear manner from bottom to top, so poetically hypersensitive to the rhythms of a sequential array of intriguing and usually multi-piece columnar articulations.

Historical prototypes? Well, I don’t believe you can roam through pieces from his The Lightness of Being series and not feel Ben-Tré’s sympathy for Alberto Giacometti and Stonehenge, for the Kore and Kouroi figures of ancient Greece and those sculptures of stoic menhirs of ancient Britain, those timeless rough-sculptures, as you can now experience at the Dennos Museum in Traverse City, the sense that you’re in a time-traveller, but not too much to the man of stele. And the slightly eerie feeling you get when amidst a group of Ben-Tré’s bases is slightly different—some are square, while most, as in The Lightness of Being #5, are round. His bases are always an integral part of the sculpture, as was the case with Brancusi, not solely a support element. The wide thin bronze plate resting directly and horizontally on the floor transitions into a vertical element that is vaguely vase or vase shaped. In The Lightness of Being #5, it is more of a truncated bit of column, with the base clearly articulated and just an indication of a few inches of a slender shaft, followed by the first overtly vertical element, resembling a Greek vase shape cast in glass, somewhere between an amphora or a lekythos in form. Then comes the first “wow” element, a taut coil of bronze that looks as if it’s under an extraordinary amount of pressure, some uber-canister or crematory urn or cylindrical stupa that is ready to spring, which would vault the glass element atop it about 50 feet into the air. And that element! More than half the height of the entire sculpture, this lovely and graceful mass of glass is as iconically a suggestion of a woman’s body as one could imagine. It’s a contemporary distillation of a Minorean or Cycladic vision, some stunningly wise condensation of how artists have long idealized the bodies of women—a swelling here, a cinching there—it is torso as essence, the core of a Kore, reductive but with such lissome and gentle grace as to finally be expansive.

Much of how Ben-Tré achieves these effects resides in his materials and working processes. He begins with drawings, from small sketches of ideas to fairly complete finished drawings, full-scale studies for the sculptures they will become. Then comes the inferno where the live fire is ready to spring, which would vault the glass sculpture, this lovely and graceful mass of glass is as iconically a suggestion of a woman’s body as one could imagine. It’s a contemporary distillation of a Minorean or Cycladic vision, some stunningly wise condensation of how artists have long idealized the bodies of women—a swelling here, a cinching there—it is torso as essence, the core of a Kore, reductive but with such lissome and gentle grace as to finally be expansive.

How does Ben-Tré accomplish all of this? Well, let’s look and reason along with him, and stay on The Lightness of Being series. The first surprise is how unadorned in mood they can be. The Lightness of Being #2 seems seductive and reminiscent of a vessel form, curvy and slow moving, swelling and rising upward with grace and beauty, while The Lightness of Being #10 looks stiff and intensively logical, at once more architectural and vaguely imperious, like a sentinel. The Lightness of Being #9 bears a resemblance to the Burj Khalifa in Dubai, both slender and monumental, exquisite in the way each element and its treatment inexorably leads you to the next. Ben-Tré makes each of his micro-formal decisions seem inevitable and logical, masking their judicious and thoughtful aura. The Lightness of Being #8, one of my favorites, seems ready to spring apart, a confluence of order and erotica, a mind/body dualism that speaks to the impossibility of such things.

Going through it even more carefully. Notice how each of Ben-Tré’s bases is slightly different—some are square, while most, as in The Lightness of Being #5, are round. His bases are always an integral part of the sculpture, as was the case with Brancusi, not solely a support element. The wide thin bronze plate resting directly and horizontally on the floor transitions into a vertical element that is vaguely vase or vase shaped. In The Lightness of Being #5, it is more of a truncated bit of column, with the base clearly articulated and just an indication of a few inches of a slender shaft, followed by the first overtly vertical element, resembling a Greek vase shape cast in glass, somewhere between an amphora or a lekythos in form. Then comes the first “wow” element, a taut coil of bronze that looks as if it’s under an extraordinary amount of pressure, some uber-canister or crematory urn or cylindrical stupa that is ready to spring, which would vault the glass element atop it about 50 feet into the air. And that element! More than half the height of the entire sculpture, this lovely and graceful mass of glass is as iconically a suggestion of a woman’s body as one could imagine. It’s a contemporary distillation of a Minorean or Cycladic vision, some stunningly wise condensation of how artists have long idealized the bodies of women—a swelling here, a cinching there—it is torso as essence, the core of a Kore, reductive but with such lissome and gentle grace as to finally be expansive.

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The Lightness of Being #1, 2010
Cast glass, oxidized bronze, and metal leaf. 80 x 9 x 9”. Edition 2/2.
The Lightness of Being #9, 2010
Cast glass, bronze, gold leaf, and polychrome
91 x 7 x 7”
Edition 1/2
The Lightness of Being #5, 2010
Cast glass, cast bronze, and patina
73 x 6 x 6"
Edition 2/2
The Lightness of Being #10

2010
Cast glass, cast bronze, lead, and patina
106 x 9¾ x 9¾"
Edition 2/2
15

The Lightness of Being #7, 2009
Cast glass, cast bronze, and patina
87 x 6½ x 6½" Edition 2/2
The Lightness of Being #3, 2010
Cast glass, cast bronze, and patina
104 x 9 x 9" Edition 2/2
Axis 8, 2012
Cast glass, sheet lead, aluminum powders, and pigmented waxes, 23 x 4 x 4”
Edition 6/5

Axis 7, 2012
Cast glass, aluminum, silver leaf, aluminum powders, and pigmented waxes, 24½ x 4¼ x 4¼”
Edition 4/5
Work on Paper for Axis 8, 2012
Mixed media on paper 30 x 22”

Work on Paper for Axis 7, 2012
Mixed media on paper 30 x 22”
Work on Paper for Axis 5, 2012
Mixed media on paper
30 x 22"
Edition 4/5
Cast glass, stainless steel, silver leaf, aluminum powders, and pigmented waxes

5  x  4½ x 3"  

Edition 4/5

Work on Paper for Joined 1, 2012

Mixed media on paper

30 x 22"
The Lightness of Being #8, 2009
Cast glass, cast bronze, and patina
91 x 9 x 9"
Edition 1/2
The Lightness of Being #2, 2010
Cast glass, cast bronze, and patina
86 1/2 x 12 x 12"
Edition of 2
Wrapped Light #6, 2008
Cast glass, silver leaf, and gold leaf
17.5 x 7 x 7"

Wrapped Light #1, 2008
Cast glass, silver leaf, and graphite powder
20½ x 6 x 6"

Wrapped Light #3, 2008
Cast glass, silver leaf, and pigmented waxes
20 x 8 x 8"
Born in Brooklyn, NY, 1949
Resides in Providence, RI and Vinalhaven, ME

Education
Missouri Valley College, Marshall, MO, 1967–68
Brooklyn College, Brooklyn, NY, 1968–69
Portland State University, Portland, OR, B.S.A 1978
Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, RI, AFA 1980

Sited Public Projects
Artery Plaza, Bethesda, MD
BankBoston Plaza, Providence, RI
Beau Ciel Condominiums, Sarasota, FL
Brown University, Providence, RI
Buffalo and Erie County Public Library, Buffalo, NY
Clayton Plaza Tower, Clayton, MO
Crescent Court, Dallas, TX
Currier Gallery of Art, Manchester, NH
Dana-Faber Cancer Institute, Boston, MA
Hasbro Children’s Hospital, Providence, RI
Hunters Plaza, Bank of America, Charlotte, NC
Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, Hanover, NH
Hunter Museum of American Art, Chattanooga, TN
IBM Corporation, Gaithersburg, MD
Lloyd D. George United States Courthouse, Las Vegas, NV
Mary Baker Eddy Library for the Betterment of Humanity, Boston, MA
Piedmont Park, Atlanta, GA
Post Office Square Park, Boston, MA
Rhode Island Convention Center, Providence, RI
Riley Hospital for Children, Indianapolis, IN
Ritz-Carlton Hotel, Boston Common, Boston, MA
The Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, Waltham, MA
Seattle Art Museum, Seattle, WA
Siebel Systems, Bridgepointe Campus, San Francisco, CA
Target Plaza, Minneapolis, MN
Thea Foss Waterway Public Esplanade, Tacoma, WA
The Toledo Museum of Art, Toledo, OH
University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, IL
University of Michigan, Stephen M. Ross School of Business, Ann Arbor, MI
Warrington Town Center, Warrington, England
Weber State University, Ogden, UT
The Wheeler School, Providence, RI

Selected Public Collections
Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, NY
American Craft Museum, New York, NY
Arco Corporate Art Collection, Los Angeles, CA
AT&T Corporate Collection, Chicago, IL
BankBoston Art Collection, Boston, MA
Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, NY
Howard Ben Tré
Portland Art Museum, Portland, OR
Portland Museum of Art, Portland, ME
Prudential Insurance Company of America, New York, NY
Reader's Digest Association, Pleasantville, NY
Remick Gallery of the National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C.
Rhode Island School of Design, Museum of Art, Providence, RI
Rockefeller Management Corporation, New York, NY
The Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, Waltham, MA
The Saint Louis Art Museum, Saint Louis, MO
The San Francisco Arts Commission, San Francisco, CA
Santa Barbara Museum of Art, Santa Barbara, CA
Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art, Scottsdale, AZ
Seattle Art Museum, Seattle, WA
Seven Bridges Foundation, Greenwich, CT
Southwestern Bell Corporation, Houston, TX
Tokyo Marine Management, New York, NY
The Toledo Museum of Art, Toledo, OH
University of Michigan Museum of Art, Ann Arbor, MI
Weber State University, Ogden, UT
The Wheeler School, Providence, RI

Selected Solo Exhibitions
1979 University of Rhode Island Fine Arts Center Galleries, Kingston, RI, "Howard Ben Tré: Solo"
1980 Hadler/Rodriguez Galleries, Houston, TX, "Howard Ben Tré: Recent Sculpture"
1981 Foster/White Gallery, Seattle, WA, "Howard Ben Tré: Sculpture"
Habitat Galleries, Lathrup Village, MI, "Howard Ben Tré: Recent Sculpture"
Hadler/Rodriguez Galleries, Houston, TX, "Howard Ben Tré: Recent Sculpture"
1982 Hadler/Rodriguez Galleries, New York, NY, "Howard Ben Tré: Columns"
1983 Clark Gallery, Lincoln, MA, "Howard Ben Tré: Recent Work"
Foster/White Gallery, Seattle, WA, "Howard Ben Tré: Sculpture and Photographs"
Hadler/Rodriguez Galleries, Houston, TX, "Howard Ben Tré: Recent Sculpture"
1984 Hadler/Rodriguez Galleries, Miami, FL, "Howard Ben Tré: Recent Sculpture and Works on Paper"
1985 Charles Cowles Gallery, New York, NY, "Howard Ben Tré" (exh. cat.)
Hadler/Rodriguez Galleries, Houston, TX, "Howard Ben Tré"
1986 Charles Cowles Gallery, New York, NY, "Howard Ben Tré" (exh. brochure)
John Berggruen Gallery, San Francisco, CA, "Howard Ben Tré: Recent Sculpture"
1987 Fay Gold Gallery, Atlanta, GA, "Howard Ben Tré"
1988 Charles Cowles Gallery, New York, NY, "Howard Ben Tré: Figures" (exh. cat.)
1989 Charles Cowles Gallery, New York, NY, "Howard Ben Tré: New Work"

The Phillips Collection, Washington D.C., "Contemporary Sculpture: Howard Ben Tré" (exh. cat.) (traveled to Carnegie-Allen Art Gallery, Pittsburgh, PA; Laumeier Sculpture Park & Museum, St. Louis, MO; DeCordova Museum, MA, and Sculpture Park, Lincoln, MA)

1991 Charles Cowles Gallery, New York, NY, "Howard Ben Tré: Vessels of Light" (exh. cat.)
Charl Km, Lincoln, MA, "Howard Ben Tré: Sculpture"
1992 Dorothy Goldstein Gallery, Santa Monica, CA, "Howard Ben Tré: New Work"
The Toledo Museum of Art, OH, "Crossing the Boundaries: The Sculpture of Howard Ben Tré"
1993 Brown University, David Winton Bell Gallery, Providence, RI, "Howard Ben Tré: New Work" (exh. cat.) (traveled to Norton Gallery of Art, West Palm Beach, FL)
Charles Cowles Gallery, New York, NY, "Howard Ben Tré: Wrapped and Paired Forms" (exh. brochure)
1994 Davis/Aix/Clain Gallery, Houston, TX, "Howard Ben Tré: Recent Sculpture"
University of Rhode Island, Fine Arts Center Galleries, Kingston, RI, "Howard Ben Tré: Basins and Fountains" (exh. cat.)
Musée d'Art Moderne et d'Art Contemporain, Nice, France, "Sculptures de Verre" (exh. cat.)
1995 University of Richmond, Marsh Art Gallery, Richmond, VA, and the Cleveland Center for Contemporary Art, Cleveland, OH, "Howard Ben Tré: Recent Sculpture" (exh. cat.) (traveled to Newport Art Museum, Newport, RI)
1996 Charles Cowles Gallery, New York, NY, "Indoor/Outdoor: New Sculpture" (exh. cat.)
2000 Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art, Scottsdale, AZ, "Howard Ben Tré: Interior/Exterior" (exh. cat.) (traveled to Palm Springs Desert Museum, Palm Springs, CA; San Jose Museum of Art, San Jose, CA; Orange County Museum of Art, Newport Beach, CA; Purchase College/Senate University of New York, Columns" (exh. cat.)
2001 Minneapolis Institute of Arts, Minneapolis, MN, "Howard Ben Tré: Sculpting Space in the Public Realm" (exh. brochure)
2002 Charles Cowles Gallery, New York, NY, "Howard Ben Tré: New Work"
2005 State University of New York at Buffalo, Anderson Arts Gallery, Buffalo, NY, "Private Visions, Utopian Ideals: The Art of Howard Ben Tré" (exh. cat.)
2009 Imago Galleries, Palm Desert, CA, "Howard Ben Tré: Lightness of Being"
2012 Imago Galleries, Palm Desert, CA, "Howard Ben Tré: Denuo Museum Center, Traverse City, MI, "Howard Ben Tré: Lightness of Being, New Sculpture" (exh. cat.) (traveled to The Marshall Fredericks Sculpture Museum, Saginaw, MI)
WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

All work is from the collection of the artist unless noted.

Axis 5, 2012
Cast glass, aluminum, gold leaf, bronze powders, and pigmented waxes 24½ x 4¼ x 4¼” Edition 4/5 page 23

Axis 7, 2012
Cast glass, aluminum, silver leaf, aluminum powders, and pigmented waxes 24½ x 4¼ x 4¼” Edition 4/5 page 18

Axis 8, 2012
Cast glass, sheet lead, aluminum powders, and pigmented waxes 23 x 4 x 4” Edition 4/5 page 19

Joined 1, 2012
Cast glass, stainless steel, silver leaf, aluminum powders, and pigmented waxes 5½ x 4 x 3” Edition 4/5 page 25

The Lightness of Being #1, 2010
Cast glass, cast bronze, patina, and metal leaf 80 x 9 x 9” Edition 2/2 page 7

The Lightness of Being #2, 2010
Cast glass, cast bronze, and patina 86½ x 12 x 12” Edition 2/2 page 29

The Lightness of Being #3, 2010
Cast glass, cast bronze, and patina 104 x 9 x 9” Edition 2/2 page 16 Courtesy of Habatat Galleries

The Lightness of Being #4, 2010
Cast glass, cast bronze, and patina 103 x 8 x 8” Edition 2/2 page 3

The Lightness of Being #5, 2010
Cast glass, cast bronze, and patina 73 x 6 x 6” Edition 2/2 page 10 Courtesy of Habatat Galleries

The Lightness of Being #6, 2009
Cast glass, cast bronze, and patina 87 x 6½ x 6½” Edition 2/2 page 15

The Lightness of Being #7, 2009
Cast glass, cast bronze, and patina 91 x 9 x 9” Edition 1/2 page 26 Courtesy of Image Galleries

The Lightness of Being #8, 2009
Cast glass, cast bronze, gold leaf, and patina 91 x 7 x 7” Edition 1/2 page 9

The Lightness of Being #9, 2010
Cast glass, cast bronze, gold leaf, and patina 91 x 7 x 7” Edition 1/2 page 3

The Lightness of Being #10, 2010
Cast glass, cast bronze, lead, and patina 106 x 9½ x 9½” Edition 2/2 page 12

Work on Paper for Axis 5, 2012
Mixed media on paper 30 x 22” page 22

Work on Paper for Axis 7, 2012
Mixed media on paper 30 x 22” page 21

Work on Paper for Axis 8, 2012
Mixed media on paper 30 x 22” page 20

Work on Paper for Joined 1, 2012
Mixed media on paper 30 x 22” page 24

Working Drawing for Lightness of Being #3, Lightness of Being #4 and Lightness of Being #5, 2007
Graphite on paper 103 x 36” page 33

Working Drawing for Lightness of Being #5, 2007
Graphite on paper 103 x 36” page 35

Wrapped Light #1, 2008
Cast glass, silver leaf, and graphite powder 20½ x 6 x 6” page 31 left Courtesy of Habatat Galleries

Wrapped Light #3, 2008
Cast glass, gold leaf, and pigmented waxes 20 x 8 x 8” page 31 right Courtesy of Image Galleries

Wrapped Light #6, 2008
Cast glass, silver leaf, and gold leaf 17½ x 7 x 7” page 30 Courtesy of Image Galleries

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The work in this exhibition and for the past 23 years has been thoughtfully and creatively executed by Eric Portrais. Thor Dieringer, who worked at the studio for 6 years, also was invaluable for his contributions in bringing ideas and drawings into the physical realm. Special thanks to Wendy Baker who manages us all and keeps things going.

Thanks to Wendy MacGaw for logistics, transportation and her loving support of my efforts.

Thanks to Gay BenTéré for her continued involvement and feedback on projects.

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