

# Dan Wollmering

## Natural selection: NEW SCULPTURES

Flinders Lane Gallery 11-29 September 2007

The Other 2007 photographer Max Loudon



Conditional Access 2007 photographer Max Loudon



In 1563, Bernard Palissy, in his *Recepte Véritable*, asked what alternatives there were to the abstract, sterile geometry that dominated the theory of fortification of his day. This had no lived relationship, he argued, to the inhabited places on which it was imposed. He looked to nature and saw 'the miraculous protection of molluscs such as sea-snails... designed with so much geometry and architecture.' Their shells suggested that a defensible shape could be coiled and partitioned. If a town were like this, the inhabitants could retreat one section at a time, thus always having a refuge available.

The importance of the organic as a model is often seen as characteristic of modernism. The example of Palissy, however, suggests that the bionic principle, where a living structure suggests a prototype for a designed object, has a much longer history. This is the history of the tension between form as a unity, as *Gestalt* to be intuited, and form as the outcome of a rational relationship among parts, a synthesis or work of the intellect. The sculptures of Dan Wollmering partake of this tension. As the title *Natural Selection* indicates, Wollmering is aware of the organic referents that are in play in his freestanding sculptural entities. However their formal presence is ambiguous. This is revealed in their modular construction, where an accretion of elements, each with a mechanistic turn, is subsumed to an organic authority.

Evolution, the process propelled by natural selection, has a way of throwing up strange forms, in art as in nature. Wollmering's constructions are both optimistic and ominous. How does one account for this uncanny presence? In *The Life of Forms in Art* (1934), Henri Focillon argued that form is driven to diversify, even if its logic is that it produces monsters. What is at work is the generative power of mutation, which 'unrolls its demented existence — an existence that is merely the turmoil... of a single, simple form.'

Wollmering's sculptures share something of Focillon's monstrous momentum, yet in their tactile textures, airy curves, and human scale, they evade the menace he implies. Their gracefully cambered ribbons of wood, their fragile overlapping tiles, their striations and tessellations have a voluptuous quality. They swell and diminish with a musical rhythm. These works have a quality of being machine-animals, or perhaps animal-machines, with a geometry that derives from a structure of nested, overlapping segments. The theme of bilateral symmetry and binary opposition runs through the group of works, implying that there is an enigmatic taxonomy at work.

Just as the enclosed chambers of a shell, or the armoured plates of a crab, confront us with their mysterious and secretive life, Wollmering's forms declare their inscrutable otherness.

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The Architecture of the Convent. Brainwashed 2007