



COVER: **RUBY**



INDY

JOHN CLEMENT: Steel Spirals Against the Sky

Jonathan Goodman

John Clement keeps alive a grand tradition in contemporary American sculpture: the promise and consequence of work made of welded steel, often placed in outdoor sites. His studio in Astoria, Queens, is within short walking distance of Mark di Suvero's working compound, on the edge of the East River. Clement worked as an assistant to di Suvero in the 1990s, learning the skills he now uses in his own art. Welded-steel modernist sculpture in America began in the middle of the last century—we have the extraordinary example of David Smith, the only major sculptor to have worked during the time of abstract expressionism. Since then, in contemporary times, other artists have pursued this way of working, which regularly makes use of steel as a permanent material in order to construct public works of art. Di Suvero is now the eminent practitioner of welded-steel art, and while its continuation has diminished to some extent, Clement belongs to the next generation. His coiled spirals curve gracefully in open air, giving the impression that they float nearly weightlessly in the atmosphere. They look very much like a line drawing bending and twisting according to a self-determined necessity, so that Clement's viewers experience his work as an asymmetrical, but also firmly established, open-air construction.

The gestalt of Clement's pieces is generally similar: coils of steel that tend to form a central opening. The work does not occupy space so much as move through it,

suggesting motion and elliptical improvisation. In some ways, the sculptures perform an idiosyncratic music, just irregular enough to sustain the contemporary feeling for the offbeat. But, even so, art like this tends to work with the site it is placed in, rather than impose itself against the scenery surrounding it. Now, in a time when public art—that seen in the subways, for example—often plays a merely decorative role in conjunction with its location, it is more important than ever to have public art assert itself as a singular effort, worthy in its own right. Clement's lyricism provides us with a true measure of what can be achieved within an abstract idiom. Placed in an open field, or in the lobby of an office building, the sculptures both maintain their own presence and act in alliance with their surroundings. The trick, of course, is to accomplish both esthetic independence and complement the setting that surrounds the art. Too often public work merely establishes the memorial of something—a person, a place, an event. This function can diminish public art's presence as sculpture. But Clement, by virtue of being abstract, evades the requirement that the work must refer to a reality beyond itself. Thus, he has considerable freedom even when working on commission.

Viewers can see this happen in *Houdini* (2015), a simple red coil placed outdoors in Daegu, South Korea. Resting in the midst of an open field, *Houdini* refers to nothing beyond itself. A mountain looms in the background, while a sky with cirrus clouds holds up overhead. The piece stands in alignment with its setting. It makes the viewer think of David Smith's placement of work in a meadow in Bolton's Landing in upstate New York. Part of the allure of a sculpture like this stems from its existence

outdoors. As a manmade artifact in the midst of nature, *Houdini* thrives on its cultural qualities—despite the fact that it enacts an organic form. The natural world is a difficult place to stand up to with an artistic undertaking, but the self-sufficiency of *Houdini* indicates that a strong, simple vision of form can coexist with the world around it. *Once Upon a Time* (2016), a large, complicated coil in front of an office building in Atlanta, achieves a similar goal in an urban landscape. Beginning with a point resting on a steel mat, the sculpture rolls in circles away from its starting place, ending fairly high up in the air, again in a point. Clouds and sky are reflected in the mirrored glass of the building behind it. Truly elegant in its overall form, the sculpture remarkably builds a dialogue with the building, instead of being eclipsed by the larger structure.

Contemporary sculpture, unfortunately, is the poor relation of the art world. It won't go nicely over someone's sofa. Yet much of the most interesting, challenging, and innovative art being made today is sculpture—this despite the fact that commercial galleries do not often support three-dimensional efforts like Clement's. Actually, the artist has made smaller works, presumably placed easily within someone's home. These pieces are larger, for example, than much of the tabletop art of Anthony Caro, the late British sculptor, but they are small enough to fit into an interior space. *Saturn* (2016), a small red coil that looks like it embodies the path of a gyroscope, is about four feet high. Its curves are angled, so that the sculpture tilts in space. In a work like this, the question of scale comes up. Its presence is monumental, even though it is small in size. It is a strength the viewer often finds in Clement's art, which regularly feels massive in extent, no matter the actual dimensions of the particular work. This

is not to say the small pieces only reiterate the large ones in effect; instead, they both communicate a real significance, based on the mass of the steel arc, even as the arc fights off gravity as it enacts a line in space.

The large indoor work called *Blue Water* (2017) consists of three sky-blue coils that stand next to each other, close to the point of touching. They fully occupy a lobby two stories high in a building on Park Avenue in Manhattan. The metal cylinders elegantly curve across the space, seeming nearly to float off the floor. As I have said, Clement's art functions eloquently as a line drawing, and *Blue Water* is a remarkable example of the artist's ability to delineate a form traveling freely in air. His work thus functions as a bridge between two and three dimensions, giving the forms a complexity that enhances their formal eloquence. We are now in a point of time when the memorial role of sculpture is less and less appreciated. As a result, the need for a figurative presentation disappears, and the abstract qualities of sculpture come to the fore. Clement's ability to make use of nonobjective form for public purposes shows us that the abstract work of art can indeed play a role in communal space, where the physical movement of people provide a living, motion-filled counterpoint to a stationary sculpture. From archaic times, sculpture has been used to remember the dead, but Clement does something quite different. He uses his art to enhance the living advantages of both culture and nature, in ways that exemplify an open attitude toward the appeal found in both.



ONCE UPON A TIME



TIDAL



BLUSH

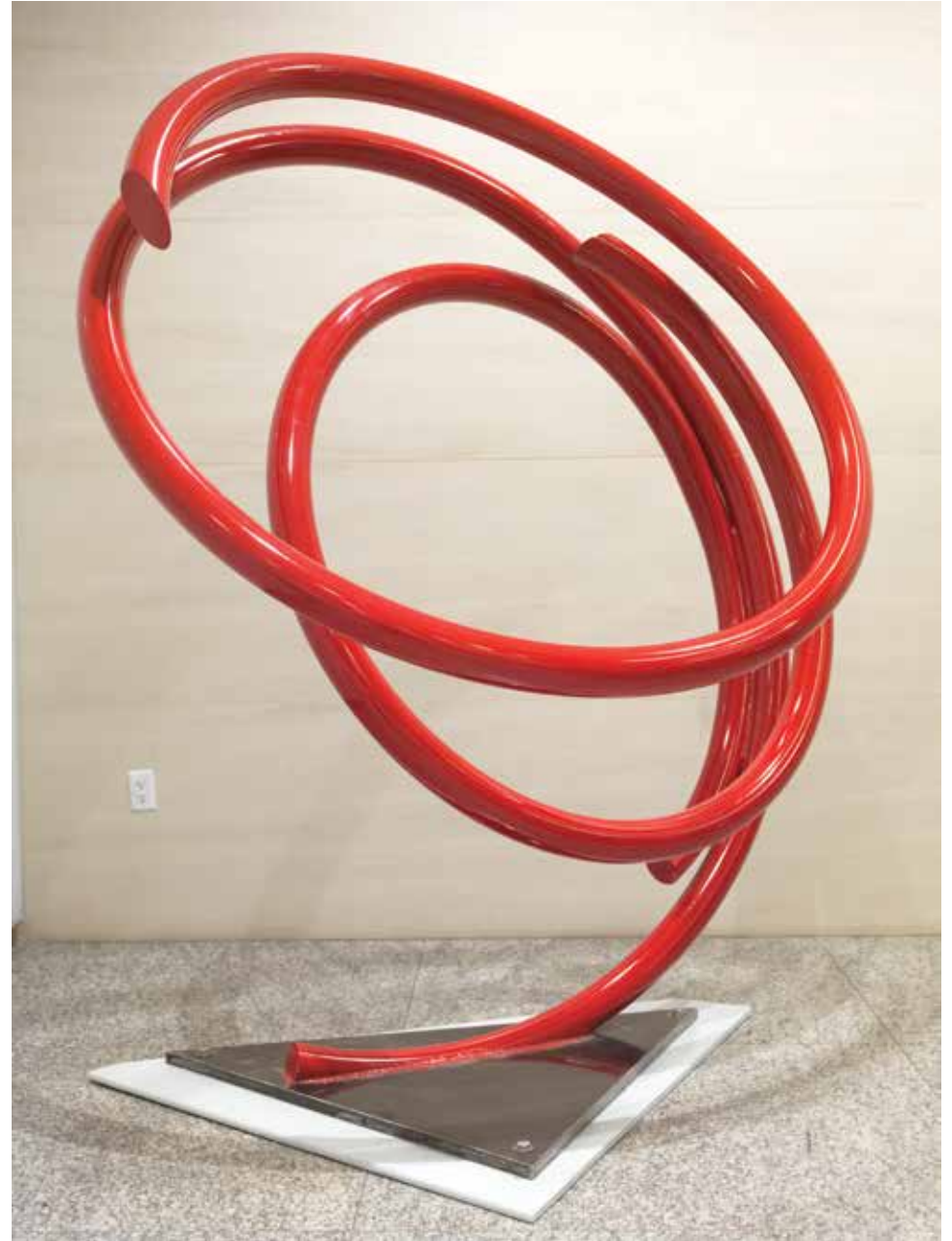


SATURN





GALILEO

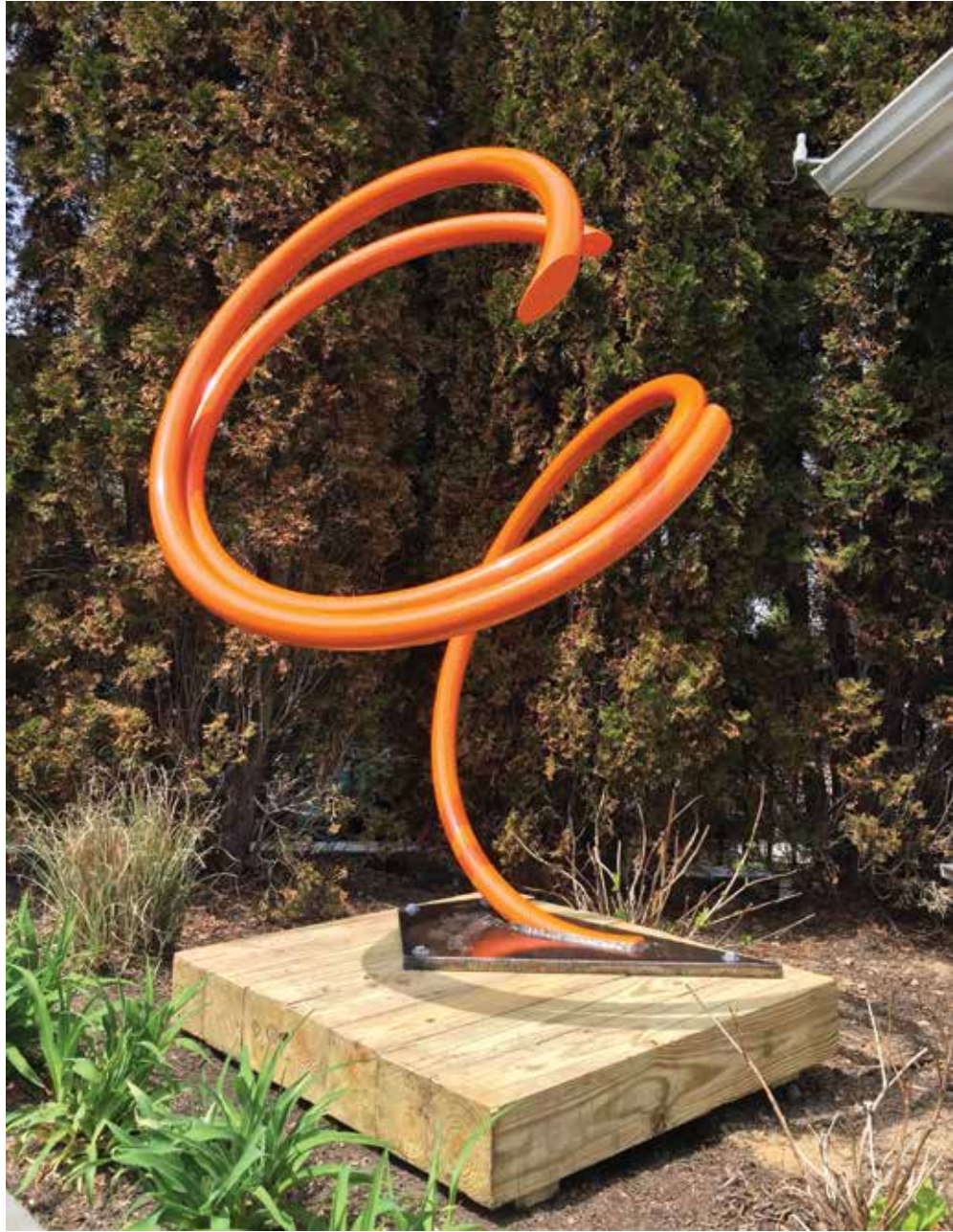


PLUTO

BLUE WATER







VENUS



MARS



CV

1992 BA, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA

1993 School of Visual Arts, New York, NY

PUBLIC COMMISSIONS

2017 *Blue Water, Galileo, Saturn*, 237 Park Avenue, New York, NY

2016 *Casper*, San Francisco, CA

Once Upon a Time, Atlanta, GA

2015 *Tidal*, 170 Amsterdam, New York, NY

Duke, Le Domaine Forget, Quebec

2014 *Orange Blossoms*, Staten Island, NY

Tusk, Sculpture by the Sea, Cottlesloe, Australia

2010 *Ta Da*, City of Long Beach, Long Beach, CA

Learning Curves, City of Long Beach, Long Beach, CA

2008 *Wiggle Room and C'mon*, Sunnyvale, CA

Sea Room, Delray Beach, FL

PUBLIC INSTALLATIONS

2014 *Hot Tamale*, Greenwood Gardens, Short Hills, NJ

2013 *Hot Tamale*, Village Green, Summit, NJ

2012 *Hot Tamale*, Tusk Orange Julius, Boscobel House, Garrison, NY



GLOW

2011 *Duke*, Adelphi University Sculpture Biennale, Garden City, NY
Sprung, Shore Road Park, Staten Island, NY
Oiler, Montague Park, Chattanooga, TN
2010 *Jelly Bean*, Roanoke AIR Sculpture Project
2009 *Duke*, Miami Shores Village Hall, Miami, FL.
Scoop, Sysco Campus Headquarters, Houston, TX
2008 *Freckle*, Sculpture for New Orleans, Tulane Campus, New Orleans, LA
Uh Oh, Sculpture for New Orleans, New Orleans, LA
June Bug and Alee, Decorative Center, Houston, TX
2007 *Juicy Fruit*, Cashiers, North Carolina
Popeye, Fredonia State University, Buffalo, NY
Squeeze, Butch, Ithiel, "Palm Springs Public Art Program", Palm Springs, CA
2006 *Tiller*, Hudson River Sculpture Trail, Haverstraw, NY
"Art on the Outside," West Hollywood, CA
Jasper, Vancouver, BC
Chewey, Macon Arts Festival, Macon, GA
2005 *Kini's Playground*, Vancouver Sculpture Biennale, Vancouver, BC
2004 *Youngjoo*, Bridgeport, CT
Blame Physics, 18th Annual Rosen Sculpture Competition, Boone, NC
New Anatomy, The Morris Museum, Morristown, NJ
Fe, Pittsfield Public Sculpture Project, Pittsfield, MA
2003 *Fe*, Lakeland, FL.
2002 *Running Numbers*, Lakeland, FL
As Pure as Math, Portland, ME
2001 *Intervals of Prime # 3*, The Heckscher Museum, Huntington, NY

Intervals of Prime # 3, Seaside Park, Bridgeport, CT
New Anatomy, Lafayette Park, Bridgeport, CT
2000 *As Pure as Math*, Washburn University, Topeka, KS
Blame Physics, Russo Park, Bridgeport, CT
1999 *The Future of Science*, Harbor Park, Middleton, CT
Mathematical Time, Connecticut Sculpture Park, Washington, CT
Site Specific, Nelson Galvanizing, Long Island City., NY

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2014 "Fireflies", De Buck Gallery, New York, NY
2011 "Oiler", Causey Contemporary Fine Art, Brooklyn, NY
2010 "Eye Candy", Gallery Sonja Roesch, Houston, TX
2009 "Mike and Ike", Causey Contemporary, Brooklyn, NY
2008 "Alee," Gallery Sonja Roesch, Houston, TX
2005 "John Clement", Buschlen Mowatt Fine Arts, Palm Desert, CA
1999 "Poetics of Space", Tricia Collins Contemporary Art, New York, NY
1997 "T Zero", Larvae Art Space, Brooklyn, NY
1996 "John Clement", The Westenberg Gallery, Great Barrington, MA

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