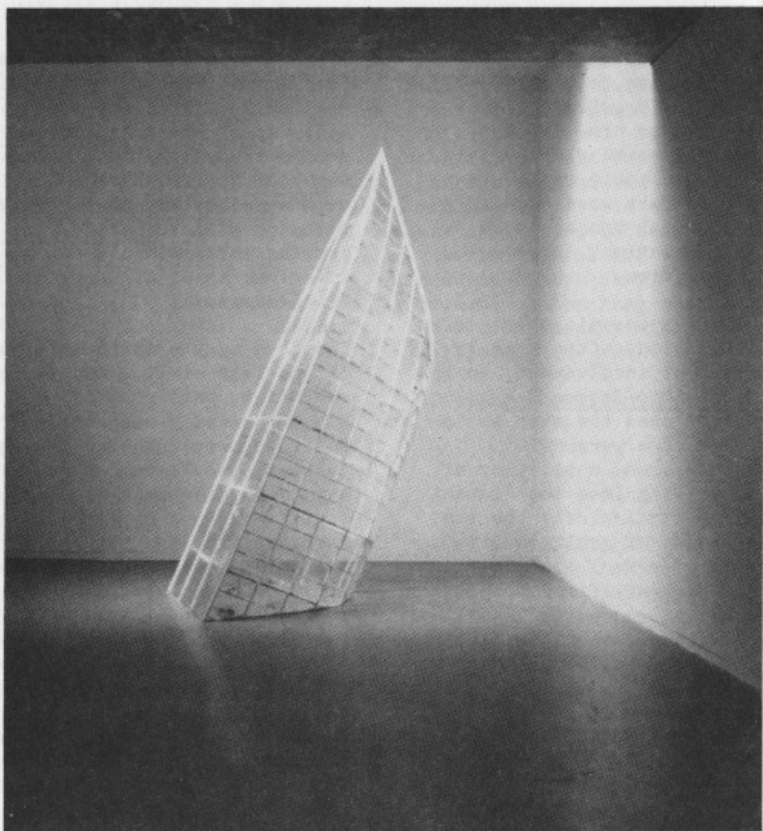


John Roloff
MATRIX/BERKELEY 110

University Art Museum
early July - early October
1987

Vanishing Ship (Greenhouse for Lake Lahontan), 1987



By the time Bay Area sculptor John Roloff had completed his graduate studies in 1973, the ship had become the central motif in his work. Roloff's fascination with the sea dates from his childhood on the Oregon coast and manifested itself first in an ambition to become a marine geologist. He credits the dynamic and free-wheeling art department at UC Davis, where he studied ceramics with Robert Arneson, with convincing him that he was drawn more to the imagery and emotions he experienced in nature than to its scientific study. It quickly became evident to him, moreover, that in working with fired clay, he could replicate in his own art work such geological processes as sedimentation, erosion and evaporation.

Roloff's ceramic ship series culminated, after over 15 years of involvement, in the Night Ship/Frozen Sea group. Roloff uses the ship as "an image of a personal voyage...and a metaphor of travelling into the distant past, particularly the vast distance of geologic time...a time of primal emotion." Successively fired to cause cracking and aging, his ceramic vessels look like ice-encrusted ghost ships in frozen waters. Roloff likens their texture and mood to that of Albert Pinkham Ryder's paintings of lonely, ocean-tossed boats. The art of both artists may be seen as a romantic, introspective journey into uncharted waters, rather than a record of nature.

In the late 1970s Roloff made his first monumental kilns of ceramic fiber blankets reinforced with steel rods. In the shape of starfish,

ocean waves or submarines, the kilns were fired with propane gas at remote desert or prairie sites as a kind of performance sculpture. The residue of the firings from the ceramic lining of the kiln seemed to be a part of the land itself.

In a permanent outdoor kiln piece, Collision: Lava Ship/Trellis Ship at the Falkirk Community Center, Roloff intersected a rough, burned-out ceramic hull with a steel trellis planted with ivy. The ceramic element was transformed by the intense heat of the kiln; the vine will effect a second, more gentle transformation, but one that will eventually overtake the lava ship. This piece pointed to Roloff's growing interest in the relationship of his work to the landscape.

Inspired by the Earth Artists of the late sixties and early seventies, particularly Robert Smithson with whom Roloff shares a background in geology, Roloff has moved beyond object-making and a commitment to a single material into the landscape. Smithson's interest in the relationship of art to the world, as opposed to art isolated by internal relationships, acted as a catalyst for many artists who wanted to create public work that would relate not only to the physical environment but to cultural and historical factors of the site as well. Roloff addresses such issues in several current projects, such as the yet untitled work for Candlestick Point Park, San Francisco. Along with other artists, including David Ireland and Lisa Hein, Roloff was commissioned to create a permanent installation in this

undeveloped shoreline area. The installation, which will be formed by a 120-foot-long grove of white trees and a 13,000 square-foot "wake" of black lava, will recall the many 19th century ships that are buried beneath the landfill site.

Roloff continues to find new poetic applications of the ship metaphor and to develop pieces that are set into motion by a process or transformative element, as evidenced in Vanishing Ship (Greenhouse for Lake Lahontan), a work he has created for MATRIX. Vanishing Ship is related to a proposal for the Djerassi Foundation entitled Sinking Ship/Greenhouse (Alien Flora/Ancient Sea) and to Ancient Shoreline/Island for Lake Lahontan for the University of Nevada, Reno (drawings for these proposals are included in the exhibition).

"Talking Tree Element," one part of the Nevada project, is an open steel structure placed over several newly planted trees that are intended to engage with the sculpture and eventually lift it off the ground. Similarly, Vanishing Ship has the potential for growth and transformation. A steel and glass structure inspired by 19th century greenhouses, Vanishing Ship is a sealed, self-contained, artificial environment in the shape of a sinking ship. Projecting 12 feet above the floor toward the gallery skylight, Vanishing Ship is tilted at the angle of deeply tipped geologic strata. Containing silt, water, rock and algae from northwestern Nevada's Pyramid Lake, a disappearing remnant of the immense (over 3000 square-mile) ancient

ice-age Lake Lahontan, Vanishing Ship is like a ship from the time when humans first set foot upon North American soil. Like many of Roloff's works, it raises questions about nature in art and man's interface with nature.

Born in Portland, Oregon, in 1947, Roloff received a B.A. in art from UC Davis in 1970 and an M.A. from Humboldt State University in 1973. Roloff has received many awards, among them three from the National Endowment for the Arts and a fellowship from the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation. Roloff has taught at Mills College in Oakland and the San Francisco Art Institute. In 1983 he was a Visiting Lecturer in the Practice of Art Department at UC Berkeley. Roloff accepted a teaching position at the University of Southern California for 1987-88.

Constance Lewallen

Works in MATRIX (all works lent by the artist; courtesy Fuller Goldeen Gallery, S.F.):

1. Vanishing Ship (Greenhouse for Lake Lahontan), 1987, steel, glass, paint, putty, water, silt, algae, rock, electric pump, plaster, 12 x 4 x 7-1/2'.
2. Sinking Ship/Greenhouse (Alien Flora/Ancient Sea), 1984, pencil on vellum, 30 x 90".
3. Ancient Shoreline/Island for Lake Lahontan, 1986, pencil and xerox on vellum, 36 x 82".

Selected one-person
exhibitions:

Lester Gallery, Inverness,
CA, '75, '77; Hansen-Fuller-
Goldeen Gallery, S.F., '79,
'80, '81; Theo Portnoy Gal-
lery, NY, '81; San Francisco
Art Institute, '82; Fuller
Goldeen Gallery, S.F., '84.

Selected outdoor
installations:

University of Notre Dame,
Indiana, Fired and Glazed
Earth Piece, '79; Craven,
Saskatchewan, Canada, Prairie
Starfish/Glacial Epoch (for
Judy), '80; International
Sculpture Conference,
Oakland, CA, Mountain
Kiln/Black Orchid, '82;
Falkirk Cultural Community
Center, San Rafael, CA,
Collision: Lava Ship/Trellis
Ship, '84; University of
Nevada, Reno, Ancient
Shoreline/Island for Lake
Lahontan, '85, '87.

Selected group exhibitions:

The Oakland Museum, CA,
California Ceramics and
Glass, '74 (catalogue);
Whitney Museum of American
Art, NY, Biennial, '75
(catalogue); Fendrick
Gallery, Washington, DC, Clay
U.S.A. (catalogue);
University of North Carolina,
Chapel Hill, Contemporary
Ceramic Sculpture, '77
(catalogue); Herbert F.
Johnson Museum of Art,
Cornell University, Ithaca,
NY, Landscape, New Views,
'78; SFMMA, Northern
California Clay Routes:
Sculpture Now, '79
(catalogue); State University
of N.Y., Stonybrook, Ceramic
Directions: A Contemporary
Overview, '83; Newport Harbor
Art Museum, Newport Beach,
CA, 2nd Newport Biennial: The
Bay Area, '86 (catalogue).

Selected bibliography about
the artist (see also
catalogues under group
exhibitions):

Albright, Thomas. "Art
Where the Present Is
Irrelevant," San Francisco
Chronicle, April 6, '82.
Cebulski, Frank.
"Metamorphic Fires," Artweek,
April 10, '82.
Burststein, Joanne. "The
Travels of John Roloff,"
American Ceramics, Fall '83.
Albright, Thomas. Art
in the San Francisco Bay Area
(Berkeley: UC Press, '85).
Boettger, Suzanne.
"John Roloff," Artforum,
Summer, '85.
Baker, Kenneth.
"Exhibition Focuses on
'Difficult' Art," San
Francisco Chronicle, Aug. 9,
'85.
Levin, Elaine. "John
Roloff: A Ceramics Monthly
Portfolio," Ceramics Monthly
Magazine, Summer '86.

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