

Tom Hardy's *Oregon Landscape*

by Bruce Guenther

A perennial presence on the scene and actively exhibiting until 2012, Oregon sculptor Tom Hardy assured his place in art history with major public works in a dozen cities, including his heroic *Great Presidential Seal of the United States* (1997) for the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial in Washington, D.C. In 2017, an earlier masterpiece

returned to its rightful place in the public spotlight on the campus of Portland State University: the bronze *Oregon Landscape* (1962) was relocated and freed of its architectural function as a privacy screen for the ground-floor windows along the façade of the former Neuberger Hall on the city's South Park Blocks (fig. 1). The sculpture was refurbished in 2018 and is now sensitively presented on a discrete steel armature that allows viewers to move along the work's 144-



Figure 1. Students admire Tom Hardy's *Oregon Landscape* on the west façade of then South Park Hall (now Fairborz Maseeh Hall), 1965, University Archives Digital Gallery, Portland State University Library.

foot length and fully engage, at close range, with its brilliant visual interplay of line and mass, open and closed form (fig. 2). Situated between Southwest 10th and 11th Avenues on a walkway adjacent to PSU's Science Research and Teaching Center, the eight sections of Hardy's forged and welded bronze relief are now a freestanding monumental topography of Oregon, from the rocky Pacific Ocean beaches across the Cascade Mountains into the sagebrush deserts of Eastern Oregon.



Figure 2. Tom Hardy (American, 1921-2016), Oregon Landscape, 1962, forged and welded bronze (photo: Josh Gates). This distorted perspectival panoramic view shows the full length of the 144-foot sculpture located along the south side of PSU's Science Research and Teaching Center.

A native Oregonian, Thomas Austin Hardy (1921-2016) was born in Redmond and spent his childhood on small farms where he became fascinated by plants and animals and the seasonal cycles that marked agricultural life. Avidly drawing from nature since childhood, Hardy went on to study art first at Oregon State College and then at the University of Oregon, graduating with a B.S. in General Art in 1942. Following a tour of duty with the U.S. Infantry and Air Force in the Pacific theater during World War II, Hardy returned to Oregon both secure in his identity as a gay man and committed to a career as an artist. Working on the family farm initially, Hardy painted and made pottery at the Oregon Ceramic Studio in Portland, before enrolling once again at the University of Oregon to complete a Master of Fine Arts in sculpture in 1952. Having discovered direct-welding with an oxyacetylene torch in graduate school—the device combines fuel with pure oxygen to produce an extra-hot flame—Hardy found it the perfect tool for translating his passion for the visual and emotional power of nature from his drawings into an immediate, highly original sculptural language.

Hardy was a master draftsman, printmaker, and ceramicist as well as metal sculptor. He moved rapidly after graduation to establish his studio in Portland as a base from which he could cultivate his growing coterie of Northwest collectors, and subsequently pursue public and private

commissions across the country. He soon became one of the most active and ambitious artists in the community, exhibiting extensively throughout the region as well as nationally in museums such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Museum of Modern Art, Whitney Museum of American Art Annual, and in galleries from New York to Los Angeles, where he achieved a reputation and career few Oregon artists enjoyed in the late 1950s and 1960s. Just two years out of graduate school, Hardy joined the prestigious Kraushaar Gallery in New York, and was affiliated with them for over twenty-five years. (Fellow Portlanders Carl Morris and Hilda Grossman Morris were represented by Kraushaar as well throughout their lives.) Teaching periodically in the first two decades of his career despite the homophobic bias of the times that closed certain situations to him, Hardy was in demand to teach direct metal welding as a visiting artist or as faculty at the University of Oregon, University of California Berkeley, San Francisco Art Institute, Reed College, University of Wyoming, University of British Columbia, and Tulane University in New Orleans.

The use of an oxyacetylene torch in fine-art production in the United States had been established in the late 1930s, in large measure, by David Smith's first exhibitions of his direct-weld abstract sculptures in New York. Liberated from traditional modeling, casting, and carving, Smith's use of direct oxyacetylene welding to imbue the sculptural process with the exhilarating freedom of abstract expressionist painting was revolutionary. The success of his work attracted other artists to the technique and birthed a generation of direct-weld abstract sculptors—prominently Herbert Ferber, Seymour Lipton, and Ibram Lassaw. Thus, the oxyacetylene torch moved from the machine shop and factory floor into the studio and subsequently into the curriculum of the expanding postwar fine-art departments of academia. It was against the dominance of Abstract Expressionism in both painting and sculpture of the time that Hardy forged a new nature-based

vocabulary employing the full range of effects possible with direct oxyacetylene welding. Working deftly with torch and metal, he harnessed spontaneous decision-making and gesture to create an innovative formal vocabulary abstracted from nature which attracted significant national attention in the early 1960s.

In conceiving *Oregon Landscape* as a diorama-like celebration of the ecology and rich biodiversity of the state, Hardy created a magisterial work that additionally provides the viewer with a master's fulsome index of welding techniques. Hardy began the commission by compiling a list of both the common and unique flora of the state, from which he then developed an extensive series of sketches and drawings as the point of departure for the work. As was his practice for much of his lifetime, Hardy used drawing to

translate the carefully observed subject into the language of art through its progressive simplification, to discover and define its essential structure and shape before moving to the torch to invent the forms three-dimensionally in metal. His scrupulous visual dissection of plant forms and isolated core silhouettes provided him

with initial templates, which he and his studio assistants could use to cut bronze sheet for everything from bushels of bivalves to hundreds of vine maple and rhododendron leaves in the course of creating the massive work (fig. 3).



Figure 3. *Oregon Landscape*, detail showing leaves cut from bronze sheet (photo: Josh Gates).

Moving from drawing into welding, Hardy erected a continuous linear structure of round and square bronze rods—not unlike a drawing in space—for each section of the relief sculpture. The open armature would be altered or extended as he responded to and realized the unique characteristics of each of the topographic zones from seashore to high desert. Shifting the visual reference point of the linear elements from horizon line to foreground through the placement of sheet-metal panels or plant forms, Hardy insured an ever evolving relationship for the viewer that effectively evokes the physical characteristics of the place. *Oregon Landscape* begins with the immediacy of one's experience of clambering over rocks along the shoreline



Figure 4. *Oregon Landscape*, detail with octopus, crabs, kelp (photo: Josh Gates).

to look down into surging tidal pools teeming with echinoderms, sea urchins, sea stars, octopus, and crabs (fig. 4). Hardy evokes the ocean tide by overlaying round and forged undulating rods which arc over a sheet-metal background, so that the metal rods and their cast shadows convey the shimmering optics of the tide's force passing through water and rocks. The armature is divided into open and closed zones by shaped metal panels worked from both sides—ball-peen hammered and molten brazing rod on the surface and repoussé work from the back—to suggest the textures of barnacle-covered rocks and the fine pebbled sands that collect in tidal pools. Drifts of kelp mark the top edge of this section of the relief, while clusters of sea stars and chitons with arrays of sand dollars and razor clams populate the abstract interleaving of

open and closed planes. Hardy riffs on the surface textures and joints of the habitués of the tidal pool with brilliant economy through his braze-welding of forms and use of the brazing rod's molten tracking on the surface. The coastal panel is the most fulsome in terms of oxy-welding versatility and innovation, and sets a high standard for the medium's expressive possibilities Hardy would realize across this majestic work.

With the habitat and ecology of the lush slopes of rain-soaked arcadian



Figure 5. *Oregon Landscape*, detail with dense vegetation (photo: Josh Gates).

forests of the coastal range and the fertile agricultural valleys following in the next two sections, Hardy shifts perspective to position the viewer as if pushing through the dense vegetation at eye level (fig. 5). The linear armature all but disappears as the burgeoning layers of flora—ferns, *Darlingtonia*, elderberry, dogwoods, and maples—create complex masses of texture visually alive with the interplay of light and shadow. Trillium, Oregon

grape, and rhododendron come to the fore as the artist uses the linearity of branch and the repetition of leaf structures as a base for a richly layered staccato of edge and surface, rhythm and texture, to animate his evocation of Oregon's all-encompassing green.



Figure 6. *Oregon Landscape*, detail with conifers, ferns, maple leaves (photo: Josh Gates).

In the middle sections of *Oregon Landscape*, the forest gives way to fern and large-leaf maples from which meadowland emerges (fig. 6), and the viewer's position changes once again. Hardy steps us back to consider the open, distant valley vistas with his rod-worked horizon line, while fields, groves of Oregon ash and oak, and dimensional rock outcroppings signal the beginnings of the foothills of the Cascade Mountain range. Where the massive tree trunks of the coastal forests were subsumed as background by the close-up riot of ground foliage, now Hardy deploys strong vertical

columns suggestive of old-growth ponderosa pine and Douglas fir tree trunks as a foreground frame through which the viewer glimpses the valley and distant forests where tectonic-formed mountains bisect the state. Hardy elaborates on his earlier use of bronze plate in these sections to define the topographical features as valleys become mountains (fig. 7).

Stands of coniferous trees are rendered in the round, as silhouette cutouts in the plate, or through molten brazing-rod drawing across the surface—a tracery at times not unlike the skeining paint of



Figure 7. *Oregon Landscape*, detail with linear mountain forms in background (photo: Josh Gates).

Pollock. One becomes more aware of the artist's use and texturing of differing gauges of bronze sheets in these sections of the relief as the work shifts into more abstract, planar passages in concert with the assertive linear rod drawing of his initial armature.

The Cascades section of the sculpture continues the distant view with a composition of bronze rods defining horizon and mountainous verticality, while the open and closed areas of that armature feature cut, shaped, and forged plate to embody the scale and rocky majesty of the mountains, cloaked in the conifers of the great Northwest forests—western red cedar, ponderosa pine, Douglas fir. The inventiveness of Hardy's vocabulary in responding to the shapes and textures of the trees illuminates his expert control of the unpredictable molten metal used both to establish structure and to embellish surface in the work. From the simplicity of an outlined

silhouette and drawn trees to a repoussé forest of tree tops in plate metal, Hardy's welding skill culminates in the boldly brazed and chased complexity of fully three-dimensional evergreens, assembled of cut-plate triangles covered in melted brazing rod that has subsequently been forged to retexture and further animate surfaces. Hardy brilliantly captures both the delicate flora and the stony monumentality of the Cascades' glory.

As the welded armature defined the Cascade Mountains, Hardy continues it into the final High Desert sections with the distant views defined by armature and a series of layered, worked bronze plates to build the succession of plains and plateaus. The dry windswept scrubland stretches out as a horizon of rock plateaus that hide the geological and prehistoric past. At the plateaus' base, the foreground opens to reveal the John Day Fossil Beds with their stratified remains evincing the deep history of the place (fig. 8). Here the base plate has an enlivening surface of drawn and splattering molten brazing rod, which suggests the successive sedimentary layers trapping the scattered skulls and bones of a distant time's inhabitants.



Figure 8. *Oregon Landscape*, detail with fossil bed (photo: Josh Gates).

And so, Hardy finishes *Oregon Landscape* as it began with the viewer up close, now absorbed in the exposed fossils. The work is a tribute to the wonders of Oregon, but also, metaphorically, a testimony to the continuity of existence as Hardy subtly directs our imagination to reflect on the beginning of life at the ocean's edge and ends our journey with the inevitability of death and a return to the earth.

Oregon Landscape is a triumph of the artist's vision and technical prowess which firmly established his fresh nature-based vocabulary nationally. In this magnum opus of his career, Hardy gave tangible form to the geography of Oregon while conveying an elusive sense of place through the lively interaction of light and shadow across the plethora of forms in the shallow physical depth of his work. A superb example of public art that is rediscovered by successive generations, *Oregon Landscape* delights the eye and lofts anew a wonder at its simultaneous abstracted invention and verisimilitude to the experience, just around the corner and down the road, of the richly varied and often breathtaking Oregon terrain.

Art historian and independent curator, Bruce Guenther is Adjunct Special Exhibitions Curator for the Oregon Jewish Museum and Center for Holocaust Education, Portland. A specialist in post-war American and European Art, Guenther was Chief Curator and Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art, Portland Art Museum, Oregon, until his retirement in 2014. Previously he served as Chief Curator at the Orange County Museum of Art, Newport Beach, California, and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, and head of the Modern Art Program at the Seattle Art Museum. He has curated numerous major monographic and thematic exhibitions internationally, and authored numerous books and exhibition catalogues. His essay on Tom Hardy's *Oregon Landscape* is published here with the kind permission of The Ford Family Foundation, which commissioned the piece for Critical Conversations, an element of the Foundation's Visual Arts Program.