

SYLVIA SAFDIE AND JOHN HEWARD

Centre d'exposition St. Hyacinthe, ST. HYACINTHE, QUEBEC

The exhibition was called "Zakhor" (which means "remember" in Hebrew) and consisted of six sculptures – three by Safdie and three collaborative pieces by Safdie and John Heward. The title came after the execution of all the works and was chosen by Safdie as much for the energy of the sound of the spoken word as for its meaning. However, the title seems particularly revealing when you consider this exhibition as an environmental installation with a dynamic common to both memory and place: the fact of multiple avenues of entry and egress, freely chosen.

The experience of the work reminded me of the varying levels of access and accessibility that memories have. Similarly, I found that the several pathways that opened in and through the works celebrated my pace, propensities and free choice and became a structure of pure possibility that I could activate and *live* as I moved from one sculpture to the next.

The touchstone for the show as a whole was *Zakhor #1*. Using aluminium, brass, graphite, water and light, Safdie executed a powerful metaphor for remembering. A huge aluminum bowl filled with water rests on the floor. The bowl is interpretable as a container of memories and thoughts and their gestation in mind. A smaller brass bowl floats within it, moving imperceptibly across the surface. It contains graphite – a metaphor for ash (the residue of what is burnt and left behind), yet also that which is used

in mark-making to eulogize or commemorate what one has lost.

In *Zakhor #2*, a plexiglass bowl on the floor is filled with water. In its bottom is rust-coloured desert sand. Hanging in the air above it is a smaller plexiglass bowl in which a tiny oil lamp floats in water. Still further above, a light-source hidden in a lead casing casts a light into the water of the smaller bowl, which acts as a lens for it. The result is an ineffable, non-physical reflection suspended in mid-air between the two bowls – a tremulous volume with no physical substance created by the refracted rays of the electric light and the candle light. The illusion is akin to the memory of a thing, a referent that exists only in remembering. As a whole, *Zakhor #2* functions as a powerful and felt metaphor for the strata of memory.

The entire exhibition space was darkened, lit only by the candles and small light sources in certain pieces. Here was an environing context in which one's own most personal memories and the participatory factor in commemorating were brought to the fore. Certainly, the lit candles in the darkened space left me with a sense of solemn observance and memorialization and, not least, perdurance. The very routes I followed through the space suggested, in their totality, a kinesthetic framework for an associative network of memory. The temporally external horizon that bounded the structure of pathways in and

through the sculptures generated a temporally internal horizon as well – one that existed solely within me.

In *Aley/Kaneh*, a bronze object hangs from the ceiling. It could be a chrysalis or a leaf – "Aley" means leaf in Hebrew and is, incidentally, the name of the town where Safdie was born in Lebanon. As well, there is a long tree branch on the floor ("Kaneh" means tree-trunk in Hebrew). If the leaf reads as a chrysalis or a wing, the branch reads as vertebrae. The sculpture suggests a commemorative thinking back – whether into one's own life-origins or other lives extinguished, whether into personal, collective or biological memory.

The three collaborative works executed by Safdie and John Heward are called *Conjunctions* and are the result of a long dialogue between the two artists, who have lived together for the past ten years. The resolute organicity latent in Safdie's sculptures plays off the ambiguous materiality inherent in Heward's factory- and foundry-made objects, and the seamless wedding of these harmonious sets of meanings – the result of two sensibilities that have shared so many lived experiences over the years – became paradigmatic in its expression of a nature/culture duality and in demonstrating that memory is the active stimulant to present being.

In *Conjunction #2*, a rod hangs at eye level from the ceiling and terminates on the floor in a bowl that has been painted and burned. Inside the bowl is a

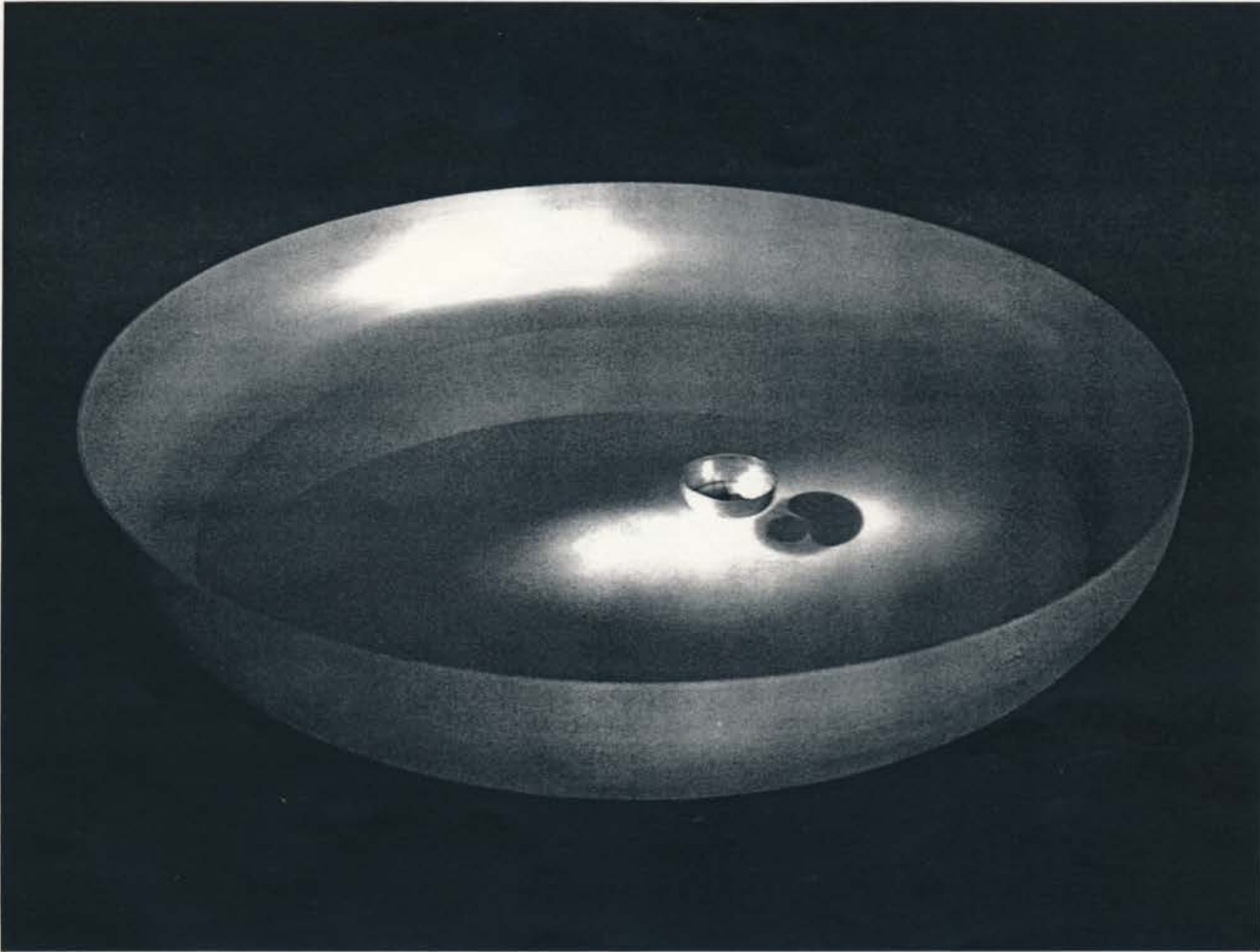


Photo: courtesy the author

SYLVIA SAFDIE
Zakhor #1 (1992); Aluminum, brass, graphite, water & light; Diameter 66 in

powdery substance that might be cumin or turmeric. As I sighted down through the rod, I glimpsed the golden luminescence of the ground seed at the end of the long tunnel. Here was a strong metaphor for memory as well, for the rod became a deep well one might plumb in search of lost time.

In *Conjunction #1*, spare elements such as an iron circle, a tubular rod and a

cleft rock form a memory construct. The cleft rock, contributed by Safdie, was broken during a dance performance by Safdie and choreographer Linda Rabin, pointing to Safdie's frequent use of indicative signs, that is, signs to aid memory and to further the commemorative genealogy of her art.

In "Zakhor," Safdie has pared her formal language down to the bare essen-

tials of life and rendered her sculptures co-extensive with and resonant of her own lived experiences and memories, and these somehow become generic. Like the blurred glimpse of oil-lamps in the sleepless consciousness of Proust's narrator, Safdie offered up objects from which I could piece together the original components of my ego.

James D. Campbell