

The Setting

When Olmsted and Vaux designed Prospect Park in 1866, they created a landscape in which water, woods and meadows are so effortlessly blended that many Park visitors do not realize that this is a manmade place. The Lullwater with its graceful curving shoreline and waterfall lends a calmness to the site, a feeling of being far removed from the tensions of urban life. Olmsted's vision was altered by the addition of neo-classical elements at the turn of the Century. McKim, Mead & White built the Lullwater Bridge in 1890. Architects Helmle and Huberty built the elegant terra-cotta Boathouse in 1905. Both the Bridge and the Boathouse replace earlier rustic wooden structures which had burned. Both have been recently restored and reopened to the public. This small section of Prospect Park, composed by the masters of landscape design and now renovated and managed with the utmost care, has a special significance.

The Sculpture

Four sculptors have brought works to this place, installing them in harmony with the water, woods and open space. Each sculpture has a meaning, a reason to be and a reason to be here. STEP ONE is a walk, an unfolding series of visual experiences.

Leaving the Boathouse, one sees Florence Neal's "Wind-Vanes" perched nine feet above the ground. In these pieces, she is celebrating the movement of the wind, the changeability and constant newness of the natural world. Using forms she has observed in nature, birds, fish, leaves, she has welded metal pieces which will spin in the wind, always presenting a new face to the viewer.

After crossing Lullwater Bridge, one encounters Tom Bills' "Boathouse Sculpture". Both Bills and Masters have made pieces out of cast concrete, responding to Cleft Ridge Span, the first cast concrete bridge in America, a decorative tunnel which leads to the Boathouse. The Span will begin restoration in 1988. Bills works with construction materials. Steel is cut. Concrete is poured and shaped. His references to architecture are a starting point rather than a conclusion. He has engineered a "keyhole", an open space in the piece which invites interaction. Peer through it. Push your hands into the crevice. The solidness of the concrete is a support mechanism for this carefully crafted moment in art and the Park.

The next works of art on the walk are by Stephen James. He has installed two tall "Bird House", architectural configurations made of metal. The works have a concise and expert sense of geometry. They stand in the trees on the slope that leads to the water. They refer to the shapes of trees, of real bird houses, or real houses. They add an invented structure to the grove of trees, a structure that suddenly seems to belong there.

Deborah Masters' "Pond Virgins" are three concrete figures on pedestals; goddesses, guardians, female spirits that stand and protect. She is referring to the classical Roman gardens where sculpture lined a pathway or stood beside a reflecting pool. Masters' work combines an understanding of classical forms with a strong feeling for gesture and placement. The "Pond Virgins" stand near the waterfall beside the lagoon. They will be keeping watch through the summer over children, families, wildlife and waterlife.

In organizing this exhibition, the first outdoor sculpture show to be sponsored by Prospect Park, I have kept in mind these words of Olmsted: "all that is done in a Park, and all of the art of a Park is done to influence the mind through the imagination." A Park is for walking. Sculpture is for seeing. Take your own STEP ONE.

Mariella Bisson
Curator



Deborah Masters, "Pond Virgins"
3 figures each 108" X 30" X 30", Cast concrete
1988

DEBORAH MASTERS

These sculptures are modernday Venuses beside a reflecting pool. I immediately thought of making these images when I first saw the Boathouse, which seemed a bizarre moment of tranquility so near to the madness of the city streets. Here then are a group of young girls contemplating their own beauty and the beauty of all that surrounds them, reflected in the Lullwater.

Selected Exhibitions

- Solo show, Leidis-Flam Gallery, Brooklyn, 1988
- "The Blue Angel: Decline of Sexual Stereotypes in Post-Feminist Art", Longwood Gallery, Bronx/Birmingham, Alabama/A.I.R. Gallery, N.Y.C., 1987, 88
- "Oppression/Expression", Contemporary Arts Center, New Orleans, LO., 1986
- "Wings Over Brooklyn", Memorial Arch, Prospect Park, Brooklyn, 1986

Education

- New York Studio School, N.Y.C.
- Bryn Mawr College, PA
- Penland School of Crafts, N.C.
- Moore College of Art, PA