

# Robert Owen

by Pam Hansford

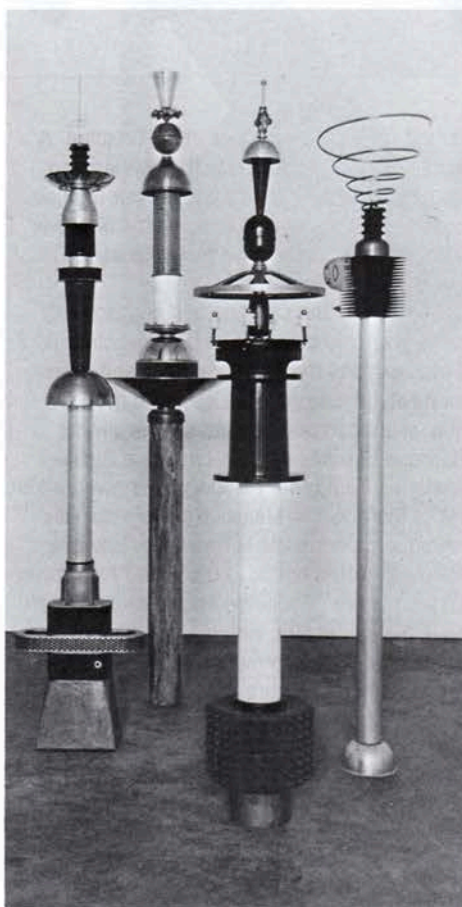
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*Highly finished and beautifully made vertical structures are incorporated with other materials into installations and continue Owen's preoccupation with art as a spiritual experience and create an aura of meditation like a shrine.*

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SOMETIME during the early 1950s, Robert Owen discovered the work of Albert Namatjira whose paintings were famous for their stately and poetic treatment of the Australian bush, and he began to make copies in the style of the great artist. Painted during his teenage years in the New South Wales country town of Wagga Wagga where he grew up, these respectful offerings to the Namatjira cult<sup>1</sup> are his earliest surviving works. Like the originals they contain a sense of homage, though for Owen's part this is directed more towards painting itself, than to the majesty of the natural landscape. These works look to Namatjira to provide a clue about what painting might be, and how to be an artist. They are like pin-ups of an ideal painting whose perfection is reflected in the great Father-of-Trees so beloved by Namatjira and the young Robert Owen.<sup>2</sup>

Over three decades now separate the tree paintings from Owen's latest tower-like structures, with an enormously varied output of objects and images in between. What is striking in the comparison between his work now and then is not so much the disparate nature of the images, as his commitment to a relatively coherent aesthetic over almost the entire period. The original act of homage that led Owen to copy Albert Namatjira in order to learn the ways of art has been repeated in a



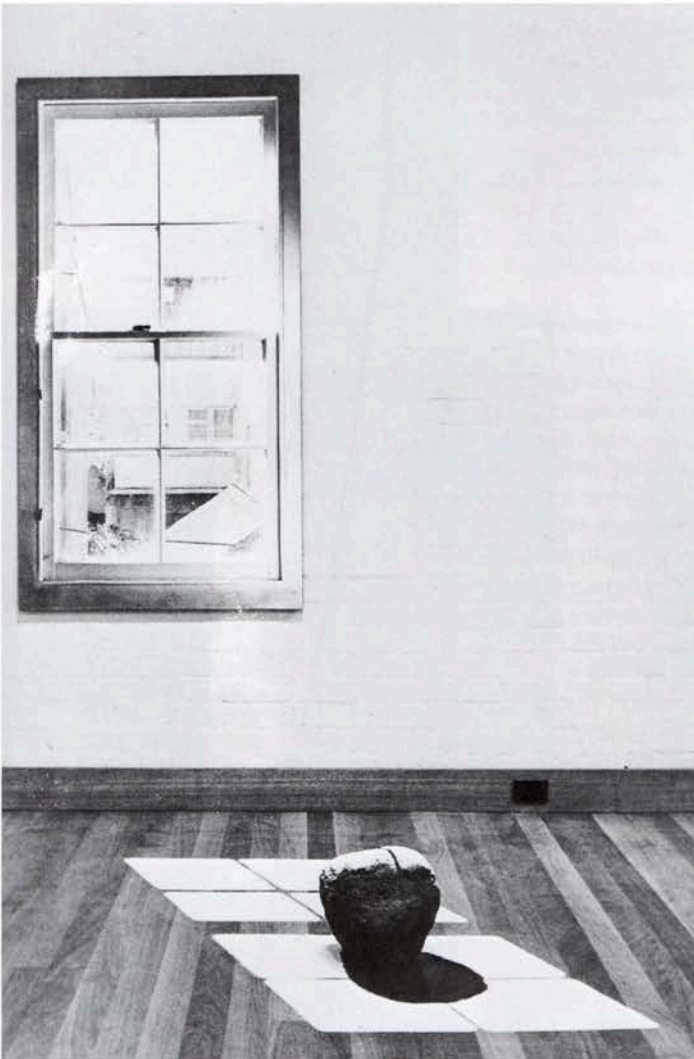
lifelong aesthetic choice. In this choice art is primarily seen as an experience of reverence, an act in which the mystery of the world is externalized in the 'presence' of the work. The experience of art is a homage to this presence over and above the various forms of rationality which conspire to bring an art object into being.

Perhaps the clearest expression of Robert Owen's aesthetic is to be found in the 1980 piece *Apposition* where he used a quotation from Robbe Grillet to provide the work with an interpretive cipher: 'Let it be first of all by their "presence" that objects and gestures establish themselves, and let this presence continue to prevail over whatever explanatory theory that may try to enclose them in a system of references, whether emotional, sociological, Freudian or metaphysical.'

Via Robbe Grillet, Owen seems to be saying that the authority of a piece of work is contained not so much in its illustrative or explicative power, as in its power to present the mystery of the world, not as a problem to be solved but a reality to be experienced. It is the complexity of this reality which the presence of the work both reflects and protects. For art

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ROBERT OWEN PERSEPHONE'S TOWERS (1985)  
 Foreground ECHO CATCHER  
 Mixed metals and plastic. 232 x 46 x 46 cm  
 Courtesy Roslyn Oxley Gallery, Sydney  
 Photograph by Dave Cubby



*left*  
 ROBERT OWEN HIATUS (1981) Installation  
 Part one: Photograph on linen (wall) 49 x 176 cm  
 Part two: Talcum powder 'light', granite stone and lead  
 shadow' (floor) 30 x 70 x 185 cm

*below*  
 ROBERT OWEN APPOSITION (1979/80) Installation  
 Part one: East wall - 15 black and white photographs and text,  
 92 x 155 cm  
 Part two: 15 wooden stools, 61 x 200 x 400 cm  
 Part three: 15 images, acrylic on canvas, 5 panels,  
 137 x 305 cm. Overall size 305 x 685 cm



to be successful it must remain opaque to the prying eye of reason; it should never be able to be interpreted away as the amalgam of so many discoverable rationalities.

In a work like *Self-portrait (from the centre)*, Owen has compiled a number of references ranging from cosmology, mapping, human and celestial standards of measurement, and colour theory, to underlay a meditation on the connection between the earthly and the insubstantial. Like many of his other works *Self-portrait (from the centre)* presents the viewer with a metaphysical unity, which at one and the same time wants us to acknowledge the existence of a myriad of seemingly irreconcilable dualities (for example near/far, shadow/

light, materiality/insubstantiality), and to weld them into the experience of a whole. The pearls which form the centrepiece of this work are like so many congealed suns, whose roundness is the metaphor for a perfect unity.

Under various guises this theme of unity has been a constant preoccupation in Owen's work. The tree paintings provide the first form for this emblem and the 'towers' the latest. It was Nietzsche who pointed out that, at least mythologically, art owes its unity to the evolution of Apollonian and Dionysian elements. Apollo is etymologically the 'lucent' one and reigns over the boundaries of illusion and all plastic powers, whereas Dionysius represents the swooning ecstasy of enchantment and

pure excess.<sup>3</sup> In the guide laid down by this elemental conflict Owen takes up Apollo's part, and his work represents a meditation on perfectly Apollonian themes such as 'light', 'proportion', 'memory', and 'transformation'. Of the works completed during the 1980s, it is perhaps the recent towers that give these themes their fullest expression. Whereas earlier works such as *Hiatus*, *Apposition* and *Turn of the moon* use the literal properties of light and shadow to explore the nature of perception and illusion, the towers have swallowed the light. They are containing and transforming structures whose rationale leans more towards a meditation on the nature of Apollonian proportion than Apollonian

illumination.

The sense of Apollonian proportion that one gets from the towers has several aspects. There is again the recurring theme of a collection of disparate and seemingly irreconcilable things placed within the frame of a formal unity. Each tower has been composed from a collection of apparently unrelated objects like electrical coils, machine parts, metal bowls, light bulbs, wine glasses and so on, and then engineered into one piece. Individual differences in materials, function, style and significance are incorporated into the harmony of each unit, which looks at one minute like a weapon, and at another like a totem. Collectively the towers give the impression of a technologically improved version of Stonehenge, a worshipful circle for an unspecified industrial cult.

The feeling of 'natural' stasis apparent in some of the earlier light works (whose perfect metaphor is the pearl) has been taken over by the figure of an industrial totem whose ancestors can be traced back to some early experiments with junk sculpture made in 1964. Owen sees these pieces as metaphors for heads with energy spewing out the top in convolutions of chrome plated milk cans. Completed when he was living in Greece, these works now seem frankly digestive, and their primitive vigour has been swallowed up by the towers and translated into more urbane forms.

These early prototypes for the towers attempted to put energy into a basic form. That they were fabricated from junk is suggestive when we compare them to the rest of Owen's work which by and large is fashioned from highly worked, very aestheticized materials (for example, the polished surface of the pearls in *Self-portrait (from the centre)* the refined blue pigment used in *Hammer on a rock* and other pieces, and the seamless insubstantiality of light and shadow in *Apposition* and *Hiatus*). The towers inherit this focus on materializing consciousness, and Owen sees them as having a connection with attitudes to masculinity. The junk from which the towers are made perhaps reflects the difficulty of this theme; it is not of a type easily distanced into his usual repertoire of highly refined materials.

In *Persephone's towers* the theme of constructing a masculine presence is overlaid with a complex set of references that range from Buddhist stupas to Constantin Brancusi's *Bird*

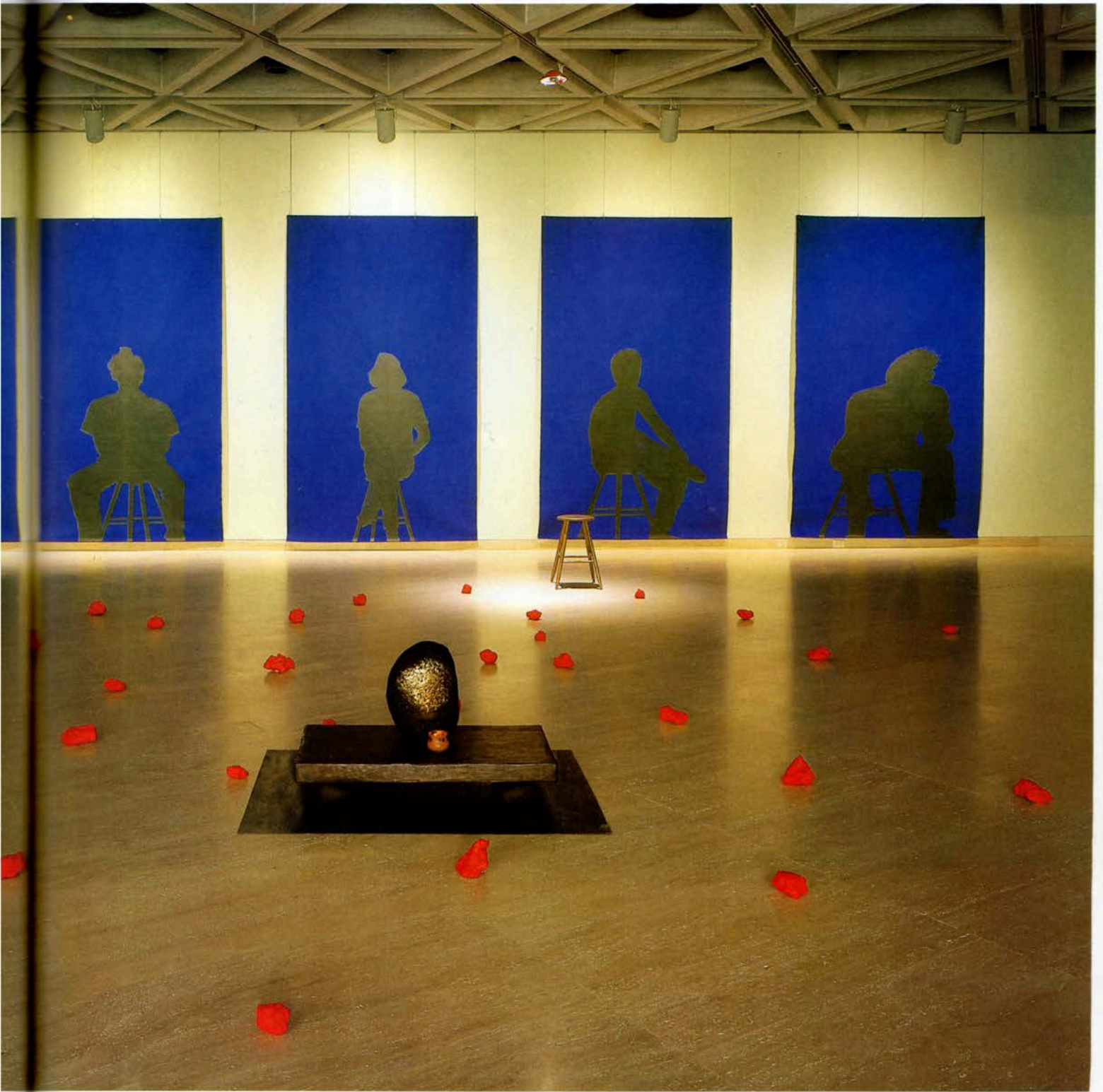
*in space*. The myth of resurrection referred to by the title is one in which the repetition and return of the seasons is linked to a power which controls the boundaries of change and transformation. Owen wants the towers to suggest things which have the potential for transmitting and receiving energy, and the work combines an interest in technological, mythological and Tantric elements whose common meeting point is the question of how energy can be metamorphosed.

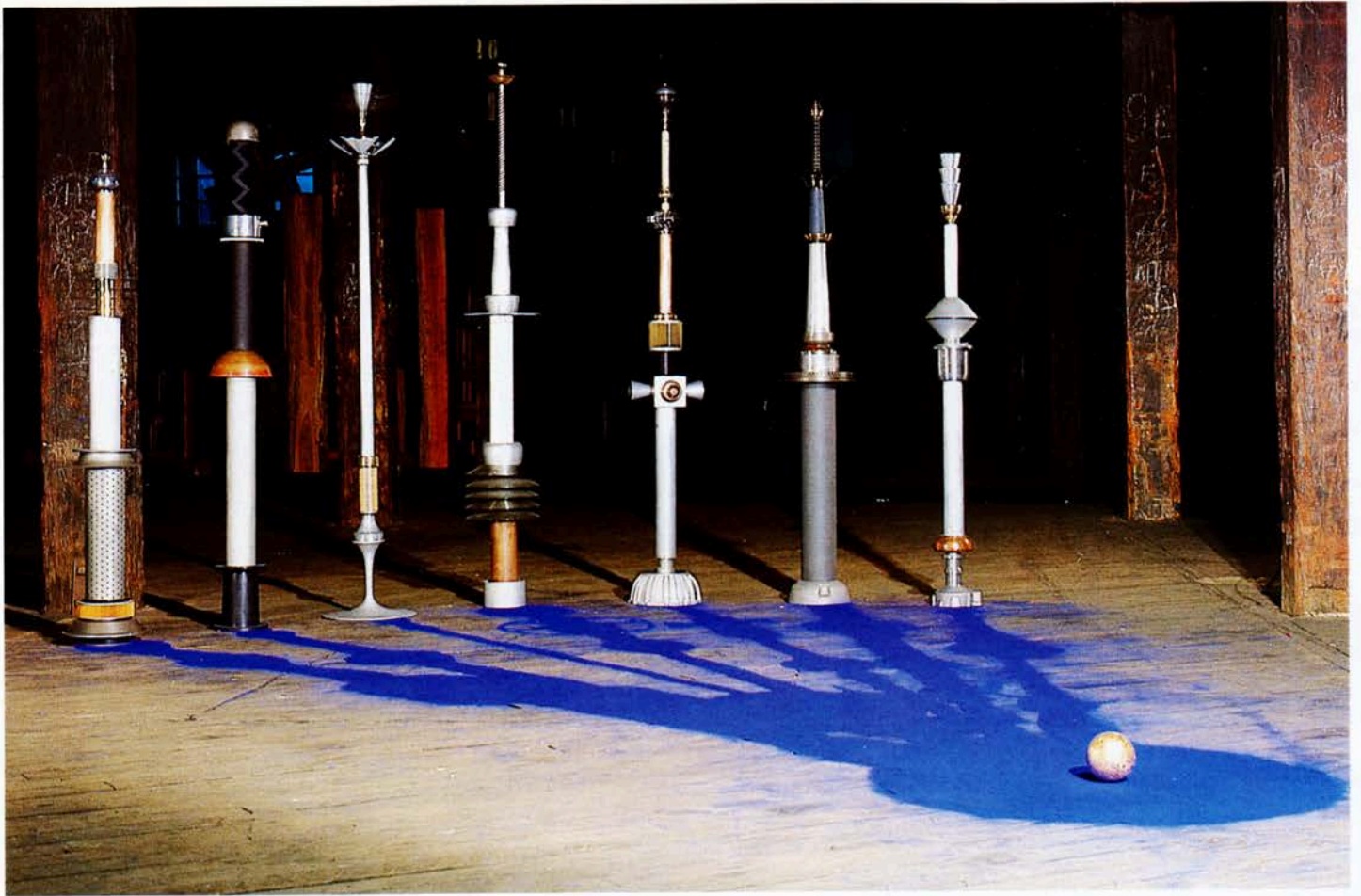
The sense of masculine presence which emerges from all these concerns is one which combines mixed feelings of transforming power, incipient violence, mutation and cyclic change, and totemic reverence. These themes are far less spartan than the strong formality of some of Owen's earlier works like the strictly measured *Zen of Hammer on a rock*. While there is no wild Dionysian letting-go in these recent works, there is the sign of a less objectifying more directly subjective element at work. In *Echo catcher*, for example, the perfectly enigmatic feat of echo-catching is materialized into an almost sentient image. This quasi-figurative turn possibly reflects the current trend both in sculpture and painting towards a reassessment of representation. While his work does not take part in a full-blown return to figuration, the towers do suggest epithets which lean more towards the living than the cool formality of most of his past work.

Unlike the more straightforward, recognizable humanity of *Prometheus blue* or *Self-portrait (from the centre)*, the quasi-figuration of the towers is both more playful and more threatening. Here the theme of the archaic is treated not so much from the point of view of a universalizing metaphysic (like the mythological foundations of *Prometheus blue*, or the cosmological ones in *Self-Portrait (from the centre)*), as from the direction of a type of alchemy. The materials are left rough, piled on top of one another in an organized though relatively untransformed state, and their conglomeration suggests things in a state of mutation. These ancestral figures are not the human exemplars we find in the earlier works, but traces of something pre-mythological whose



ROBERT OWEN PROMETHEUS BLUE (1983)  
Installation, Art Gallery of Western Australia Mixed media





proportions have not passed entirely through Apollo's sieve.

The most recent piece in the tower series, *Hearing*, exhibited in the Sixth Biennale of Sydney, is a work that combines obsessions from the past like 'blue', 'pearl/sun', and 'shadow', with themes common to other pieces from the tower series. Owen's attraction to blue has its basis in André Broca's paradox: to see a blue light you must not look directly at it, which means that the perception of blue entails not identifying the object. Blue is a perceptually decentering colour which indicates a fading zone, one where phenomenal identity vanishes.

Owen has traditionally used blue to mark out areas of shadow, as the negative double of a body, as soul or ghost, and it forms a significant part of the poetics of his materials. In *Hearing* blue again takes on these various functions as well as anchoring the towers into

a group.

Like all of his work, the towers operate at a high metaphysical pitch with the accumulation of references in these recent works leaning decisively in the direction of an exploration of a masculine presence. With *Hearing*, for example, the symbol of the sun is reintroduced not only to denote the usual play on the nature of light and shadow, but also to stand as the traditional symbol of male fertility. The strong connection between the nature of thought and the sun in Western metaphysics (for example Western philosophy is brimming with metaphors that link light to thought – 'the light of reason', 'enlightenment', 'seeing the light' *et cetera*) is a tradition which describes the spiritual nature of male creativity in its non-sexual 'pure' or rational forms. *Hearing* seems to be at least partly concerned with how to materialize these questions of auto-genesis. The blue 'shadow' in the work is the uncertain

limit of this creation – does the 'shadow' create the towers or the towers create the 'shadow'? The receptive arc formed by the towers in this piece is a metaphoric cradle for sounds created from thin air.

Perhaps the decisive historical factor in Owen's work has been its involvement in elaborating the proportions of a sense of spirituality. His art has always had a reverential air, and he continues to establish the limits of this aesthetic choice. There are few Australian artists who have pursued these questions with the same intensity and persistence, perhaps because the deeply secular nature of white Australian culture made them appear somewhat obsolete. Today, however, questions about the status of 'belief' are taking on a new force. The threat of world crisis has become so deeply demoralizing that our cultural faith in 'Man' and 'his' connection to 'Progress' which served the spirit of the nineteenth century has

failed, and the question arises as to what, if anything, can be put in this empty place. In a recent interview with Jean François Lyotard, one of the curators of 'Les Immatériaux'<sup>4</sup>, Robert Owen discussed the implications of these questions for art. Commenting on the various ways in which he felt Lyotard had successfully made connections between technological and philosophical issues, he remarked: 'I think you have grasped something... that people are concerned about: direction and spirituality if you like. A difficult word, but the meaning of what one is doing, a responsibility for that question, the materialization of an imaginative image, a process of perceiving the world.'<sup>5</sup>

It is clear from this that Owen wants his art to serve 'life', to engage a strongly justified spiritual meaning, and in this way to extract an experience of spirituality from the presence of his work. His recent towers carry this commitment a step further, for the presence of masculinity that is inscribed here is deeply equivocal: caught between weapon and idol, man is brought to doubt the value of his own masculine nature. It is the figure of this ambivalence as an equivocal symbol of unity, which has taken over from the pearls as the centrepiece of Robert Owen's work.

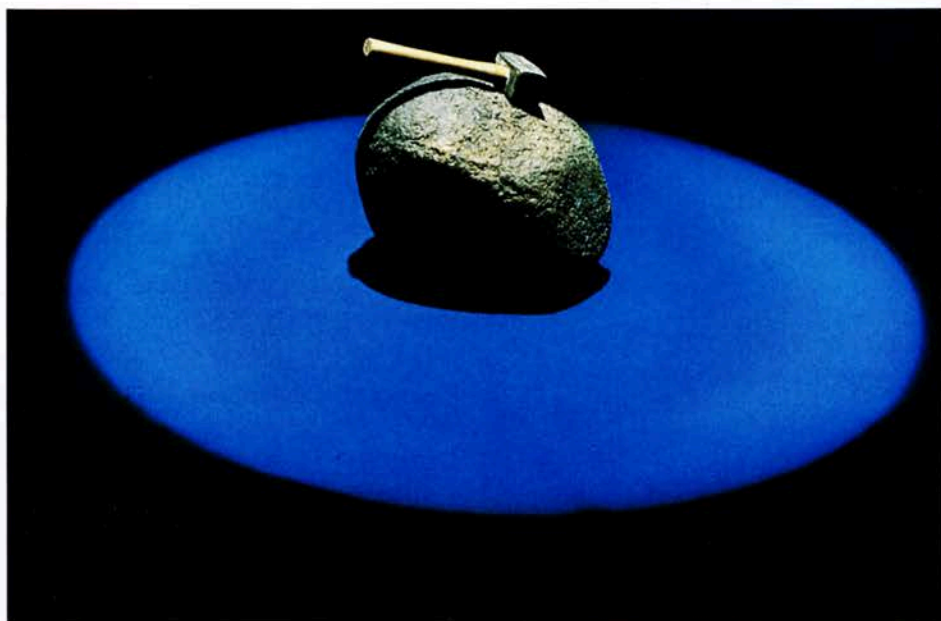
<sup>1</sup> Whereas painters like Russell Drysdale had given Australia the enigmatic look of a rapidly emptying country town, Namatjira gave the bush mythic proportions. While his work did not engage with the latest trends, his landscapes had the distinction of being loved enough to become kitsch. Right across the country Namatjira's images appeared on everything from cushion covers to ashtrays. This domestic Namatjira cult temporarily ended the days of his images as art, and as the decade wore on it faded from view.

<sup>2</sup> Whatever precise purpose these images may have served back then (as household decoration, or just as practice for a fantasy of future being), today they have an extraordinary currency for they look suspiciously like paradigms of appropriation art, like simulacra of a landscape. The joke is that, today, copy and original form a high serious duo, whereas these works are remnants of a more transparent time when a tree was a tree, and a copy no more than kitsch, or a young man's fancy.

<sup>3</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, Doubleday, New York, 1956.

<sup>4</sup> 'The Immatériaux' was an exhibition held at the Pompidou Centre, Paris, from March to July 1985.

<sup>5</sup> *Tension*, No. 9, May, 1986, p.7.



opposite  
ROBERT OWEN HEARING (1986)  
Mixed metals, plastic, glass, rubber, pigment and gold leaf  
2.5 x 4.3 x 5.3 m  
Photograph by Jill Crossley  
Possession of the artist

above  
ROBERT OWEN SELF PORTRAIT (FROM THE CENTRE)  
(1983) (DETAIL)  
Bronze and pearls  
Courtesy Roslyn Oxley Gallery, Sydney

top  
ROBERT OWEN HAMMER ON ROCK  
Sound installation, pigment  
Possession of the artist