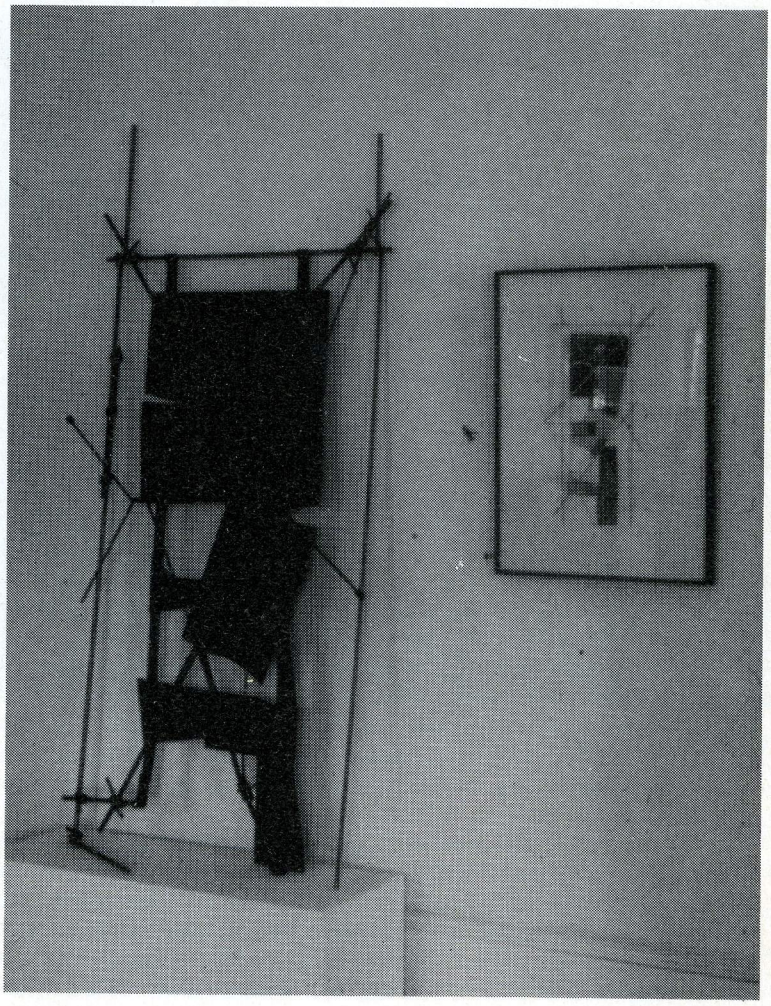
Celia Winter-Irving

JOHN GOULD'S SCULPTURES

After making steel sculpture in strict accordance with the established canons of constructed metal sculpture, John Gould's investigative repositioning of his sculptural stance at the age of thirty one was an outcome of his desire to loosen traditional ties, and explore a new idiom within a tightly prescribed medium strongly associated with formal preoccupations. Made at a time when welded metal sculpture has been declared by many to be notionally bankrupt, his fresh and innovative approach to form and composition provides a welcome input of currency to his medium. In his new work seen in Sydney in 1983, he moved beyond the established aesthetic of making something look well in a particular space, and successfully used both floor and wall as site, considering both areas to be integral parts of his statement.



Natives Return —
Drawing and Sculpture, 1983

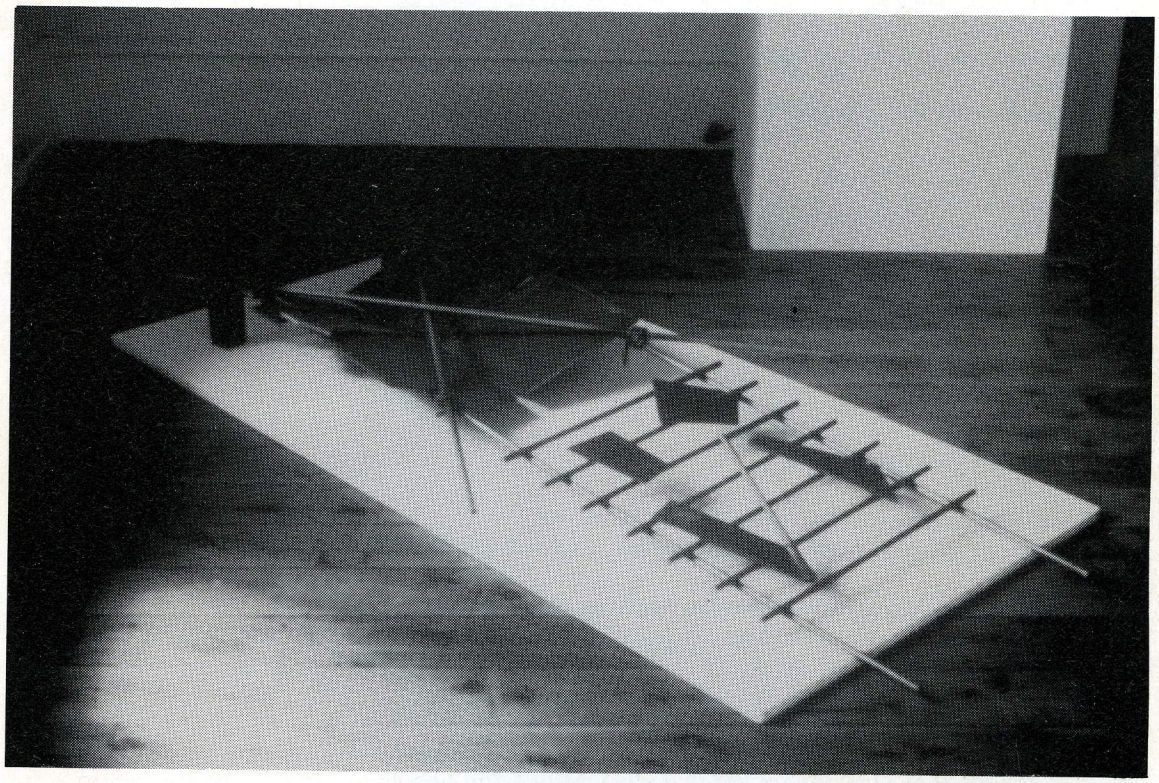
Without changing his materials, or defecting to the more ephemeral modes of three dimensional expression which refute and at times make a mockery of tried and true sculptural values, John Gould in his new work endeavoured to engage his viewers in questioning the relevance of art and its function. His recent corpus of work was an investigation of steel sculpture and abstract sculpture generally to explore social issues and make a broad comment on the human condition capable of communicating itself to persons of different cultures, and persons operating in different social systems. He also wanted to 'explore personal space,' to make sculpture which worked to his own satisfaction rather than sculpture which would merely gain acceptance from peers and mentors. Boldly disregarding dogma, he saw the creative limitations of working within a tradition with accepted guidelines and producing work which elicited a predictable response. He wanted to revise the principles of the tradition in which he worked and to broaden its perspective, to allow the sculptor working in constructed metal to be seen as commentator as well as object maker, and therefore to make commentary an acceptable sculptural device in the context of object making. Through taking on the role of both commentator and object maker, Gould wanted to make sculpture capable of inviting the viewer into its concerns rather than sculpture which remained aloof in demeanour and shut out its public.

At a time of ruthless questioning of his sculptural values, John Gould read *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee,* which documented the history of American Indians since first settlement, concentrating in particular upon the effect of white domination and deprivation of land rights. It was American Indian imagery and their functional objects which provided the point of departure for his new corpus of work. Acutely aware of the formal and aesthetic limitations of his previous sculptural circumstances, Gould was attracted by the functional nature of the Indian imagery, which extended far beyond the decorative to reflect their rites of passage and their fundamental attitudes to life and death, concepts which structured their lives and gave them meaning over and above survival. He was equally attracted to their three dimensional objects, litters, stretchers, beads and jewellery and felt that if these were considered to possess sculptural values and properties, they overcome many of the limitations of their makers' techniques and technologies to master problems of composition, form and truth to materials which beset object sculptors today. He felt also that a contemporary representation of the properties of art of a pre-industrial revolution society in which art and life were inexorably linked would encourage his viewer to consider the relevance of art in his or her life in a refreshing yet historically secure way.

John Gould's intentions were primarily realised in a series of large scale two dimensional steel sculptures straddled against the wall or randomly placed on the floor. In each of these pieces, flat elements of steel welded together were held in bondage by a taunt brace of steel rods twined together with lengths of bent steel. The works suggested a ruthless and aggressive domination of materials,

the steel appeared unusually malleable and pliant, its potential stretched to its limits in service to the statement being made. An air of resignation permeated each piece, the flattened elements of steel lay spent and exhausted against the wall or on the floor, violated of properties and bereft of identity.

These sculptures impose themselves slowly on the viewer, they invite a lingering participation and a lengthy looking into. The final response is a conclusion drawn about content rather than a reaction to their 'formal qualification'. The works suggest consideration of a broader range of the qualities of abstraction than usual, content being a legitimate contender. They suggest also a broadening of the notion of quality in welded metal sculpture and that a vigour of statement not usually associated with the medium is a healthy and welcome element.



Big Foot in Death, 1983