

Lines of Site

Olive Hershey

Four p.m., running east along the jogging trail on the south side of Memorial Drive:

I trot under the Waugh Drive bridge, step off the concrete and onto the fine broad swale beside a gentle arc of Buffalo Bayou. Towers of crystal gleam silver, green, and rose in the lowering sun. In the foreground the trail falls to a rustic bridge, rises again, and falls once more toward the city. Along this stretch of green space the fortunate runner evades the ennui of jogging in a city with almost no grade changes. Seeing is best here as well, for the eye can make a long sweep on the Buffalo Bayou Parkway; there is little to impede its play.

Not that there's nothing to look at as I pass. A gray-green scrim of willow branches and vines veils the bayou's edge; a fitness station of wood and plastic exhorts me to perform deep knee bends; and the totemic columns of the Memorial Drive bridge loom as stark and white as the ruined rice dryer high above. Hearing my footfalls bouncing off



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the bridge, I wonder where the naked man is today, the one I saw here a year ago taking his ease in the deep shadows; and where is the remarkable tenor voice singing Puccini that stopped me in my tracks under this same bridge?

My fondness for this five-mile loop, its voices and vistas, has evolved into a mission. Every time I run out from under that bridge and onto the four-acre meadow that borders the southeast side of Greenwood Cemetery, I check for surveyors' stakes like the ones I pulled out and threw into the bushes almost exactly a year ago. Since there are no stakes today I quicken my pace, admiring the shiny black streak

my dog Bear makes galloping against the wall of leafless trees a hundred yards away. Bear, who is tracking a rabbit, is swallowed up in the tangled brush, and as he is lost to view, still barking, I am filled with an acute sense of the freedom this bayou trail affords me, of how fortunate I am to carry through that spaciousness the illusion that I might run, and see, forever.



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That this long line of sight might be vital to Houstonians, too long in city pent, ought not to need restating. However, the recent acceptance of two new sculptures — *Passage Inachevé* by Linnea Glatt and Frances Merritt Thompson, donated to the city by the Texas Chapter of the Committee for the French Revolution, and the Houston Police Officers Memorial — raises once again the dilemma of art versus open space in a city with deplorably few acres of usable and attractive space available.

In the last long meadow before the Sabine Street bridge lies *Passage Inachevé*, a steel sculpture shaped like a house straddling the jogging trail. Arrested by this strange object, I slow to a walk, observe how at a certain distance its girders and open eaves visually decapitate downtown skyscrapers as neatly as a guillotine. Walking into the piece, I sit on one of the eight concrete cubes inside, wondering what kind of ritual could be performed here. A band might stand on the cubes to play, a group of poets might read; but the sculpture looks so much like a burned-out structure that one wonders.

I try walking around the sculpture, looking through its grid at bayou, willows, skyscrapers, clouds, and my strongest impression is of a barrier interposing itself, insisting on making its statement. Although I do not pretend to criticize the work as art, I resent this intrusion, preferring the subtler, gentler narrative the curve of the bank makes and

the lyrical cadence of cypress and maple beside the wooden bridge to the east. As I walk past the sculpture up the rising trail to Sabine Street, I have to wonder: what is it about our psyche that demands that all spaces be filled with objects, all silences with sound?

I am not arguing against placing art in public spaces, only suggesting that some of our scarce greenbelt land is better left uncluttered. The concept of preserving open space does not appear to be one of the priorities of the Municipal Arts Commission, which reviews proposals of groups and individuals who wish to donate art to the city. The criteria most often cited in a recent meeting of the commission were safety, durability, and ease of maintenance. Sue Rowan Pittman, chairman of the commission, had this to say about the review process: "The main point is to cause political people not to deal with the good-bad-obscene question." Of Houston's parks, Mrs. Pittman said: "They're not like parks in the Northeast. People up there can use their parks year round."

In the mid-1970s, Charles Tapley and Jerry Lunow drew extensive plans for the Buffalo Bayou Parkway that called for leaving the land in a relatively natural state from Shepherd to Sabine Street. According to Tapley, his plan was later scrapped by the Whitmire administration and another similar plan adopted. If commemorative art is to be placed along this stretch of the bayou, there is an urgent need for an integrated process of review, site selection, and landscaping.

"I think the time will come when people are going to laugh at the silly postage-stamp approach to public art we have in this city," Tapley says. There seems to be little cooperation between donors, artists, landscape architects, and the city. Objects simply appear one day as if dropped from the sky.

On my way west I pass Henry Moore's bronze sculpture, *Large Spindle Piece*, solitary on a knoll overlooking the site of the new Jesús Bautista Moroles sculpture on the opposite side of Memorial. The Knox Foundation had a hand in raising funds for both pieces, and the foundation's representative, Britt Davis, told me that Moore

consulted extensively with the city before the site was chosen. On the other hand, the site for the Moroles piece, a memorial to Houston policemen killed in the line of duty, was chosen four years ago, before the artist was selected. Thus both pieces might be said to be site related, although not site specific. Neither qualifies as "plop art," a term used by artist Jack Massing to describe works that are "plopped" down anywhere. "I think in Moroles's piece the site determined a lot," Massing says.

The stepped-pyramid shape of Moroles's pink granite work could hardly be less obtrusive in the landscape. In fact, Thomas McEvelley refers to the "humility" of its low rise above ground level. Although the center portion of the piece will rise vertically to a modest 12 feet, the four outer squares of the mandala will descend the same depth into the earth. According to Britt Davis, the Harris County Flood Control District required that the total mass introduced into the site not exceed the amount excavated. The equation is evocative, denoting sensitivity to the site as well as concern for the dignity and authority the artist wants to express.

I am standing on the curb looking down on the broad, green four-acre plain where the mandala shape of Moroles's memorial is marked off with white plastic pipes. The model I saw at Davis-McClain Gallery has an unassuming dignity, a gravity without heaviness. Above all, the piece will not intrude between the viewer at the curb and the arc of magnolias and crape myrtles surrounding the sculpture and delineating a meditative space around it. As I take in this spaciousness I am in some way made more spacious. The January sun is warm on my face and in the winter grass crickets are chirping. Million of spiderwebs run between the grasses. In my meadow on the far side of the bayou no art has yet appeared. In the barren tracery of distant trees there is a purity and peace unequalled by any sculpture, and I think of what Guy Hagstette, one of the architects of Sesqui-centennial Park, said to me the other day. "People are losing the capacity to be alone with themselves. That's part of the reason they want to put things in spaces. They don't value their own emptiness." ■



Passage Inachevé, 1990, Linnea Glatt and Frances Merritt Thompson, sculptors.

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