

# sculpture

## CAL LANE: VEILED HISTORIES IN STEEL

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*Guttersnipe*, 2012. Steel, 8 x 6 x 40

Critics define Cal Lane as a female sculptor-welder, a woman using male-oriented, working-class technology to make art. Such an ahistorical critique, however, overlooks both the history of 20th-century welded steel sculpture (from González and Picasso through David Smith and Anthony Caro) and the fact that Lane's steel works are not welded. Duchampian critical theorist Michael Rattray convincingly demonstrates Lane's relationship to the readymade but ignores the century-long history of welded steel sculpture when he describes Lane's (supposed) use of welding as a contemporary "non-art practice." Curator Kay Hartenstein Saatchi also uncritically describes Cal Lane's work as "welding."



*Guttersnipe* (detail), 2012. Steel, 8 x 6 x 40 ft.

Though art writers and curators may have a limited knowledge of sculpture techniques compared to sculpture historians and sculptors themselves, it is difficult to see how Lane's work could be considered welded—in fact, it is the very opposite. She uses a cutting process rather than a joining process, so this imprecise use of the term “welding” is more than a minor catachresis. To clarify, welding is the joining of two parent metals by melting them while at the same time adding a similar intermediate metal, a process that produces a homogeneous piece of metal. Lane burns through steel plate with an oxyacetylene torch and perforates thinner steel sheet with a plasma cutter. There may be an impressive display of sparks, but these processes are not welding.

Modernist sculpture historian Albert Elsen, interviewed shortly before his death, claimed that post-Modernism as a style was largely non-existent, and that the biggest change in sculpture was simply “the presence of women in great and increasing numbers.” He was fascinated by how “technological changes like tools encourage women” but overlooked how women come to three-dimensional art relatively free of the prejudices that formed sculpture over the last century. Women once pursued sculpture with a vengeance tempered by historically denied access, and they are now re-exploring various, almost abandoned techniques, including the use of the pedestal, mold making, metal casting, carving, and welding.



*Shovel*, 2004. Steel, 147 x 21 x 12 cm. each.

Lane draws repetitive shapes on found steel objects, then cuts them out in stencil-like patterns. The positive forms are removed (and stored). She repeats this process again and again until the steel is riddled with perforations, with just enough of the original structure remaining to retain the form of the readymade. In a gendered history of labor, this constantly repeated touch can be understood as characteristic of traditional women's work, although *taille direct* sculpture, traditional men's work, is also repetitive. Lane says, "Labor is most definitely a part of my work...it is the repetitive process of cutting that I crave."

Over the last century, *taille direct* developed within an ideology of reductivism. It was the atavistic sublimation of Neolithic tool making. As one proof of this, compare the sharp edge of a tool, a knife or a chisel, to the extreme surface of a sculpture by Brancusi. Contrast this with Lane's sculpted ready-made tools—shovels and wheelbarrows, their function emasculated by her pierced lace work, bare steel skeletons of the sculptural past.

David Rabinowitch, a protégé of Donald Judd, claimed that he made his floor sculptures from slabs of steel because steel was a neutral material, a consequence of its ubiquity in 20th-century Modernist sculpture; therefore it was the most appropriate material to use in the production of abstract art. Rabinowitch understood steel as a sign for abstraction itself, unclothed by the gross historical poetics of its materiality. Lane understands sculpture differently: clothed in a flickering historical shadow, it is a veiled play of contrasts alternately concealed and revealed. One cannot imagine Lane working like Rabinowitch with a brand new steel plate, fresh with mill scale. She approached steel readymades on an escalating scale, beginning with a shovel and wheelbarrow, then moving on to an oil drum, an automobile, a sewer pipe, and a shipping container. The size and form of her works are tied to objective specifications, the industrial history of steel.



*Moral Mortar*, 2011. Steel, 136 x 52 x 15 cm.

*Doilies* (2000) consists of circular steel plates cut into lace patterns. The dialectic is obvious: industrial versus domestic, strong versus delicate, masculine versus feminine, functional versus decorative. *Doilies* recalls the ornamental tracery of Gothic and Islamic architecture and its 19th-century rebirth in the structural steel and glass of Joseph Paxton's Crystal Palace. The lace doily, a crocheted ornamental mat, derives from these sources.

Lane's sculpture translates fretwork into steel. Historically, fretwork is an interlaced geometric pattern, a grid or lattice cut out of wood, metal, or even soft stone, used to decorate furniture and musical instruments, windows and doors. In Hindi, a *jaali* refers to a fretwork wall, an ornamental pattern of perforations constructed through calligraphy and geometry. The openwork provides shade and breeze, concealment and confinement. Just as architecture is clothing and clothing a form of architecture, so the *jaali* conceals as it reveals, functioning like the burka, the over-garment of Islam. Roland Barthes claimed that it was "where the garment gapes...which is erotic: the intermittence of skin flashing between two articles of clothing, between two edges: it is the flash itself which seduces." For Lane, it is the "metaphor of lace...[that] intrigued me by its associations of hiding and exposing at the same time, like a veil to cover, or lingerie to reveal."

In *5 Shovels* (2005), the plasma-cut steel spades have non-functional, lace-cut blades. As assisted readymades, they acknowledge Duchamp's spade work—*In Advance of a Broken Arm* (1915). Each of the five shovels has the approximate size and shape of a face, recalling veils, masks, the pierced visors of medieval helmets, and Gothic arches. They also resemble cuneiform lace lingerie, priapically inverted, and are the most obviously erotic of Lane's works. In clothing, lace often functions as a cultural surrogate for hair, whether worn as a veil (imitating the concealing and revealing of the face and neck by hair) or lingerie (imitating the concealing and revealing of the vulva by the patterned hair of the mons pubis).

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## GALLERY

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*Guttersnipe*, as shown at the Grunt Gallery in Vancouver, is a 20-foot section of the original 40-foot-long sculpture, a half pipe of corrugated aluminized steel sewer pipe, six feet in diameter, placed between wall and floor. It is cut along its length into a narrative of strange creatures set in a landscape of buildings and bombs, their shadows projected stencil-like against the wall, as if the steel has become a film. These drawings deserve but do not encourage study. The relatively small repeated images merge into a very nearly hallucinogenic or (in Freudian terminology) polymorphous perverse surface, an ironically reproduced *horror vacui* that is more texture than image. The overall size of the readymade produces a historical viewing distance from which Lane's sculpture appears both crystalline and vegetal, recalling geometric garden arbors twined with vines. The overall gray and brown coloration recalls both the securely ordinary and the numinous. Just as gray is the color of bare steel, brown is the color of history. Lane's brown is the patina of ferrous metal. While rust is a common enough finish for Modernist welded steel sculpture, in Lane's work, steel seems a victim of its own chemistry, rusting right into the stencil pattern, a natural simulacrum of dappled light, inevitably veiled by historical twilight but opening up, enlarging, encompassing, with potential for constant and literal growth.

Refusing to work under Rodin, Brancusi declared, "Nothing grows in the shade of large trees." Yet early Modernists like Brancusi, Gaudier-Brzeska, Duchamp-Villon, and Boccioni all worked in the shadow of Rodin, often reproducing his themes (partial and striding figures, the kiss, the gate) in order to contradict him. In his turn, Carl Andre cunningly chose to work in the shade of Brancusi, thereby generating self-fulfilling provenance for his work.<sup>9</sup> Lane's *Guttersnipe* recalls Andre's recent steel plate and shadow sculpture, *Rise* (2011). Unlike Brancusi, Lane thrives in the shadow of history.

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Cal Lane was a recipient of the International Sculpture Center 2001 Outstanding Student Achievement in Contemporary Sculpture Awards

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