

Iron and Steel. Paolo Bellini, James Licini, Josef Maria Odermatt

August 16 to November 10 2013

Swiss sculptors working in iron and metal made major contributions to international postwar sculpture. Among them were names such as Max Bill and Bernhard Luginbühl or Oscar Wiggli and Jean Tinguely. Due to the specific qualities of the materials they used and the specific advantages of working with iron, metal and steel—by means of forging and welding—they developed fundamentally new forms of expression in three-dimensional composition. Paolo Bellini, James Licini and Josef Maria Odermatt were among the leading next-generation representatives of the genre in Switzerland. They took up working with iron to find, in sculpture, creative responses to the avant-garde approaches of the 1960s and 1970s as in *arte povera* and minimal art. Following on from the solo exhibitions of Bernhard Luginbühl (2003) and Oscar Wiggli (2007), the show *Iron and Steel* takes a comprehensive look at the most recent work in the careers of the three outstanding artists Paolo Bellini, James Licini and Josef Maria Odermatt.

Iron and steel first appeared very late on the scene in the history of sculpture. As non-precious and relatively inexpensive metals they were used for manufacturing commodities, making machines and trains, and building railroads. Iron and steel were seen as strongly representing technological advancements and the Industrial Revolution, but these materials were not associated directly with art. Sculptures and sculptors still relied on the more «valuable» materials of bronze and marble in the pursuit and further development of classically figurative subject matter.

A symbol of radical change was the Eiffel Tower, which was built in 1889 for the centenary of the French Revolution. The iron lattice construction employed steel girders and reached a hitherto unimaginable height although it weighed comparatively little. The Eiffel Tower is both a symbol for progress and the first modern sculpture in art history. In 1912, Picasso took the step of translating the construction used for the Eiffel Tower into the vocabulary of sculpture and created the cubist *Guitar* out of sheet metal. This three-dimensional collage was referred to as an «assemblage» and differs fundamentally from all existing pieces of sculpture: it is neither hewn out of a block of stone, carved in wood, nor modeled from clay to be later cast in bronze. Instead it has been constructed and assembled out of separate individual components. Materials that had been rarely used in art so far and their specific processing techniques brought the movement away from traditional forms of figural representation to the realization of abstract avant-garde conceptions of space around 1910.

Already in the 1920s and 1930s, Swiss artists such as Johannes Itten, Serge Brignoni, Walter Bodmer and Max Bill experimented with construction—or non-representational sculpture—and created surrealistic and constructivist sculptures out of iron and steel. After World War II, exhibitions at the Kunsthalle Basel and in Bern played a decisive role in the dawn of the new era of European art. There, the first retrospectives of works by artists whom totalitarian regimes had branded as «degenerate» were shown—such as Paul Klee, Wassily Kandinsky and Fernand Léger—as well as overviews of the new art styles emerging in Paris and New York. This background was influential in shaping the next generation of Swiss artists who began their artistic careers as the «young rebels» during the 1940s and 1950s. These artists, mostly trained as sculptors or decorators or classically schooled painters, began to use iron, among them Bernhard Luginbühl, Robert Müller and Jean Tinguely. The qualities of iron ranged from aggressive and unpolished to rhythmic and playfully dance-like, and it became the dominant «content» of Swiss iron sculptures at the time. With their work, these artists anticipated the Nouveaux Réalistes and the pop art arrangements of discarded consumer products.

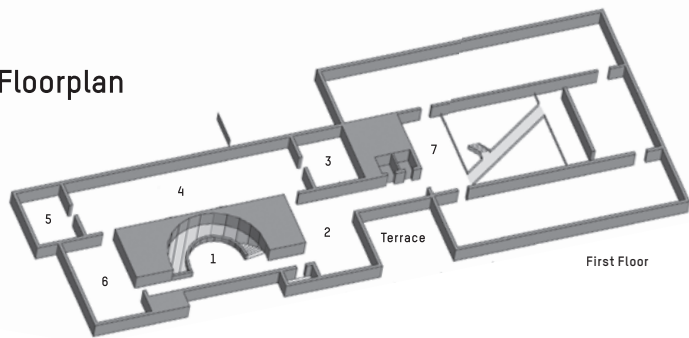
In the 1950s, abstract-expressionist iron and steel sculpture was a recognized avant-garde approach. Hence the avant-garde of the 1960s and 1970s departed from the concept of iron as an existentialist material and began to use it strategically in order to document art concepts. In the 1960s, iron and steel were used in the context of addressing specific issues and not primarily signs of avant-gardism. In Switzerland, this generation of sculptors working with iron found its direct successors and leading figures in Paolo Bellini, James Licini and Josef Maria Odermatt. Their artistic investigations are profound. They are artisans in techniques needed for working with metal. The scrap-metal yard was no longer their main source for iron, as it had been for the pioneers in the field, for the artists whose creations reflected the materials' paradoxical evocativeness that spans ruin, endurance and resistance. Bellini, Licini and Odermatt work with metal that they buy new direct from iron and steel suppliers. Their materials are massive square iron bars and steel plates, I-beams or steel square tube as well as ultra-thin sheet metal. The sculptors modify the form of their «raw materials» of standardized pieces of metal by hammering. Or cut them up into pieces that are then, with the aid of welding technology or massive bolts, made into constructions. Licini, Odermatt and Bellini use iron and steel in re-

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sponse to contemporary avant-garde approaches of their time. Licini addresses the indisputability of reduction in minimal art. Odermatt engages with the archaism of arte povera, while Bellini paraphrases the classical thematic repertory of sculpture and architecture. Each of the three sculptors has made a major contribution to the history of Swiss sculpture.

Floorplan



Rooms 1 – 3:	Paolo Bellini
Room 4 / Terrace:	James Licini
Rooms 5 – 6:	Josef Maria Odermatt
Room 7:	Sculptures from the collection of the Kunstmuseum Bern

Rooms 1, 2 and 3: Paolo Bellini

Paolo Bellini differs essentially from his Swiss colleagues in the league of sculptors working with iron and steel. This is because they select to use these metals, first and foremost, for the purpose of defying opposition and uprooting tradition. In their pursuit of such goals they subordinated the material to their artistic ideas. Before Bellini began to make iron constructions in the mid-1980s, he modeled spontaneous and sensitively worked figures as well as genre scenes out of clay. The latter comprised sketch-like and ephemeral reductions of classical compositional structures into organic and elementary primeval forms.

With iron Bellini was able to dynamically break away from the confines of traditional sculpture with its simplified and compacted forms. Due to his Italianità he looked to Umberto Boccioni and Gian Lorenzo Bernini as guides. Such artists were unusual sources of inspiration at the time. Subsequently he made sculptures of iron. His designs and constructions explore form in relation to the material and its three-dimensional potential, or the dissolution and dynamism of its plasticity, as well as seeking a synthesis of sculpture with its surroundings.

Bellini is constantly experimenting and improvising with his medium. He found the appropriate raw material in sheet metal because it can be shaped and bent easily. He quickly discovered that Ovid's *Metamorphoses* principle could be applied to sculpting abstract pieces with iron, just as his great predecessor Bernini had based his ingenious figural piece *Apollo and Daphne* on the ancient Roman literary masterpiece. Bellini's subsequent sculptures were literally a renaissance of statues and architectural monuments that he transformed in ever-novel and witty ways in infinite parody.

Bellini hides the hardness of the material and its evocativeness of war. Instead of creating streamlined edges and perfectly smooth and polished surfaces he leaves the sheet metal bent and buckled as it appears after a car accident. Bellini's constructions demonstrate an absence of system. This is articulated in his technically nonchalant intervention or his expressive and expansive additions and shapes that fan out elaborately. Form in his sculptures invariably takes an unexpected turn. His pieces generally seem to lack that stability so characteristic for iron. Nevertheless, the various parts of his sculptures unflinchingly unite anew in a playful way to form a unified body. The titles he chooses refer to landscapes (*Paesaggio Urbano*, 2011), architectural structures (*Tower*, 2010 and 2012) or existing buildings (*Bilbao*, 2011 — Frank O. Gehry's Guggenheim-Museum; *Ricordando Ronchamp*, 2009 — Le Corbusier's Chapel), phantoms (*Ombra Cinese*,

2009; *Linea Rossa*, 2011; *Crepuscolo*, 2009), or mythical creatures (*Hydra*, 2012). Form in his sculptures is always replete with ambiguities. There is no official «front view» for perceiving his sculptures — indeed, they offer numerous «main views» from many different angles. As one moves around the pieces, they present constantly new, self-contained and independent views. His multivalent entities are manifestly evocative. Bellini does not seek to express his ideas in a static figure. Instead he raises consciousness for the fact that there are always many different ways for realizing something. With their playful dancing quality as they seemingly pirouette in front of us, his works present a caricature of the classical themes of sculpture and architecture. And this makes them truly unique.

Room 4 and terrace: James Licini

The artist James Licini is a rebel and outsider. He uses iron and steel in a very different way to most of his sculptor colleagues, in way that can best be described as devoid of any sort of sentimentality. Licini does not see himself as an artist but as a «steelworker».

The structural elements bearing the load in modern architecture are made of steel. The support structures in steel construction are made of steel I-beams and tubes strictly in compliance with static and physical specifications. Decoration and aesthetic qualities do not play a role. Robert Müller, Bernhard Luginbühl and company ignored I-beams and went in search of their art material in scrap-metal yards. Although the I-beam is elemental to construction, it is not elemental in the sense of suggesting primeval forces. It has no intrinsic potential for transformation. Licini discovered the raw material for his art in the neutrality of semi-finished products such as the I-beam and steel tubes. In them he sees perfect basic forms or primary structures. As a steelworker Licini is a tradesman. And although steel construction does not calculate by tenths of millimeters, the right angle is sacrosanct.

In the 1960s, James Licini approached Luginbühl's early archaism with sober objectivity, streamlining it in a generalizing way, and thereby found his own individual form of expression. Since then his work incorporates exclusively right angles and parallel elements. His artistic development strives for reduction to the extreme, and he is permanently in search of primeval forms that cannot be simplified further. Again and again he finds solutions that necessitate the creation of the next piece of sculpture. Between the last and next steel construction an infinite number of new possibilities open up.

Consequently the series of his most recent steel constructions logically comprises primeval forms or combinations of primeval forms. In the case of the combinations two scenarios may apply: various primeval forms combine to form a new constellation, or identical primeval forms are reproduced and ordered together in series or in complementary configurations. Licini's approach to sculpture is conceptual. His starting point is the standardized forms of the metal elements: the basis of a propped up square tube is square, a vertically positioned I-beam can form a square or a rectangle by adding further elements. Building up on these ground plans, Licini constructs open cubes and rectangles depending on how the different pieces of metal and their respective cross sections fit together.

Licini visited Mexico a number of times. There he discovered a close affinity to the advanced civilizations of ancient Latin America and an aesthetic equivalent to his own work. Within the exhibition space at the Kunstmuseum Bern, an open labyrinth unfolds out of an arrangement of primeval forms conceived on square ground plans together with ordered series of reproduced elements. The elementary geometry of steel-girder construction and its embedment in a unified architectural arrangement imbues the whole with the ambience of a ritual site. But Licini did not conceive the whole installation at the Kunstmuseum Bern as a ritual site. However, the analogy, although not originally intended, is not just a coincidence. After all, the ensemble comprises primeval form.

Rooms 5 and 6: Josef Maria Odermatt

The smiths and sculptors working with iron, such as the early Bernhard Luginbühl, Eduardo Chillida, Oscar Wiggli and Josef Maria Odermatt, made creations for eternity. Every step in their working process was planned ahead. The physical exertion was great, as the trade of a smith was still being practiced in the way it had been for thousands of years. The blanks that the artists worked on were heated up in the forge until incandescent at a temperature of 1250 degrees Celsius and then hammered into shape on an anvil. Even with the use of a mechanical blacksmith's hammer — as was employed by Wiggli and Odermatt — the realization of an artwork is extremely labor intensive. Thus, during his 50 years working as an artist, Odermatt produced only 417 sculptures made of iron. Each of these artworks is unique. On every one he embossed his signature and verified its artistic authenticity. Like Bellini and Licini he refused to work with assistants.

If we today, two years after the artist's decease in November 2011, scrutinize his work as a whole, we can trace a consistent development. The basic forms of his structures are elementary, but he always managed to present them anew and create something original. The silhouette that crystallizes reveals the view that the artist had from his house and studio in Huob above the township of Stans. The jagged lines form a distant alpine landscape. It is made up of unique elements that merge to form a unity. The sculptures Odermatt produced in his forge are monuments that are suffused with the elementary forces of nature. The artist has shaped and formed them in a way that we can vividly experience their physical presence, their essence and their aura.

Existential issues were the starting point for Odermatt's entire oeuvre. The first artwork he forged in iron was a wayside shrine. He made it in 1965 for the convent of St Claire in Stans (*Helgenstöcklein*). He set a highly abstract figure of Saint Nicholas of Flüe, strongly resembling a burnt statue, in a massive frame structure. In the work we find all the traits characteristic for his later work. A seemingly protective structure frames organic forms. Discourses of contrariness, of protection and breaking out, of peace and aggression, of action and passivity, or, more drastically, of life and death, are intrinsic themes of all his later creations. However, his subsequent works no longer directly reference the human body. Nevertheless, the craftsmanship in working and hammering massive iron has transformed each of his works into a «body» — a body that could be a piece of driftwood cast on the banks of a gushing mountain stream. Because most of his artworks are assemblages of individual elements, they often have a gregarious quality. Spires, thorns and razorblades, which can be interpreted as parts of statues, columns or medieval armor, unite to form phantom-like images. The mythic conflicts of legends are constant background themes for Odermatt, who regularly participated in the Mardi Gras festivities with grotesquely costumed individuals. His work finds essential sustenance in the archetypal imagery of Swiss legends. The subjects of existential threat and death influenced his work from the beginning and remained throughout. Odermatt's sculptures are personal symbols that give palpable expression to the fundamental conflicts in life and to universal experiences. But it would be wrong to speculate about the content of Odermatt's sculptures. They may make feelings symbolically manifest, but they are definitely not narrative.

A technique he had hitherto hardly used in working with iron dominated his art since the 1990s until his death. Often, when connecting pieces of iron, he welded them together and no longer used forged clamps. This technique made it possible to connect the pieces in a highly finished way. Because Odermatt sanded and smoothed the surfaces of his sculptures and then blackened them with burnt linseed oil, they increasingly began to resemble architectural iron constructions. The «ascetic» reduction led to a series of sculptures marked by their stringency and austerity of form. In the series Odermatt repeatedly addresses, in ever-changing ways, the fundamental relationship between support and load. By means of the

abstract serial systems of conceptual and minimal art, Odermatt succeeded in impressively fusing archaic symbolic images and arranging forms in an organic way.

Biography: Paolo Bellini (b. 1941)

Paolo Bellini was born in 1941 in Mendrisio. During his apprenticeship at an art foundry in the village where he grew up he learned the techniques of melting down metal and casting bronze statues using wax models. His diverse artist acquaintances such as Jean Arp, Emilio Stanzani or Remo Rossi played a key role in his decision to enrol at the art academy in Brera, where he studied under Marino Marini. After completing his studies, Bellini spent a while in Belgium where he worked as an assistant for the sculptor Olivier Strebelle. On a study tour through Europe he met the sculptor Henry Moore who henceforth influenced his work. After the tour he moved into his own studio in Ticino. As an artist Bellini experimented with a diversity of materials such as bronze, corrugated iron, aluminum and iron. From the 1980s onwards he preferred to use the latter for his sculptures. These, however, seem to contradict the characteristically unwavering quality of the metal, which the artist shapes, bends or twists, and paints over.

Biography: James Licini (b.1937)

James Licini was born in 1937 in Zurich. Following an apprenticeship as a blacksmith he worked as an ironworker on construction sites as well as a locksmith and a sheet metal worker. Since his apprenticeship he has frequented the artists' circles of Muz Zeier and Friedrich Kuhn. From the 1960s he was employed as an assistant on and off by Hans Aeschbacher and Kurt Laurenz Metzler. But contrary to expectations, James Licini had no desire to become an artist himself during this period. Rather he wanted to apply his craftsmanship and work with metal, creating something of his own without having the end product dictated by someone else when he made his first sculptures out of iron. Thus James Licini considers himself to be a steelworker and not an artist. It is his proficiency as an artisan and tradesman that made him into an expert in working with metal and enabled him to produce sculptures of such high precision. His basic materials are I-beams and steel plates, which he purchases directly from where they are produced.

Biography: Josef Maria Odermatt (1934–2011)

Josef Maria Odermatt was born in 1934 in Stans. He did an apprenticeship as a locksmith and visited courses at the school of applied arts and sciences in Lucerne. He graduated as a master locksmith in 1960. He already became interested in iron sculptures during his apprenticeship. During this time he also made the acquaintance of the sculptor, painter and draftsman Hans Christen. In the early 1960s during a longer sojourn in Paris he met the sculptor Robert Müller, who also worked with iron, and the painter Bruno Müller. From 1962 onwards Josef Maria Odermatt had a forge workshop in Stans. After traveling through Italy for several months he constructed a studio house in Huob above Stans. There he lived and worked until he died on November 6 2011. Odermatt always worked with the material of the trade he had learnt. His sculptures had no titles and he made no preparatory sketches or studies for them. Prior to the 1990s, Odermatt did not weld but used bands, rivets and hinges to unite the pieces of metal into sculptures. The pieces of his last phase of work are more compact and made by forging and welding. Simultaneous to making iron sculptures he executed an independent oeuvre of sketches.

AGENDA

Öffentliche Führungen

Sonntag, 11h: 18. / 25. August, 15. September, 13. Oktober, 10. November

Dienstag, 19h: 20. August, 10. September, 1. / 29. Oktober

Anmeldung nicht erforderlich, Ausstellungseintritt

Öffentliche Führung für Blinde und Sehbehinderte

Sonntag, 15. September, 12h

Einführung für Lehrpersonen

Dienstag, 20. August, 18h

Anmeldung T 031 328 09 11

vermittlung@kunstmuseumbern.ch

Kosten: CHF 10.00

Wenn es dunkel wird im Museum...

Freitag, 1. November, 18h – 22h

Sonderanlass für Kinder von 6 bis 10 Jahren: Mit Taschenlampen und weissen Handschuhen unterwegs durchs Museum, mit dabei der Musiker und Geschichtenerzähler Roland Zoss.

Anzahl Teilnehmende beschränkt.

Anmeldungen bis Montag, 27. Oktober

Info/Anmeldung: T + 41 31 328 09 11 oder

vermittlung@kunstmuseumbern.ch

Kosten: CHF 20.00 inkl. kleinem Abendessen

Zeitfenster Gegenwart: Rundgang mit der Kuratorin

Dienstag, 27. August, 18h

Anmeldung nicht erforderlich, Ausstellungseintritt

Künstlergespräch: Matthias Frehner im Gespräch mit James Licini

Dienstag, 3. September, 19h

Anmeldung nicht erforderlich, Ausstellungseintritt

INFOS

Curators

Matthias Frehner and Regula Berger

Admission fee

CHF 14.00 / red. CHF 10.00

Private guided tours, school classes

Tel.: 031 328 09 11, vermittlung@kunstmuseumbern.ch

Opening hours

Tuesday 10:00 a.m. - 9:00 p.m.

Wednesday - Sunday, 10:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m.

CATALOGUE (IN GERMAN)

Iron and Steel. Paolo Bellini, James Licini, Josef Maria Odermatt

Eds. Kunstmuseum Bern, Matthias Frehner and Regula Berger.

With essays by Mario Botta, Rudy Chiappini, Matthias Frehner, Ulrich Loock, Peter von Matt, Paul Nizon and Juri Steiner.

Three paperback volumes in slipcase. 192 pages,

160 illustrations. ISBN 978-3-85881-397-8,

price around CHF 55.00

EDITIONS FOR THE EXHIBITION

In conjunction with the exhibition at the Kunstmuseum Bern, Paolo Bellini and James Licini have each made an edition in iron or in steel respectively. These artworks are for sale.

James Licini

Stahlbau NP 80, 2013

(Steel Construction)

57 x 13 x 12 cm, 11.3 kg

Number: 7 + E.A. 3

Subscription price: CHF 2800.00

Paolo Bellini

Abbraccio, 2013

Iron, patinated

36 x 25 x 14 cm, 1.8 kg

Number: 10

Subscription price: CHF 1800.00

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Purchasers of the works are responsible for picking them up at the Museum of Fine Arts Bern.

WORKS UP FOR SALE

Some works of this exhibition are up for sale. The price list is available at the entrance desk.

The exhibition was kindly supported by:



Hans Eugen und Margrit Stucki-Liechti Stiftung

■ ■ ■ Stiftung **Hanny Fries und Beno Blumenstein**



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