

# SOLO IN SoHo

*Daniel C. Dempster's abstract sculptures go on show at New York's Fulcrum Gallery*



*Daniel C. Dempster*

MY WORK DESCRIBES THE MOVEMENT OF WATER AND LIGHT," remarks artist Daniel C. Dempster. "It stems directly from my academic background in physics and computer animation. It all sounds very theoretical," he adds, "but what it is really about is not being theoretical. It has to do with coming full circle through that and rediscovering how simple things really are."

New York gallery-goers will experience Dempster's vision this month, when the 32-year-old Bermudian opens his first solo exhibit at SoHo's Fulcrum Gallery, beneath the Guggenheim Museum. His distinctive abstract sculptures explore the effects of water and light on a variety of materials. Dempster has weathered several pieces by anchoring them within a dock, suspending them under water, observing the patterns of water and the effects produced for many months of exposure to the elements.

"I knew (the pieces) would be important, but I didn't know why then," says Dempster.

The centrepiece of the exhibition is a piece called *Urbanos*, a mahogany and steel installation that was left to weather in Castle Harbour for a year and a half.

"It was in a group show in Fulcrum last year and received a lot of attention," Dempster explains, "so the gallery has held onto it. Most of the other work in the show was done in Virginia."

The show is welcome reward for the Warwick Academy and Bermuda College graduate, who has exhibited drawings and sculpture in Bermuda, Canada and several U.S. cities. Dempster got his Bachelor degree studying computer graphics and Russian literature at the University of Waterloo, Ontario, before graduating from Sheridan College, Ontario, with high honours from post-graduate studies in computer animation. Dempster also considers his stints in the Canadian Forces and the Bermuda Regiment essential to his career: "My military training has had direct bearing on my ability to persevere in the integrity of my art."

"When I first came back to Bermuda after studying abroad, it

was really a shock," remembers Dempster, relaxing in his airy Bermuda studio. "I didn't know what I wanted to do. I had been doing these very precise abstracts; I took them to all the usual places and they said, 'Oh, well, this really is very nice, but—actually, we can tell you what to paint if you want to sell.' I said, 'No, thank you,' and rolled up my canvases and went away."

"I knew at some point something would come along. I was trying to look at Bermuda and I thought everything had been done—what could I possibly do that is going to be different? I found myself looking at the water at Ariel Sands, and the curve of the bay, and I started drawing particular curves and the shapes of land that hadn't been studied that particular way."

Dempster enjoys doing his coloured pencil drawings, inspired by Bermuda's rugged bays and rock formations. "I found myself looking in the water and then closer in at the tiny rock pools, at

what was happening with the refraction and diffraction of light in the movement of the water and I started to render that. I found I was able to do the abstract realistically. Most of Bermuda is composed of rugged coastline, which has nothing to do with being pretty or touristy. The inherent beauty is in the shapes of the rocks and the way the water moves over them."

Dempster further explored these phenomena as water sculptures 'in situ,' then as fountains and sculptures on land. "I was not so much bounding the water as guiding it by the shapes of mylar which I sent it over," he explains. "I directed a really powerful halogen lamp

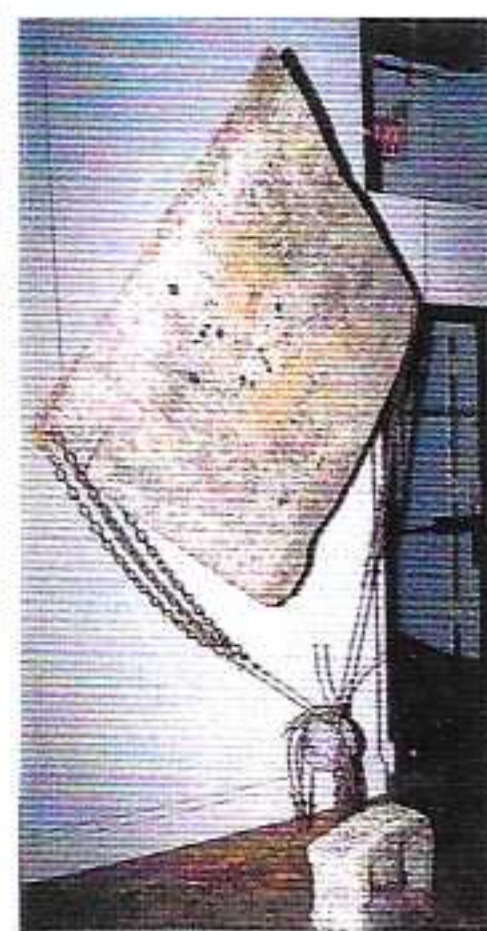
through it so that one could see the ripples of water and how they were manipulated."

Dempster continued to explore the effects of water and light on materials, and in 1993 exhibited locally in a City Hall show called 'Context,' and in 1994, 'Out of Context,' a more comprehensive exhibit at Dockyard with installations and large sculptures using driftwood and steel found around Bermuda's shore.

"Dan's work seems to me to be about shifting from the man-made or human, through time to the natural and organic," says



*Art in the making—(top) Dempster submerges a piece from his dock; (above) Urbanos after being raised; (right) Urbanos in the gallery*





Charles Zuill, fellow artist and professor of art history at the Bermuda College. "When I walk along the beach, I see once-pristine things that have now become so organic."

"Part of the interest (in Dan's work)," Zuill adds, "is in watching it shift. It takes it into the realm of music, because of the element of time involved."

Some of the colours in his latest capillary rusted steel pieces bring to mind the colours in the works of Maxfield Parish, but Dempster is wary of attributing influence to specific artists. "I find those sorts of associations after the fact. I am very wary of the notion of influences," he says. "I prefer to think of them as companions whose work I equally respect."

**D**EMPSTER'S INTRODUCTION TO THE SoHo GALLERY WHICH now shows his work was an example of synchronicity. "In 1994, I passed through New York on the way back from Ireland," he says. "I stayed in a friend's loft, and his neighbour invited us to tea and then invited us upstairs to meet a dealer."

As it turned out, the dealer was interested in Dempster's paintings, but she only represented mid- to late-career artists. But the neighbour (accomplished Manhattan artist Peter Barton) liked his abstract sculpture and introduced Dempster to Fulcrum.

"About four months later, in Virginia, I received two phone calls. The first was from a gallery in Philadelphia, saying, 'We're returning your portfolio. Your work is too intellectual for our gallery—try New York.' I was very glum. Later I had another phone call—from New York. Fulcrum wanted four pieces for a show they were doing that summer."

Dempster never looked back. Over the past two years, he has participated in 10 group shows at the well-placed Fulcrum Gallery before landing this month's solo effort. "They said, 'You've been patient with us—we think it's about time you had your own show,'" Dempster relates.

He has also kept in touch with Peter Barton, who appears proud of his Bermudian find: "He (Dempster) is an introspective observer who does not ask questions through the insight process, but observes the goings-on, catching from time to time the 'esthetic incidents' he finds there," Barton says. "It never seems to be Dan's intention to impress a content upon his audience, but rather to share a wonderment."

Life as a New York artist is a far cry from the isolated shelter of Bermuda, something of which Dempster is all too aware. But he is not one to forget where he came from. Part of this desire to contribute to the arts in Bermuda led to his forming a life drawing group in 1993.

"There were two reasons the group was formed: one was to focus my own mind. The other was social," says Dempster. "The idea was to get artists together in an atmosphere of camaraderie and also work out the egotism and insecurity that can exist here in Bermuda between artists. I don't think there is any place for that here. Leave that to the galleries and the politicians."

Dempster is disappointed that for the most part, artists in Bermuda prefer not to socialise and share inspiration together. But he has found an exception in several young artists from whom he has commissioned works.

"With these people, I have found a group of artists where personal concerns have no place. That impresses me a great deal and

I want to see that continue," says Dempster, whose studio walls hang with works by Bruce Stuart, Graham Foster, Henry Ward, Helen White, Otto Trott, Billy Gringley and Robert Bassett. "When artists respect each other's work, then it can be very comforting and helpful. Being able to bounce ideas around and talk is important."

Dempster, who has written critical essays on art and cultural identity for *The Bermudian*, believes "there is a standard by which art can be measured, and it has nothing to do with critical reviews, schools of movement or anything else. It has to do with to what extent the artist can remove his ego from the making of the piece," he says. "When one does that, one is able to enter and listen to it."

"This is contrary to certain schooling which bashes the student over the head and says, 'Do this and this and this,' and leaves intuition as something that the student either gets—or doesn't. Students are left to stumble blindly. Some of them never get it. I think it is possible, indeed essential, to cultivate intuition."

This notion of intuition relates to other philosophies Dempster has been exploring with passionate determination over the past few years, many of them focussed on Bermuda. "If we really want to talk about a national identity, then the government should be falling over itself encouraging people to create, mounting competitions, and presenting incentives to develop the perception that the arts are of value."

Dempster is also a firm believer in letting intuition guide his own work. "As I have been working the pieces up into sculpture, what I realise I've been doing is removing my ego from the work, so the work is doing the speaking, not me. It was remarkable how quickly this was confirmed. Fulcrum chooses those pieces which I know have IT."

His experience with a piece called *Moment* exemplifies this phenomenon. "I think (*Moment*) is one of the most graceful pieces I have ever made," he says. "This piece of metal was sitting in the garage for ages, and I kept playing with it and thinking, no, that's not right—no, that's not it. Then I went to a dump where I saw this enormous bundle of stainless steel wire and I knew that was it. As soon as I got home, I uncoiled it and stuck a bundle of wire in either end of this thing and it just sang."

For while his work has a lot to do with weathering and change in materials over time, he feels it has more to do with fully experiencing the moment of things as they are.

"A sense of aesthetic really is that window we can squeeze into the sphere of our thoughts which are buzzing around in our head all the time, so we can actually see something else other than our perception of self."

"Everything is beautiful—if you are prepared to open your eyes to see it." ■

*Fulcrum Gallery SoHo is located at 144 Mercer St., New York, directly underneath the downtown Guggenheim Museum (Broadway and Spring Street); open 11 a.m.–6 p.m., Tues.–Sun. For information, call gallery director, Valerie Shakespeare, (212) 966-6848. Dempster will also be showing work in two solo Bermuda shows: April 12–24, sculpture at The Masterworks Foundation Gallery, Bermuda House Lane, Front Street; and Nov. 1–21, drawings at The Bermuda Society of Arts Gallery, City Hall & Arts Centre, Church Street. Next year, Dempster will have his first museum show, May 10–July 7, at the Peninsula Fine Arts Center, Newport News (affiliated with the Virginia Fine Arts Museum: major installations and sculpture).*