

David Henderson's Soaring Space

BY BROOKE KAMIN RAPAPORT

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David Henderson's *A History of Aviation-Part 2* circumvents the dominant movements of postwar art. The soaring white fiberglass and Dacron installation, which filled an entire gallery, is neither conceptual nor politically driven. It does not reference the gestural painting or sculpture of Abstract Expressionism. Formally spare, it appears weightless, having shed the heavy theories of Minimalism. Nor does it have a narrative attached to it like much contemporary art. Instead, *A History of Aviation-Part 2* relies on long-established sculptural practice: addressing form, it requires viewers to circumnavigate its three-dimensionality. The work's essential presence is what compels the 55-year-old Brooklyn artist. "I don't feel like formalist work is over. There's a lot more territory to explore," he says.

Henderson is well aware that his work exists outside of current art trends: "I think, in a way, that Minimalism dug itself into a hole. It got to be more and more reductive, reducing things down to an absolute. I think I've come through the other side of that." In discussing *A History of Aviation-Part 2*, he affirms that formalism has remained significant to his practice. "The pieces are about very traditional sculptural issues—forms, space, volume, mass. So, in that way, they do relate to Minimalism. But they aren't particularly Minimalist, there's too much going on." Over the last decades, Henderson, who received a BA from Bard College in 1978 and an MFA from Columbia University in 1981, has explored how geometric and organic form can reside in a particular space.

He has shown his work on the 13-acre site of the Reeves-Reed Arboretum in Summit, New Jersey (2007), at the Richmond Center for Visual Arts at Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo (2008), at Knoedler Gallery's Project Space in New York (2008), and at galleries in Baltimore (2001) and Santa Fe (2010). In 2006, his 22-foot-tall *Skylark* was installed on the Brooklyn campus of Long Island University, leaning comfortably against a wall. Henderson appears committed to showing pieces outside of standard art world venues. *A History of Aviation* debuted in 2010 at the Queensboro Community College Art Gallery, which, though affiliated with the City University of New York, is miles from the Chelsea or Williamsburg scene. Its second iteration was then installed at Smack Mellon, a nonprofit space in the DUMBO section of Brooklyn that promotes the work of under-recognized, mid-career artists. The indifference that Henderson meets



from big-time galleries has enabled him to adopt a philosophy that disdains "current art world obsessions." His desire is to reach past art world viewers. "The more concerned with theory, concept, and art history that the artwork becomes, the more limited and narrowly focused the audience," he explains. Henderson is neither an art world insider nor an outsider artist—he teeters somewhere between the two spheres.

Over the course of his career, Henderson has explored various materials and diverse techniques. This ongoing interest balances the focus of his day job; since 1990, he has been a partner in an architectural metal fabricating firm in Brooklyn. While decorative metalwork panels and sleek stairways occupy him from nine to five, his sculpture pushes beyond metal to incorporate new materials and varied forms.

Likewise, Henderson might first diagram his forms with a 3D-modeling program, but he doesn't allow the technology to overwhelm the art: "Although my

Opposite: *A History of Aviation-Part 2*, 2011. Fiberglass, carbon fiber, foam, aluminum, and Dacron, 25 x 20 x 36 ft. This page, left: *Eole*, 2010. Fiberglass, 24 x 19 x 22 in. Right: *Skylark*, 2006. Fiberglass, steel, and pigments, 22 x 6 x 10 ft.

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sculptures are the product of meticulous craftsmanship, slight irregularities humanize the geometry and are inherent in the intensely hands-on methods by which they are made.¹ Foam, fiberglass, carbon fiber, epoxy resin, Dacron, aluminum, and plywood have all found a home in Henderson's sculpture. Bronze, welded steel, and marble hold no interest for him. His choice of materials is pragmatic (the work has an economy of means; the materials, an economy of necessity), but it is also more than that: lightweight materials form a vision and premise for his work. "I am interested in making things that are extremely light," he says. "You can split volume from mass. If you can make the volume really light, it defies your expectations of what it's going to weigh." The weightlessness of sculpture raises the question of how physical objects can pose as ethereal forms.

In Smack Mellon's industrial-style space, Henderson created a complete environment from an assembly of 25 large white elements.

A History of Aviation-Part 2, 2011. Fiberglass, carbon fiber, foam, aluminum, and Dacron, 25 x 20 x 36 ft.



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Smooth on one side and ribbed on the other, the forms recall butterfly wings, with free-standing sections delineated by ribs and alluding to Henderson's interest in conceptualizing aerodynamics. His construction method derives from the principles of lightweight aircraft—in fact, the work can be installed and reinstalled with relative ease by the artist and one assistant. He is fascinated by the imagery of soaring space, whether architectural or metaphorical. *A History of Aviation-Part 2* is based on the Gothic fan vaulting in the nave and chancel of Bath Abbey. In this design, which is strongly associated with England, the ribs extend upward from the columns and open up like a fan to support the structure. Henderson visited Bath Abbey in 2006 and found a place "where the spirit could soar. I am interested in the spirit of space. I wanted to see what could happen if you took those same shapes out of a specifically religious context to see if they have the same physical, visceral reaction. I am interested in that gut reaction." Visitors had to negotiate their way through *A History of Aviation-Part 2* or walk around its perimeter. The project commanded the gallery much like the vaults command the space of Bath Abbey.

In a sense, viewers become performers on a stage set when they enter this installation.² Stage sets by major American artists have a lauded history in 20th- and 21st-century design. Isamu Noguchi, Alexander Calder, Erik Satie, and David Hockney created sets; and William Kentridge designed the sets for a recent Metropolitan Opera production. But Henderson's set isn't for professional performers. Instead, ordinary people, simply by passing through the work, enter into a duet between human and sculptural form.

Henderson didn't conceive of the piece as a stage set, but he concedes that "if you look at it real close, it's kind of rough, like a stage set." There are no specified directions for viewers to take. "I want people to have a physical response to it," he says. "People go different ways. Some go to the end. Others tend to stay in the middle to see what it feels like in there." Inside the middle ground formed by these white wings, visitors inhabit a space where concept, form, and materials unite to create a work of aspiration and ascension.



A History of Aviation-Part 2, 2011. 2 details of installation.

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¹ "David Henderson," exhibition catalogue, James W. and Lois I. Richmond Center for the Visual Arts, Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, Michigan, 2008, p. 10.

² Thanks to my colleague, Charlotte Nott, with whom I discussed the idea of Henderson's work as a stage set.