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Albert Paley



# Baroque Paradoxes

A Conversation with  
**Albert  
Paley**



BY JAN GARDEN CASTRO

Albert Paley's monumental forms offer a metaphorical resolution to a dilemma first posed by the Industrial Revolution, when it disempowered the human (and human labor) by elevating machines. Today, that revolution has, of course, gone further, morphing into an electronic juggernaut with even greater capacity to dehumanize by reducing us to mere dots in cyberspace. Paley's magical style somehow integrates nature, humanity, science, and industrial materials into empathic forms with all the fluidity, asymmetry, and surprise gestures of bodies in motion. Like the artist himself, these constructions have big personality and presence, yet they somehow remain nimble and accessible. Monumental art that is "friendly" and "human" seems like a new category.

Paley's web site <[www.albertpaley.com](http://www.albertpaley.com)> gives a full list of his numerous accomplishments. A 50-year retrospective recently opened at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, and will remain on view through September 28, 2014. His work can be found in many museums, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, and London's Victoria and Albert Museum. And his more than 50 site-specific commissions include *Animals Always* (2006), a 130-foot-long archway for the St. Louis Zoo, and *Epoch* (2004), for a plaza in Washington, DC.

Opposite: *Jester*, 2013. Formed and fabricated painted steel, 18.75 x 9 x 7 ft.

Above: *Portal Gates*, 1974. Forged steel, brass, copper, and bronze, 90.75 x 72 x 4 in. Commissioned for the Renwick Gallery, Smithsonian American Art Museum.



*Synergy*, 1987. Forged and fabricated painted steel, 25 x 54 x 3 ft. Work installed at Museum Towers, Philadelphia, PA.

through hammering, it spreads, it delineates. You're using round or square bars to make a linear statement, so the quality of line is important. The early work was a lyrical organic form that I was drawing in space: How does a line begin and end when you have intersections of lines, positive and negative space?

The studio is not a factory but a space for aesthetic research. I started with a forged vocabulary, then I engaged in fabricated forms, which allowed me to deal more with volumetric relationships. So, a whole transition happened with the interplay of linear quality and fabricated aesthetic.

One of the consistencies in my work is the dialogue of opposites, which creates a synergy because of contrast, but I also try to merge them. Probably the best way of understanding it is as a baroque sensibility. Besides visual interplay, there are roughly two ways of creating a work — philosophically or emotionally. With the philosophical approach, a design theory is developed to manifest that philosophy. My approach to form development, in contrast, is emotionally based and intuitive. The emotional context, by its nature, is nonverbal, yet a dialogue happens between the intellectual component and your emotional sensibilities. When we speak or interface, there is always a balance between these polarizing opposites. The work deals with the interplay between the lyrical quality of line or gestures in space and the geometric context. The piece is not kinetic, but the viewer experiences a point in time and may contemplate what happened before and after a gesture.

Another consideration is that the majority of my work over the past 30 years is site-specific, so the scale, proportion, symbolism, and ambiance have a relationship to the architectural environment and human scale. The works for Park Avenue were sensitive to the site. Their positioning had a sense of progression, of passage. Some are

*Envious Composure*, 2013. Formed and fabricated painted steel, 18.25 x 7.5 x 7 ft.

**Jan Garden Castro:** *How has your aesthetic direction evolved from the Renwick Gallery's Portal Gates (1974) to the 13 emotionally charged monumental sculptures that you installed on Park Avenue last year?*

**Albert Paley:** The span of time from the Renwick Gallery to now is close to 40 years. A couple of things come into play. Obviously, my visual vocabulary is metal; I wouldn't say it's process-driven, but technology and metallurgy are intricately involved with the aesthetic. For instance, the Renwick *Gates* were forged: you heat the steel, bend it, and



TOP: TOM CRANE / BOTTOM: MYERS CREATIVE IMAGING

architectonic, some geometric and logical, some lyrical and ephemeral, some organic; some deal with complexity; some are stainless steel, which is reflective. Besides the form vocabulary, I also wanted to pick up on the dynamism of New York City—there's vehicular traffic, pedestrian traffic, noise, and I wanted to create a place of memory within that pattern of chaos. The location also deals with the sensibilities of the city: the dynamic thoroughfare in the low 50s, the more residential section of the 60s, and the last group of work at the Park Avenue Armory. I wanted to engage the cultural fabric of Park Avenue with those different urban sensibilities.

**JGC:** *Do you have a name for your aesthetic direction?*

**AP:** A lot of people see a line to the Constructivist school. They might look to Tatlin or George Rickey, but because my work is more emotionally based and deals with my personal experience, I don't really align with movements as such. Having said that, because of this complex dialogue that deals with alterability and change—

**Progression, 2013.** Formed and fabricated, painted steel, 9.25 x 44.25 x 4 ft.

and it's gestural—the closest context is Abstract Expressionism, which is nonliteral and deals with process, gesture, frozen motion. But then, if you go back through time, there's the Baroque sensibility; Art Nouveau is the closest to an organic sensibility; then you have Celtic and Islamic ornament. All of these deal with complexity of form and implied symbolism in the broadest context. And, as sculptures in space, they deal with light, shadow, gravity, and balance. So, it's more than just a graphic compositional sensibility; it deals with articulation of space. My work does not embrace Minimalism in any way.

**JGC:** *How did you reach this point? Your education at the Tyler School of Art was classical.*

**AP:** Formal training is important. The 1960s was a transitional period for art schools in general. Some would teach Pop Art or style, but Tyler was different, more of a Renaissance education, and art history played a prominent role in my appreciation and understanding of form development. Also, there was a huge emphasis on technique—ceramics, stone carving, wood, graphic materials. I was well grounded. It's different from trying to find a stylistic way and also from the information overload that people experience today.

**JGC:** *In Languorous Repose and Envious Composure, which flanked the massive Park Avenue Armory, I saw male and female Rochester (Paley's home city) Seneca warriors saying, "You should see our beautiful culture."*

**AP:** That's interesting. Sculpture does have scale and presence. There is all of that there. *Envious Composure* is sensual, sensitive, and gestural—the most lyrical of all. It folds in on itself; you could call it feminine. In *Languorous Repose*, the aggressive silhouette extends into space and deals with a shifting geometric base. In the relationship of the two, if you were to say male and female, there would be that polarization. Also, with *Jester* and *Encore* on 57th Street, you had the play between lyricism and assertion—that yin/yang dialogue of opposites. I would hope that within the dialogue there's an equality of balance, that one does not supersede the other.

**JGC:** *I was thinking, too, of a dialogue between Progression and the Seagram building.*

**AP:** This was different from my approach to the other sculptures. Usually I start with



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Above: *Tilted Column*, 2013. Formed and fabricated, naturally patinated steel, 19.83 x 9.42 x 7.92 ft.  
 Below: *Kirin*, 2009. Formed and fabricated, naturally patinated steel, 11 x 7.33 x 4.58 ft.



hundreds of drawings, then I make cardboard models. From the initial model, I use the computer to scan each element, and then we torch-cut a steel model. So, we go from a drawing to a cardboard model to a metal model, which becomes the basis for my sculpture. *Progression* comes from a lithograph that I did in the late '90s and then cut into a collage. The litho was a drawn line with positive and negative shapes; when you see the piece, you can see what it was cut out of—something similar to Matisse's cut-outs.

Because the sculptures are non-literal, each individual work makes reference to itself. All of these forms interrelate structurally, compositionally, or gesturally. The sculpture explains itself: its balance, its relationship, its ambiance. An element cut out of one form might be placed into another five feet away. You're dealing with a sequencing of time. It's the same kind of dialogue you have, inadvertently, with landscape: you experience the physicality of its evolution as you walk through it.

"Paley on Park Avenue" was an exhibition of my largest scale sculptures in situ to date, so I wanted it to reflect the scope of what I'm dealing with. I've talked about the relationship of the environment to the viewer, but I never name the pieces until after they're done. It has to do with my relationship to the sculpture, as well as thinking about the sculpture's relationship to the site. I don't know if "provocative" is the right word. On 67th Street, *Envious Composure* had a sense of referring to itself—the forms enclose and resolve themselves; there's a sense of peaceful independence. The title should direct the viewer to the emotional form context. I can't assume what people feel. *Jester* makes an obvious cultural reference, like a harlequin: a dancing red sculpture on its feet, extending into space.

**JGC:** *There's humor in it, too.*

**AP:** I know. Visually, it engages. With all of my work, the symbolic content is there, because people see things in symbolic ways. It's how you form your relationship to the world. Sculpture is always symbolic in that respect. Sometimes it's concrete, like *Tilted Column*.

**JGC:** *Tilted Column was in front of a church with columns, and the title reminded me of Brancusi's Endless Column.*

**AP:** That piece has a Constructivist sensibility of coming together and apart at the same time. Gravity and wind keep it in balance—the dynamism of invisible forces. Another important point: each steel sculpture weighs several tons, but people don't experience the heavy weight as much as the gestural quality playing in space. There's a *trompe l'oeil* aspect—the lack of physicality, which is a paradox. It's what sound does—it's an act of passage, it's ephemeral. Paradox is fundamental to what the work's about. What it is and what it appears to be negate one another.

**JGC:** *As I understand it, you pre-sold some of the 13 works to finance the installation. Were you considering both the Park Avenue site and the sculptures' eventual permanent home?*

**AP:** Not really. The works were all developed for Park Avenue. I moved to a new studio three years ago—a 40,000-square-foot space that, financially, took everything we had. When this opportunity came up, we had no money to create a new body of work, so we went to individuals and institutions who had supported us before, and, fortunately, we pre-sold eight works, which helped to finance the exhibition.

**JGC:** *Xu Bing once told Jason Edward Kaufman that public art is "the hardest thing to do," calling it "inflexible and hard to look at comfortably." Do you agree?*

**AP:** Public art is misunderstood. It's a different dialogue. The romantic notion of an artist developing an artwork unencumbered by outside forces is one extreme. When you design something site-specific in the public arena, the site determines much of the quality of the work: architectural scale, landscape design, symbolism, the institution, community, and so forth. A lot of artists may see that as restrictive, but if you're a swimmer, is the water an impediment to you? It's a different equation. For me, no matter how successful an artwork is, if it's put in an environment and doesn't engage and amplify that environment, it's not successful. Architecture also has to satisfy its variables.

**JGC:** *You have included iconic symbols in many works, including the staff in Good Shepherd Gate for the National Cathedral and natural symbols in Kohl Gate for the Cleveland*

*Botanical Garden and Animals Always for the St. Louis Zoo. Could you discuss one of these projects?*

**AP:** Most of my work is non-figurative and non-literal. Form is my vocabulary. If I'm dealing with an animal or a figure, then all of a sudden, it is put into a historical context. The challenge is to personalize that form. Basically, I draw all the time, so the animals are a stylization of my way of seeing form. For the St. Louis Zoo, there are animals and their environments. I'm attuned to the natural world, but it was a challenge to incorporate it into the work, and it increased my vocabulary.

**JGC:** *Your retrospective at the Corcoran Gallery follows a number of solo exhibitions in the past several years. What are you showing there?*

**AP:** It's a 50-year retrospective, and for me there's a consistency, but when the work started out, I was dealing with the school of direct carving; then I became involved with the metal vocabulary and a forged aesthetic. The iron brought me into the context of the dialogue of art and architecture.

**Animals Always, 2006. Formed and fabricated Corten steel, 40 x 130 x 12 ft. Work installed at the St. Louis Zoo, MO.**

I was also a goldsmith and furniture designer for several years. The exhibition shows the form development across these different areas, as well as drawing, which has always been part of my process. Carter Ratcliff's recent *Art & Antiques* article ("Certified Organic," June 2013) really puts that into context, and that's what I hope the retrospective will do.

**JGC:** *You do all of your own fabrication in your Rochester studio. How do you manage what is basically a small business?*

**AP:** Most of my career has been outside the gallery system. I have 16 people, because we do a lot of large-scale work. I have a director, a project manager, a structural engineer, somebody who deals with computer generation of forms, an archivist, a receptionist, a business manager. Half of my staff deals with support services, and half is hands on. One person, Jeff Jubenville, has been with me for 28 years as my fabrication manager. That's what we do in-house. We also coordinate with shipping and photography sub-contractors.

Probably the most difficult aspect is that everything we do is one of a kind; you bring past experience to bear, but there's always a learning curve. We do a lot of research, feasibility studies. My studio process aligns more with an architect's practice than with a sculptor's studio. Because of the scale of what we do, we have to deal with the engineering and to interface with other professionals. I started out as a one-man band, and the studio has grown based on the challenges of the work.

**JGC:** *How do you handle health and safety issues?*

**AP:** Safety is primary. We have safety gear and specific training that all employees go through. Except for me, everybody's been pretty safe. I've had some pretty bad accidents. In 2002, I was in a propane explosion and nearly died; 40 percent of my body had third-degree burns. That was a freak accident, though. Our safety record is very good in the studio.

**JGC:** *What kinds of things are most important for sculpture students to learn?*

**AP:** What is primary is one's unique voice, an awareness of where one fits into the cultural or art historical continuum, and the skills to manifest one's own abilities and to interface with others.

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