

**BRIAN WALL**

**CHRIS STEPHENS**



# FOREWORD

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## That Swing

Brian Wall: the very words conjure up something “brawny” and “solid,” as if more of a moniker for his welded sculpture than the name of its creator. In Berkeley from the late 1960s, Wall enhanced his name’s and his medium’s implications of brute masculinity by heightening his mid-size physique with a ten-gallon cowboy hat and advancing his presence with a stride punctuated by the clicking heels of cowboy boots made of some beast’s intensely textured hide. A well-regarded British sculptor of planar constructions, and head of the sculpture department at London’s Central School of Art, Wall took up residence on the western edge of North America when invited as visiting faculty of the University of California. The relocation seems to have prompted his participation in United States popular culture’s identification, from the 1950s, with the adventurous spirit of the American pioneer. “Westerns” were numerous among films, radio, and television programs, astronauts were exploring new frontiers of outer space, and, at least in the White House, there was a strong belief that territories in the Far East such as Vietnam should and would be conquered. On the art front, sculpture was newly prominent in artistic discourse and enlarging its size and conceptual boldness.

Locally, the dominant model of sculptorhood on the Berkeley faculty was Peter Voulkos, the Montana-born hard-drinking urban cowboy who applied his masculine aggressions to transforming ceramic pots into unruly masses of clay, slashed and stained.

And yet, the same year that Wall formally emigrated to the United States, 1972, making his faculty status permanent, he was represented – perhaps literally re-presented – in a Master’s of Fine Arts graduation exhibition by the conceptual/performance artist, then graduate student, the (late) Jim Pomeroy. In a set of slides “Brian Wall Plays Ball” (memorable to veteran observers of Bay Area art, but varying in their memories), Wall was seen playing each stroke in a round of golf.

Golf??? Contrary to the scruffy counterculture identity of Berkeley – the site a decade earlier of the socially incendiary Free Speech Movement; the place where the gritty assemblages of the west coast neo-Dada “Funk Art” gained national recognition through Peter Selz’s survey at the University Art Museum; across the bay from San Francisco’s thriving nucleus of tie-dyed hippiedom, the Haight-Ashbury – in the compact hilly terrain surrounding the glittering San Francisco Bay, golf carried all the connotations of a refined,



Jim Pomeroy (1945-1992)  
Brian Wall Plays Ball, 1971  
100 slides

*opposite page:*  
Ginza II 2000

Waxed steel  
220 x 174 x 200 cm  
87½ x 68½ x 78½ in





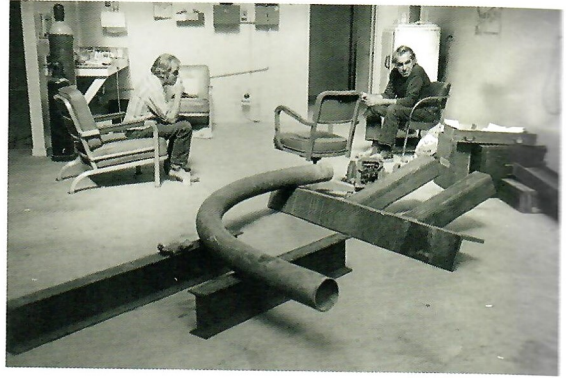


distinctly Establishment, upper class sport. It's exotic.

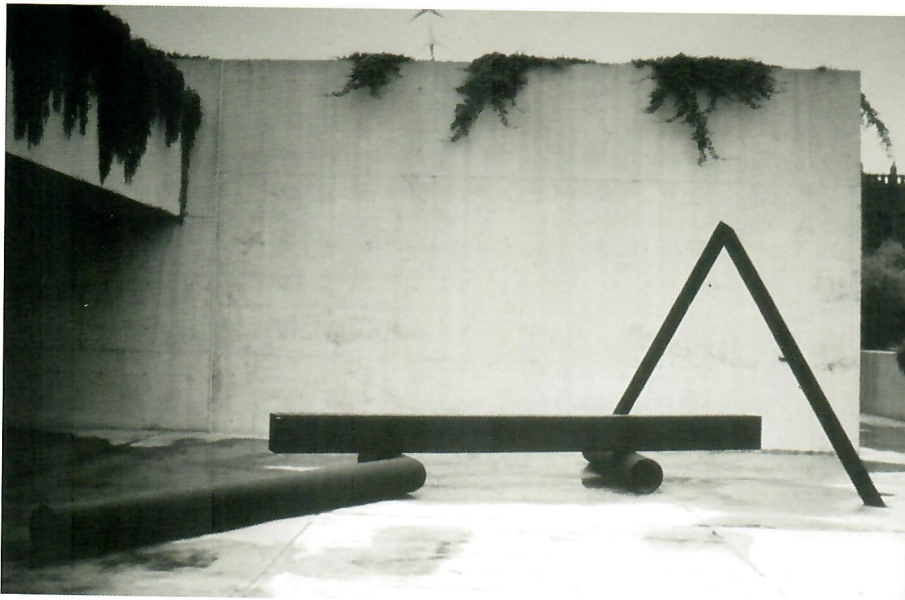
It's easy to imagine Pomeroy's work as deadpan satire, its very *echt* Conceptual sobriety ironically turning on the hilarity of revealing a member of the "Montana Mafia," as Voulkos, his sculptor cohorts and their grad students were known, as an effete gentleman duffer. Except that this was more like cinema verité, as Wall was, and continues to be, a devoted golfer who to this day precedes his welding labors in a warehouse near the East Bay shoreline with a stint at the golf course in the immense public woodlands, lake and greens cradled high in the Berkeley hills, Tilden Park. The self is multiple, as is the art.

So in surveying Wall's work retrospectively, the presentation of golf scenes, as a sort of poster for the British sculptor of clean, open, compositions in steel, seems absolutely apposite. Like the trajectory of a golf ball, the orientation of Wall's sculpture since the mid-1960s is predominately horizontal. Contrary to the major postwar American abstract sculptor David Smith's well-known Cubi series of the early-1960s – jumbled steel boxes on a vertical axis, implying a standing figure – a prominent characteristic of new Constructivist and Minimalist sculpture from the mid-1960s was its spatial parallel to landscape. And as the work progressed, Wall's monochrome cylinders, rods, and sheets both expanded in scale and are generally horizontal in orientation. Often, elements run along the ground, like the game played with finely weighted iron rods that graze the grass *just so*, and his assemblage of these units displays subtly balanced strokes.

Consider the 1971 sculpture curator George Neubert selected for the outdoor sculpture collection on the grounds of The Oakland Museum, *B-1*. This is really Wall's early insignia, the work by which those unfamiliar with his work who visit the now-named "Museum of California" are introduced to his sculpture. The composition of four steel elements is placed directly on a concrete terrace. No pedestal or panel sets its estheticized space apart from that of the viewer's.



Brian Wall with Peter Voulkos,  
Brian's Studio in Emeryville, 1975

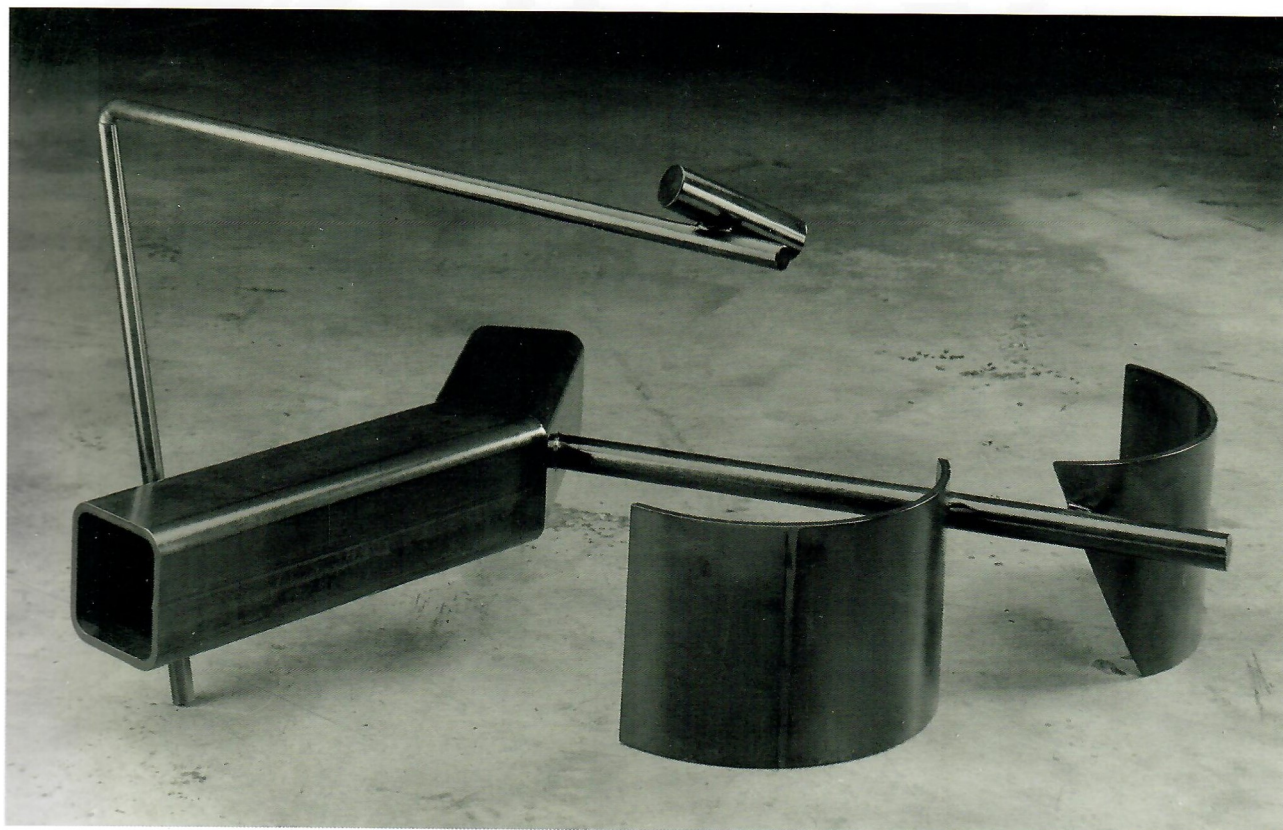


B-1 1971

Painted steel  
289.6 x 640.1 x 548.6 cm  
114 x 252 x 216 in

Collection: Oakland Museum





The four vaguely industrial-looking steel elements are unified by matt black paint, suggesting the sobriety of non-objective sculpture. Yet their casual placement at oblique angles conveys an improvisational play. And the arrangement rewards free association. Looking down onto it, we see a long bar resting across two small gauge cylinders, one of them bent at an oblique angle with a long arm. Projecting forward above the other cylinder, the rod extends into the center of the open space of the inverted V standing above it. It's like the rectilinear thrust resulting in a smoothly pocketed ball, on the ground – a sunken golf ball. And the angled cylinders supporting it then suggest the muscular tilt and tension that produced the swing.

Alternatively, and even more obviously, the configuration carries an unmistakable sexual connotation. The opening of the upturned V suggests the pubic triangle incised on ancient statues of nude females, notably on the streamlined Cycladic, marking the part of the female anatomy that the Greeks called the “mound of Venus.” It is being “penetrated” by the shaft and its two round accomplices.

Both of these constellations of allusions belie the non-referentiality frequently attributed to Wall's “abstract” compositions. True, few of his works suggest such literal narrations. And his oeuvre is most often described as participating in the aesthetic ideal that the experience of the formal qualities of works of art – line, mass, space, colour – are sufficient unto themselves, that art does not need a story, metaphor, or an extra-art engagement for value. That was the early twentieth century justification for the non-objective expansion of the

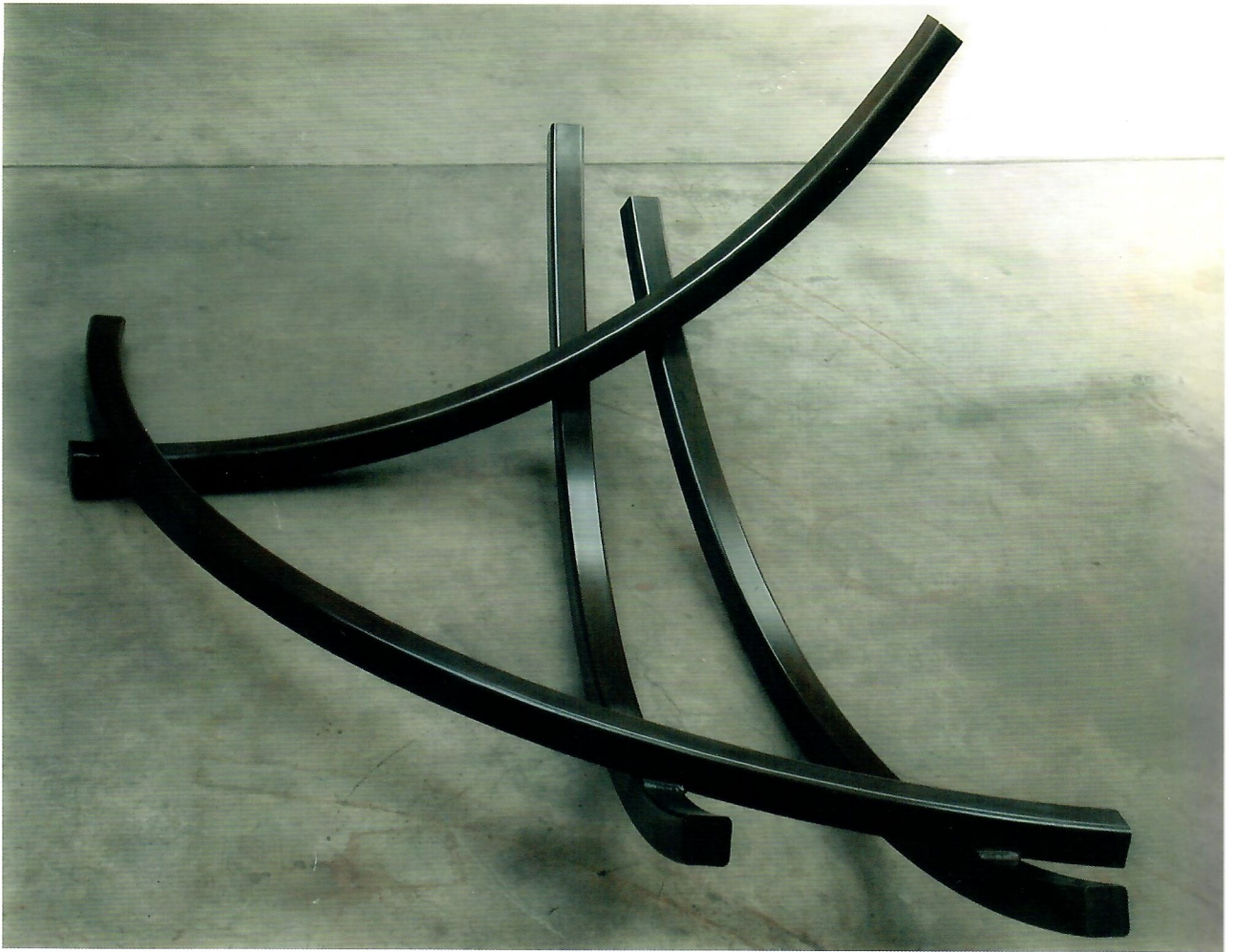
Gray's End 1993

Varnished steel

129.5 x 170.2 x 86.4 cm

51 x 67 x 34 in





Wave 2003

Waxed steel

254 x 203.2 x 101.6 cm

100 x 80 x 40 in



identity of art, as Mondrian in 1919 (“Natural Reality and Abstract Reality”) argued. “As a pure representation of the human mind, art will express itself in an aesthetically purified, that is to say, abstract form. . . This new plastic idea will ignore the particulars of appearance, that is to say, natural form and color.” But let us not forget that Mondrian was a devotee of both Theosophy and jitterbugging, and those passions contributed to his quest for a cosmic beauty and an equilibrium that is dynamic.

In art criticism, and life, the ideal of ‘purity’ is long passé. Identities of races, genders, classes, ethnicities, old age and middle, high art and low, abstraction and naturalism, historicism and the avantgarde, are increasingly merging. And the concept of “representation” has similarly been expanded to embrace not only pictorial subject matter but sensations, allusions, and contextual references. So while the forms in Wall’s “abstract” work clearly do not depict the figure, the compositions can be recognized to consistently imply movement, of both the trajectory of the golf ball and the torso, limbs and instrument that put it into motion.

One of many examples of that multiplicity of references, Wall’s 1993 *Gray’s End*, seems all about energetic thrusts. The metal material and gleaming, patent leather black coloration of the two curved panels, two small-diameter rods and the long, square-bore beam might suggest a fast machine. (Wall has had a connection to cars, but not to the speed of a sleek Batmobile type but rather to the Hollywood glamour of a 1955 Cadillac convertible of “Pacific Coral” hue, which over many years he painstakingly restored to something like automobile-as-beautiful-pink-boat (it was so jumbo, compared to trendy VW “Bugs” and Japanese compacts) and for a few years famously drove. But most of *Gray’s End*’s forms are irregular, in both their particular angles or curves and their wacky spatial relation. The juxtaposition of solid arcing planes and diagonal cylinders suggests its own dynamic equilibrium. Here, a more airborne V suggests an oblique, jutting angle, a twist of the arm or long drive shot gone awry. In the tension of angles the body is implied, both in the general sense of muscular movement and particularly as a result of the torque created by the turning of the upper and lower body, to produce a golf swing.

And the body is increasingly manifest in recent work, in both the overall mood of muscular spontaneity, and the specific repeated arcs of narrow bars, parallel to the ground and sometimes sweeping upward. The clarity of these mature compositions, such as *Wave* (2003), evoke a composed vivacity, a player at the top of his game. And here these tautly refined rhythmic gestures meet those from other creative realms, calling up movements in dance and music that display the kind of verve described by jazz musician Duke Ellington – “It don’t mean a thing if it ain’t got that swing.”



Brian Wall and Sylvia Brown in their pink Cadillac, Watsonville, California, 1988