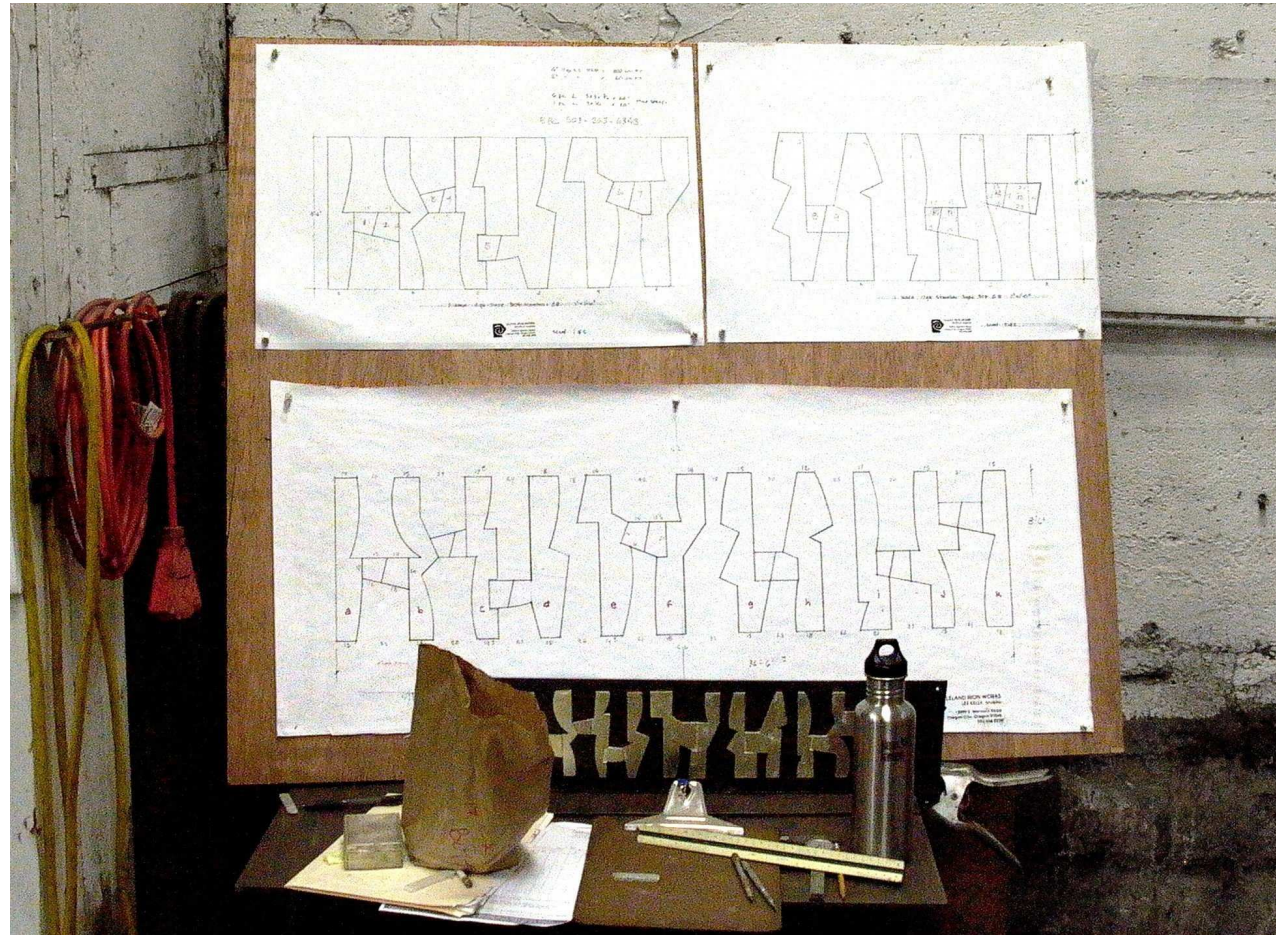


# LEE KELLY

Randal Davis & Kassandra Kelly



**LEE KELLY**



Working drawing for *Moontrap* (2011) in Leland Iron Works studio

Lee Kelly

Edges against the light

Randal Davis

Kassandra Kelly

This book was designed, written and  
published by Randal Davis & Kassandra  
Kelly on the occasion of Lee Kelly's 80th  
birthday.

Leland Iron Works  
Oregon City, Oregon  
May, 2012

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*Arch with Oak [Cornell Oaks] (1989). Stainless steel.  
Collection Cornell Oaks Corporate Center.*



*Edges against the light*

Making temples  
Edges cut against the land  
Iguanas dance in light wells  
A fine sky for Jaguar.

Dreams back before  
The past is gone but for the heart  
and culture is not important  
Only the edges against the light.

Trail through the scrub jungle  
Hot, smokey, flat, dry, crackle  
The afternoon has weight  
Ruin of a Mayan house, owners gone.

We are temple-makers in a minor age  
Putting parts in order  
Shadows move, sharpening edges against the sky  
Olmec head at La Venta  
stares dumbly at the jungle as  
Jaguar snores in his cage.

Memories of John Bolles with tourists  
Tread the temple steps  
Tour guides rap to the camera click  
Pebbles in the pool of time.  
Chichen Itza revisited.

At the market an old woman sells me six limes  
To go with a bottle of tequila  
Which will help me understand.

Lee Kelly



**Kassandra Kelly**

*Postcard from Lee*

Written on the back of a black and white postcard of Arshile Gorky's *The Leaf of an Artichoke is an Owl*, dated February 1961:

Dear Kassandra, I'm here in New York. Looking at art, listening to music. Looking and walking. Far from where I was. You would like it here. -Lee

I received the postcard, which had never been mailed, in a stack of family papers in July, 1985. It sounded like a conversation we'd had a week earlier. Except I was eight months old when you wrote it.

I realized that every conversation we've had started much, much earlier.

*Steel Rings I-IV* (1968/2011). Cor-ten steel. Private collection.

There's just no waiting around to talk it over.

When we used to go backpacking in Idaho, always listening for the trail is how I remember you. There you are, pausing on a brushed-up hillside trying to listen back to 1947. The last time you went through here was with your grandfather, Jack Howard. You weren't paying attention to the trail that day because Jack was depending on you to not fuck up about something else entirely. You were at horse-height, it was high summer, and you had a pack-string behind you. The trees were a lot shorter too. But here we are now, on foot, hot, lost, thirsty and wishing were home in our little hobbit holes again. You catch the faint honky-tonk trail rag of 1947 and pretty soon, we're moving again. Heading up, most likely. Or down again after being up.

Complicated question.

Maybe you didn't know this. People used to ask Jason and me all the time: "What's it like to have a sculptor for a dad? Do you think you will want to be an artist someday too?" God it was awful. Jason and I thought we already were artists and didn't get the someday part at all.

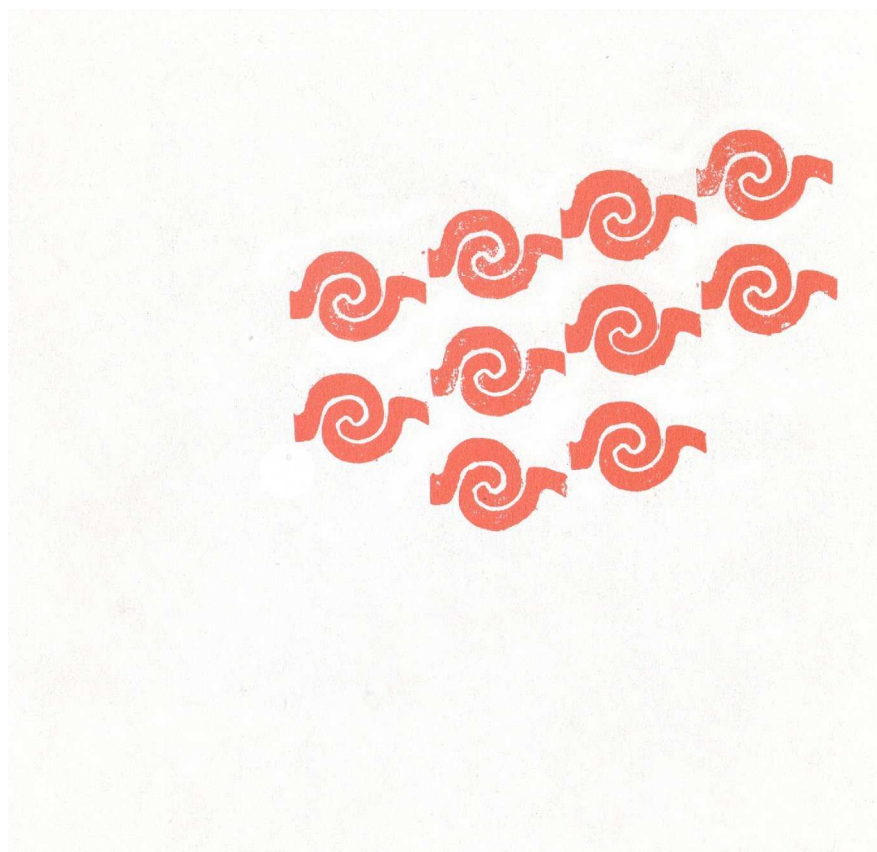
Always plenty of time to talk later.

You who are so disdainful of words, tell more stories than any three people. What I love is listening for the faint trail of a story emerging from the conversation. Once it starts, the story can go almost anywhere. I've heard you tell a story about a guy, a painter, living in New York who has a girlfriend with a little tiny dog with a rhinestone collar. The next time you tell that story, there's no girlfriend, no dog, and the guy is a climber. He's going somewhere up high, in a white out, and his buddy has altitude sickness. I hear the story again and it's Jack Howard and his brother Louis, and one of them has a rattlesnake crawling up his leg.

More than most people, we've had the longest conversations of all.

With your eightieth birthday in hand, and my fifty-second, I think of you in 1961, in New York. You are living with Erika Munk, going out every night to the jazz bars, checking out the art scene by day. Maybe one of those nights you think, Christ this is a cold old town, who do you got to know to make it in this place? And the next moment, you're asking yourself, why the hell not stay? The only thing really wrong is the low ceilings.



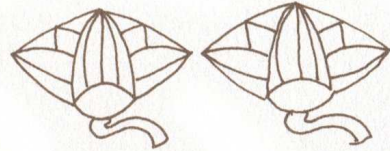


**Lee Kelly**

*A Book of Gardens*

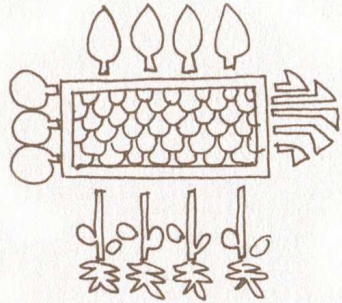
western tradition has it that man's first home  
was a garden → east of eden ←  
and we have tried to return ever since.

Lee Kelly · ©1987

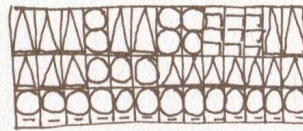


early garden : egypt

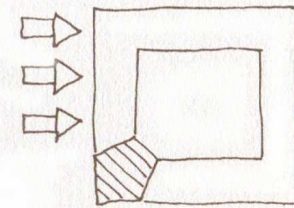
"praise to you Nile  
that comes from earth  
to nourish Egypt...  
that waters the gardens...  
she that re created to  
nourish all cattle..."



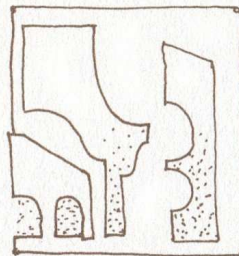
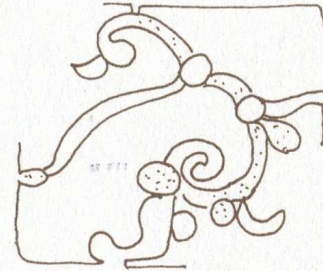
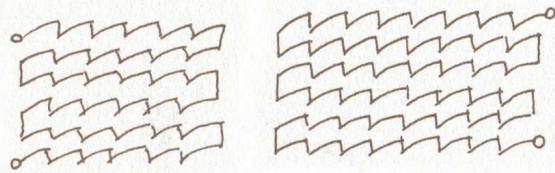
symmetrical plan, trees in rows  
around water : oasis



escape from summer heat - glare of cloudless  
sky - garden as retreat - pool of water,  
leafy trees.



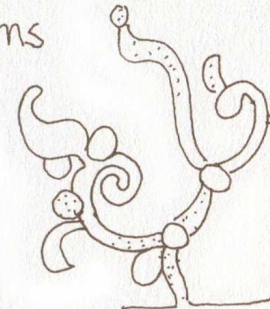
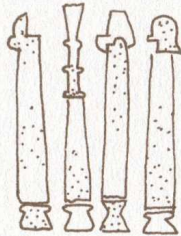
persia → paradise ≡ garden, a concept universal to human experience, paradise as a garden.



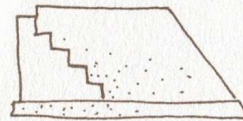
reverence for water, mystical feeling for trees, ordering of nature

to transform desert to represent the architecture of paradise

invention of garden objects: structures, columned halls, pavilions, water ways: pools, basins irrigation systems



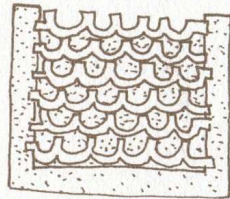
waterchute - steps → to change levels between terraces.






india - pre mughal

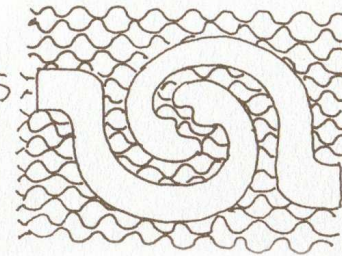
rivers: ganga, yamuna holy waters  
bringing water from the himalaya,  
house of the gods.



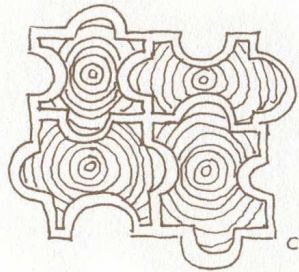
buddha attained perfect knowledge  
under a tree.

water - serpent kings (nagas), guardians  
of springs and holy tanks.

water - serpent device  spiral  
ancient symbol.



garden at night light / water  
flicker of light - sound of water



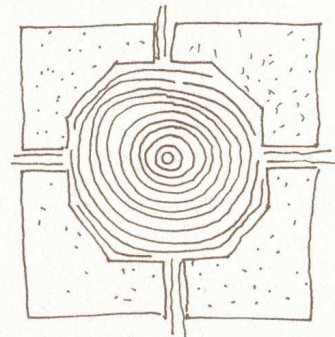
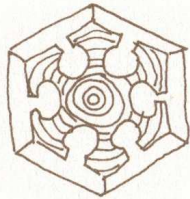
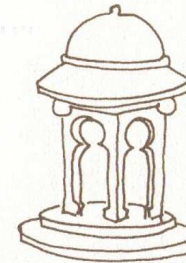
curbing@anguri.bagh

mughal-india

babur: soldier, garden-maker

"I laid out the four gardens (bagh-i-wafa)  
on a rising ground, facing south,  
there oranges, citrons, and pomegranates  
grow in abundance"

"in order to bring water I had a large  
channel dug"

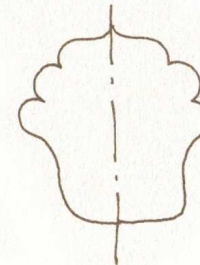


four gardens (charbagh) meeting,  
baths, mosque.

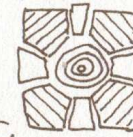
"the best of young trees must be planted there,  
lawns arranged, borders set with sweet-herbs"

water dominated, a place to be  
alone or with family and friends.

pavilions to carry on life in a garden

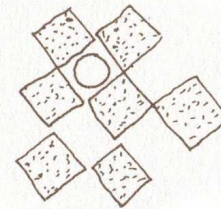


China  
from vast nature preserves or hunting parks  
to intimate family garden retreats from  
the outside world, privacy behind a wall-  
spaces recalling nature at its most wild and scenic

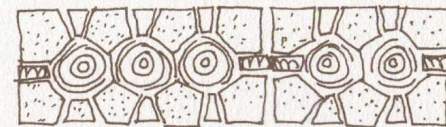
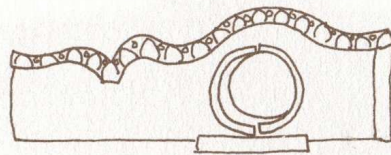


to make nature over a piece of the wilds with architecture

covered passages  
zig-zag path  
bridge  
paving patterns  
varied openings - doors - windows.  
all weather experience of garden.



never going directly, always mystery of the unknown,  
the garden slowly reveals itself.

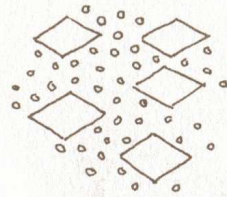


" a chinese garden is to be experienced,  
one must physically move through the spaces,  
only a hint of what lies around the corner  
is revealed from any one point."

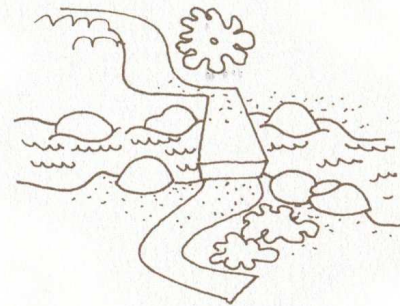
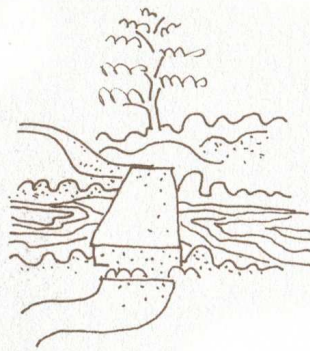
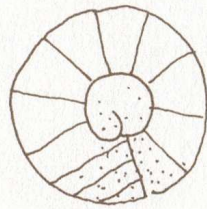
(david h engel - creating a chinese garden)

Japan

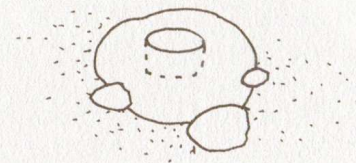
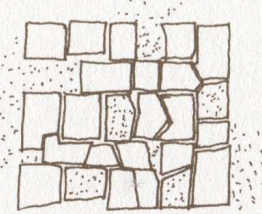
to capture a landscape : space , illusion



balance between nature and man



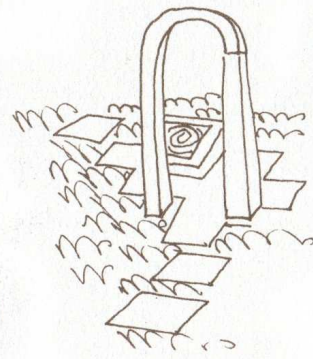
shakkei = borrowed scenery • landscape captured alive  
example • framing a distant view to make it part  
of the garden.



to choose a site w/ great natural beauty and  
place something in it is not "borrowing scenery".

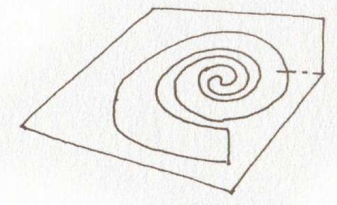
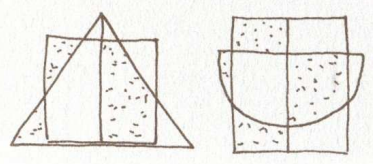
garden as a meeting place between man and nature.

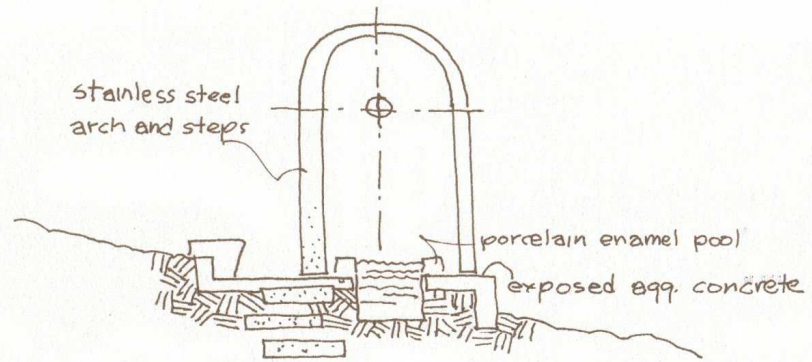
sculpture should be human scale, colors, textures balance the natural materials.



sculptural elements which emphasize human presence. leaves, water, bark, sky all these things make the surroundings.

the working relationship between people becomes critical to successfully making sculpture for a garden

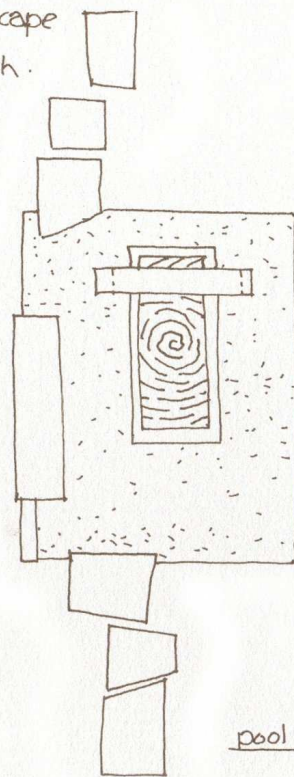




arch: "borrows" adj. landscape

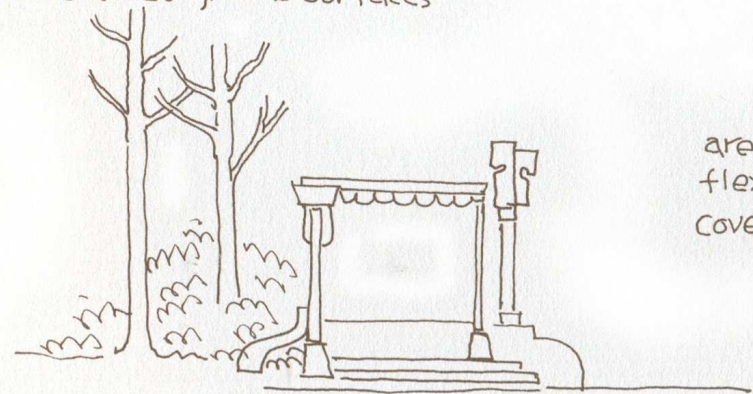
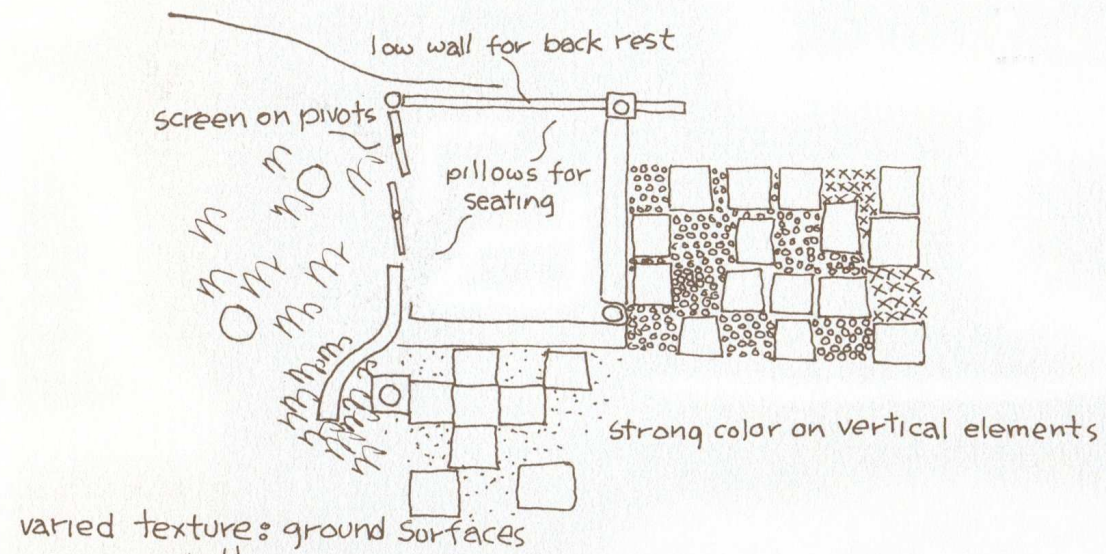
pool: "borrows" sky and arch.

stainless surface ground  
to reflect only color  
not specific images.



pool w/ bench and arch

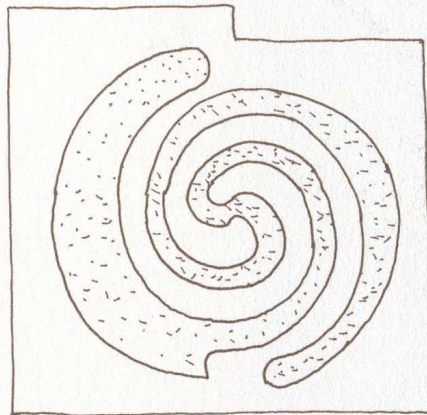
gathering  
pavillion: a<sup>v</sup> place



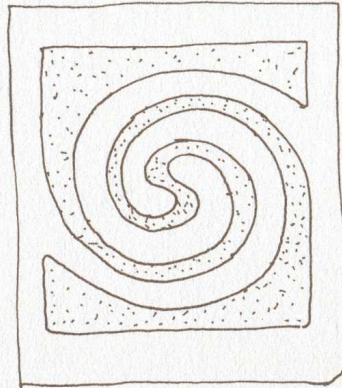
area for dinner, seating 14-16  
flexible lighting -  
covered platform.

serpent waterway

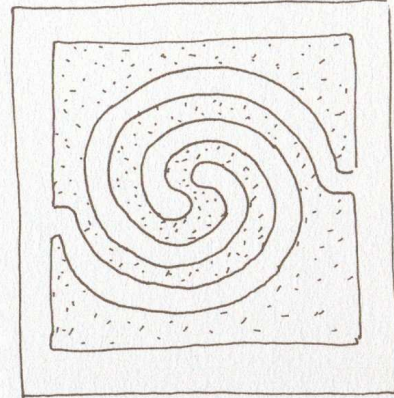
naga: benevolent snake-king  
guardian spirit of water places



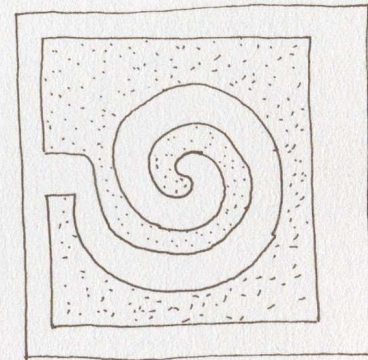
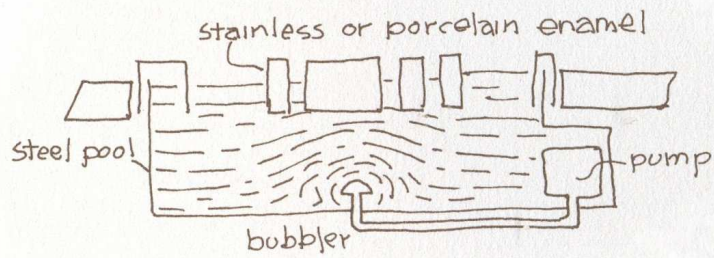
a



b



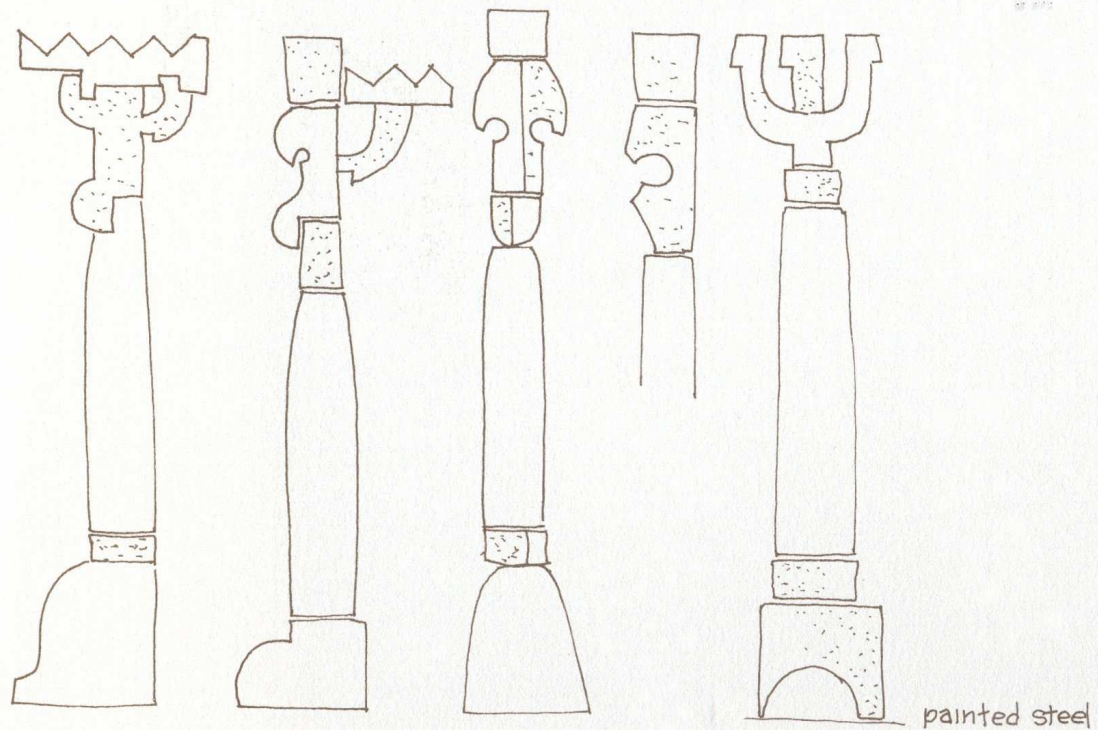
c



d



a way to understand ourselves with nature  
sculpture Symbols or devices to make connections,  
as counter point to plant materials.



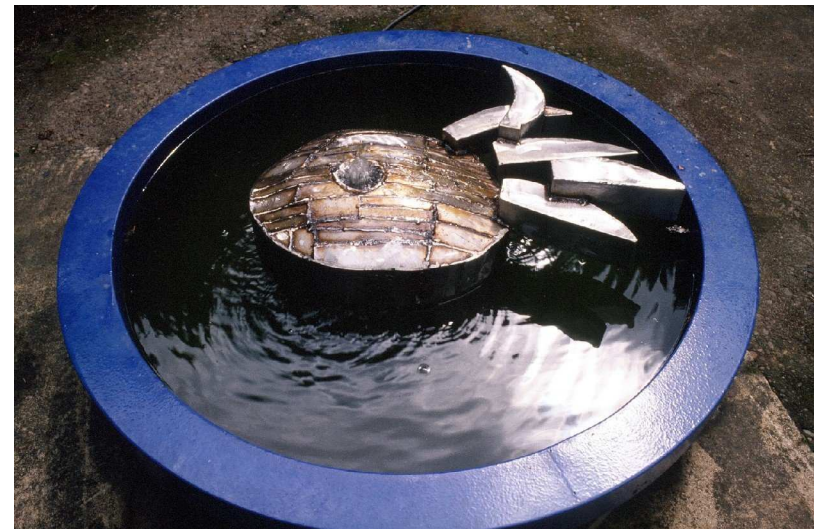
garden at night and all seasons,  
place for gathering, special events,  
as well as daily life.  
⇒ looking down into- looking out of.





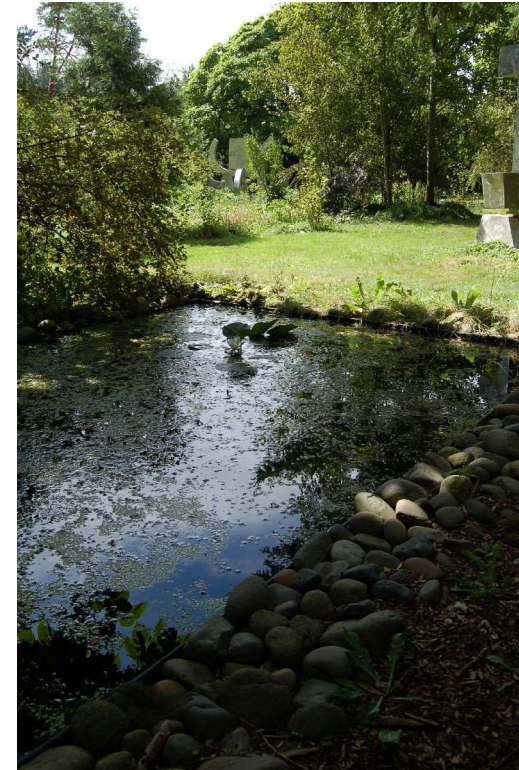
**Lee Kelly**

*"....a meeting place  
between man and nature..."*



Above: *Akbar's Elephant* (2000). Stainless steel. Collection the artist.

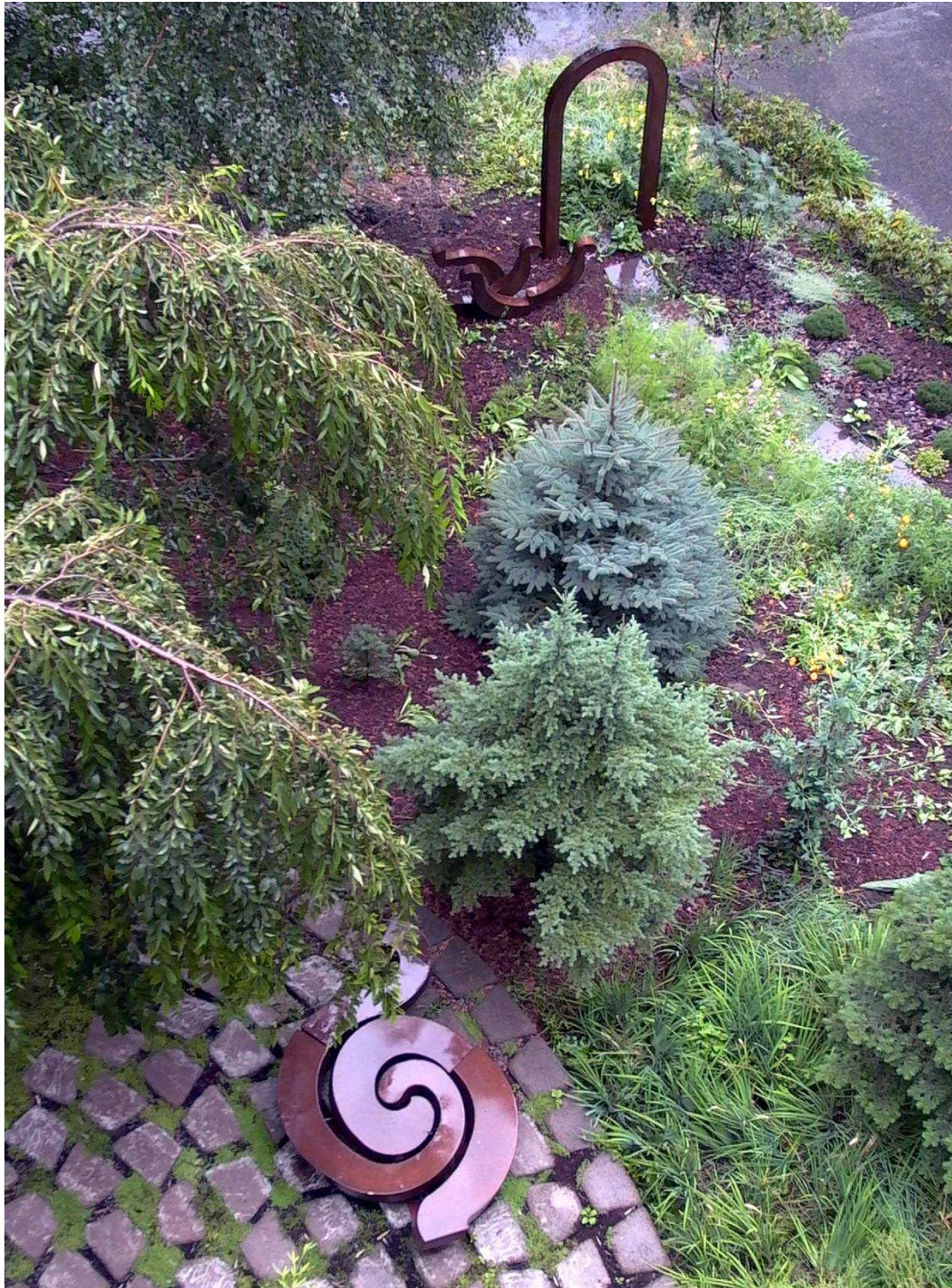
Below: *Water Piece* [after Bonnie, Dave & Ann Bronson] (1985). Enameled steel, stainless steel, water. Collection Dave & Ann Bronson.



Clockwise from above left: *Column* [with Michael Stirling] (1988). Stainless steel, enameled steel, sound elements. Collection the artist. *Tibetan Bride* (1992). Stainless steel. Collection the artist. *Garden Elements* (2007). Cor-ten steel, gravel. Collection the artist. *Koji's House* (1986). Cor-ten steel. Collection the artist. *Phi Mai* (1995) & *Angkor I* (1994). Stainless steel. Collection the artist. View of pond at Leland Iron Works.



Clockwise from above left: *Red Gate & Sunset Garden* (1982-85) with *Untitled* (1974). Cor-ten steel, enameled steel, stainless steel. Collection the artist.  
*Akbar's Gate* (1988). Stainless steel. Private collection. *East of Riggins* (1978). Cor-ten steel. Collection the artist. *Kayseri* (1996) & *Aksary* (1996). Silver leaf on stainless steel. Collection the artist.



Left: Overhead view, High Street garden.  
Above right: *Interlocking Serpents* (1999). Cor-ten steel. Collection Susan Hammer. Below right: *High Street Arch* (1999). Cor-ten steel. Collection Susan Hammer.



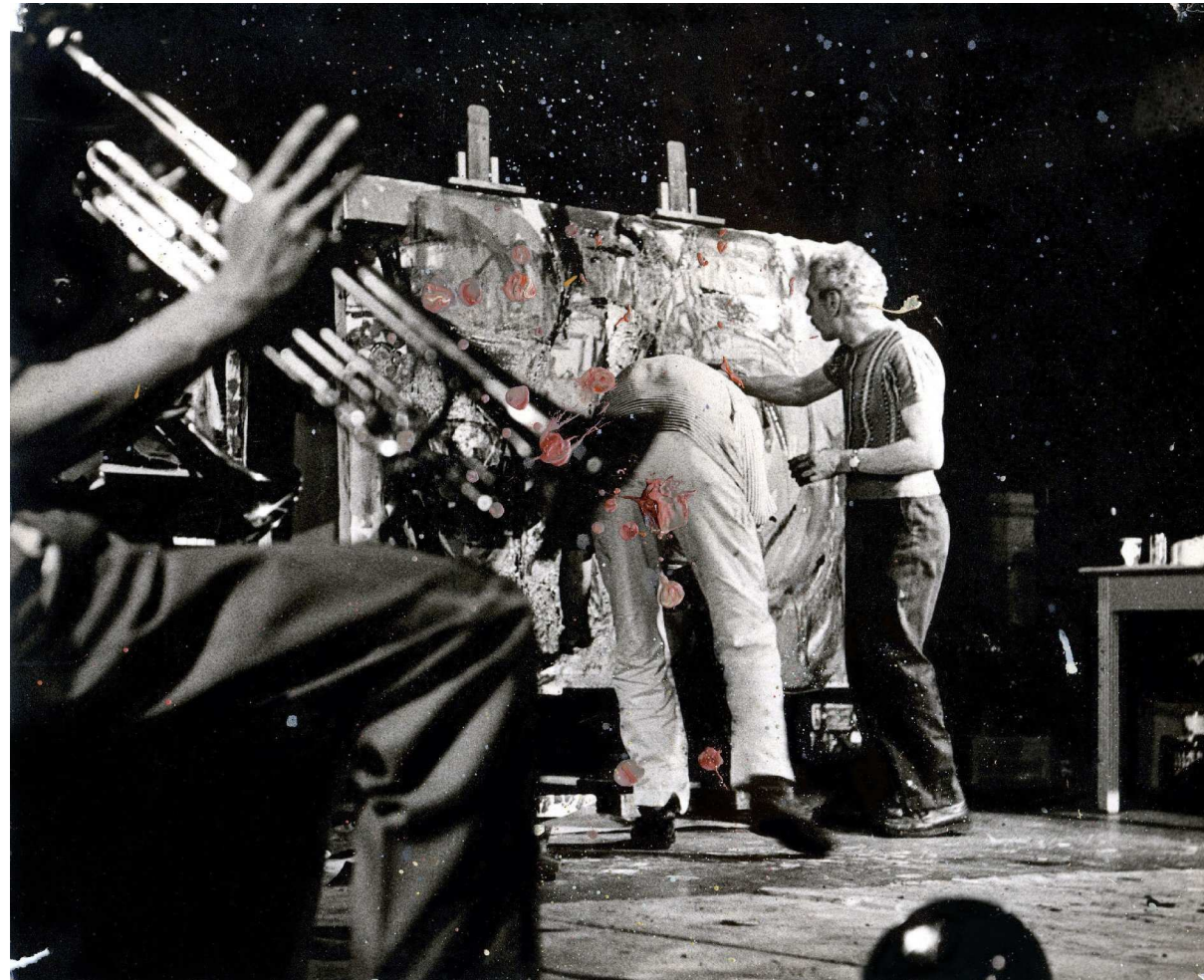
*Memory 99* (1999). Cor-ten steel. Collection the artist.

*In the Goddess Cave*

With thrown paint, jazz and burned steel  
artists of America cut the cord to Europe.  
For a decade we howled at our own moon.  
With Pollock, Smith and Parker we looked  
homeward and saw no angels.  
Took no comfort with an Athens moved to Rome  
    A Rome moved to Paris  
    or Paris moved to New York  
It was Snyder who showed us how to see  
another America, the Asia never  
told about in schools, how to listen  
for the beat, the ancient song  
about who we are. Slowly finding  
elements of the old goddess,  
of a time before swords and warrior kings.

Lee Kelly





Lee Kelly and Louis Bunce collaborated on several painting and jazz projects in 1959. This photograph documents one such performance in June, 1959 at the now-defunct Old Shangri La in Portland with musicians Quin Anderson, Jerry Magill, Dan Mason, Lee Reinoehl, Lee Rocky and Jim Smith. The photograph was later accidentally paint spattered in Lee Kelly's studio.





## Randal Davis

*"...in choice of place..."*



You could call it the "Rosebud syndrome," the search for a key or some unique tool that unlocks a complex of questions. Of course, lovely the fiction may be, it's also worth remembering that, at the end of *Citizen Kane*, the journalist remarks ruefully: "No, I don't think it explains anything. I don't think any word explains a man's life."

But I want to suggest here that there is a word, actually perhaps less the word itself than the something else that the word tries to mark, something central to Lee Kelly's work. That word is "place."

Left: *Memory II* (1979). Cor-ten steel. Collection the artist.  
Right: Two installation views of *Kyoto* series (2007) at Elizabeth Leach Gallery, Portland Oregon.

Sometimes it means a very specific physical location. At other times it is less perceptible, instead a *metaphysical* space. Gary Snyder, a poet admired by Kelly, understood this perfectly in "Riprap."

Lay down these words  
 Before your mind like rocks.  
     placed solid, by hands  
 In choice of place, set  
 Before the body of the mind  
     in space and time...

Snyder's desire for a poetry in which words are as substantial as the rocks of a breakwater, however haphazard their arrangement, emphasizes not just the work of hands, but the interdependence of the concrete and the abstract, "the body of the mind."

Architect David Seamon recently suggested a triadic structure for the phenomenology of place in which the person-place relationship, "might be clarified...in terms of *threeness* — in other words, as a *triadic* relationship among three dimensions of place...(1) *geographic ensemble*; (2) *people-in-place*; and (3) spirit of place, or *genius loci*." It follows from this that any of the three terms may dominate and that the relative balance of the triad may change from situation to situation.

Space and time, body and mind – Seamon is right to try to systematize this way of being in the world although the points themselves remain elusive, inescapably intertwined. Snyder understood this, too, and heard it in the voice of Han Shan, the 9th century Chinese poet whose work he brilliantly translated. Han Shan took the name "Cold Mountain," but he uses it in all three of Seamon's "dimensions" –

as the place he lives, as his name, and as a state of mind.

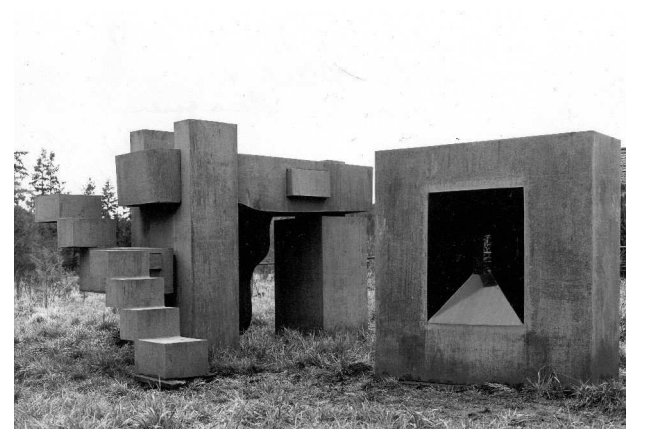
Thus he writes, recounting his life, "I settled at Cold Mountain long ago, / Already it seems like years and years" and it is clear that he refers to what Seamon would call the "geographic ensemble," the *place* that can be shown on a map. But he also writes of Cold Mountain as "...a house / Without beams or walls," limning not simply the outdoors, but an attitude toward the world.

This posture, which David Rivard describes as "posed in imbalance," culminates in the extraordinary final poem in Snyder's series:

When men see Han-shan  
 They all say he's crazy  
 And not much to look at -  
 Dressed in rags and hides.  
 They don't get what I say  
 And I don't talk their language.  
 All I can say to those I meet:  
 "Try and make it to Cold Mountain."

It's possible, I think, to use these ideas about place in respect to all of Lee Kelly's work, particularly since, say, the later 1960s and early 1970s, but one could begin even further back. Born in 1932, it's hardly a surprise that, in works from his twenties, the ethos of Abstract Expressionism is dominant – thus does his poem "In the Goddess Cave" figure Pollock, Snyder and David Smith, *pace* Allen Ginsberg, "howling at the moon...listen[ing] for the ancient song."

Recall, though, the immense influence of the two principal critical poles of the 1950s,



Above: Two views of *Arch with Waterfall, Window & Stairs* (1971). Cor-ten steel & acrylic lacquer.  
 Below: *Leaving Kathmandu* (2006). Silicone bronze. Collection the artist.

Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg – if we began with a journey to Cold Mountain, we can now hardly pass the two critical peaks sometimes called “Green Mountain” and “Red Mountain.” And that is why I say “ethos” here, rather than “formalism,” because Kelly was much the closer, in temperament and practice, to Rosenberg.

Greenberg’s reduction of painting to “first principles” was, of course, essentially that of a scientism. Rosenberg agreed, at least provisionally, that the pictorial space was neither illusionistic nor even necessarily representational but was instead “an arena in which to act.” Where Rosenberg found that “what was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event,” one could also see the way in which “space” becomes “place.”

By the later 1960’s, Kelly had moved on, dramatically, from that “place.” Literally and figuratively. As his work developed in the later 1950s and early 1960s, he moved from painting to polychrome sculpture and it is hard not to see these works as an attempted translation, a rendering, of the rich facture of his painting into three dimensions. Not so surprisingly, this work satisfied neither the painters nor the sculptors in the community, and Kelly would leave this essentially gestural vocabulary in favor of a harder and reductive set of formal devices, a repertoire closer to the examples of David Smith and Anthony Caro.

And he left that “place,” too, in a very literal sense. In the early 1960s, he and his wife, Bonnie Bronson, and their children departed

Portland for the then-very rural Oregon City, and a former dairy farm on several acres of land which would serve as home, studio and idyllic garden. Ultimately rechristened Leland Iron Works, a tribute to the iconic influence of Smith’s home and studio at Bolton Landing, Terminal Iron Works, one can also hardly fail to remark the allusion to Kelly’s name.

His principal working space and primary residence for five decades, Leland Iron Works is, like the place that Han Shan found, “a house / Without beams or walls.”

Clambering up Cold Mountain path,  
The Cold Mountain trail goes on  
and on:  
The long gorge choked with scree  
and boulders,  
The wide creek, the mist blurred grass.  
The moss is slippery, though there's  
been no rain  
The pine sings, but there's no wind.  
Who can leap the word's ties  
And sit with me among the clouds?

Visitors to Leland Iron Works often remark that it is “like a museum.” Though at least partly true, this misses an important point, implying a misleading permanence. Of the twenty or more major sculptures installed on the property at any time, some, to be sure, don’t move much or often. Shifting the monumental *Memory 99* (1999) is not for a whim, though it was transported to the city for the Portland Art Museum’s 2010 Kelly retrospective. Others, like *East of Riggins* (1978), are being enveloped by the slow embrace of the surrounding trees.

More typically, though, they move. Older pieces shift to make room for newer work, or simply shift into new constellations, new relations. This was most spectacularly true of the *Steel Rings I & II* (1968), an ensemble of large Cor-ten steel play structures originally commissioned for Unthank Park, a major development in North Portland.

Eventually, the park area was redeveloped, and the rings returned to Leland Iron Works where they remained until the summer of 2011. A visiting collector with a large property was entranced, and commissioned not just their rebuilding, but their re-imagining. Originally joined in dyads and triads, the elements were cut apart, moved back to the studio, and there reassembled in a strikingly different arrangement - one dyad remained, the others were now separated as single elements, with the ensemble to be installed throughout a large park-like garden.

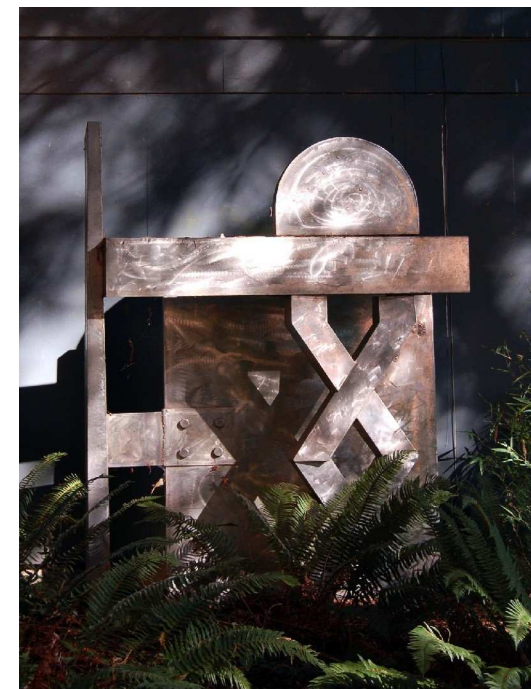
The signs of their repair and regrouping remained visible, though the distinctive and inevitable rusting of the steel will eventually obscure those traces – the “accumulation” of history, then, is as much a subtraction as an addition, an erasure as much as a writing.

Introduced to the architecture of Chichen Itza in 1972 by his friend, San Francisco architect, engineer and art dealer John Bolles, Kelly’s work which, however original, had remained within the precincts of a readily recognizable high modernism, took a different turn, becoming at once more idiosyncratic and more overtly referential.

This was immediately apparent in the ensemble of works comprising *Gate with Waterfall, Window & Stairs* (1971) which decisively brackets the highly stylized “natural” form of the waterfall with overt architectonics. This piece introduced as well qualities that would become salient features of his sculpture: the explicit use of architectural forms (albeit not necessarily “functional,” in the strict sense) and a strange, almost uncanny, feeling of being at once artifacts of ancient past and a yet only glimpsed future.

Another major change in his formal vocabulary came later, as the works increasingly accommodated curvilinear shapes. To compare, for example, the superficially similar *Memory II* (1979) and *Memory 99* (1999) makes this clear (how, too, they are atomized into the calligraphic wall sculptures of the *Kyoto* series from 2007). And as the formal range of the work increased since that time, so too did its referentiality.

Kelly was, and remains, an inveterate traveler – India, Nepal, Mexico, Viet Nam... It might be more surprising if these journeys had no perceptible impact on his art, but that is hardly the case. Yet his work did not become some sort of transcultural pastiche. Quite the contrary. These – well, it’s hard, actually, to know exactly what to call them – “influences” seems too strong, since they have clearly been factored through several sieves of increasing abstraction. Neither are they



“referencing,” at least in the present use of the term. Just as the International Style of architecture became “international” precisely because it suppressed reference to any recognizable “nationality,” so too is there a postmodernism that would attain ubiquity through the notional equivalency of any cultural signifier.

So it’s not quite as if *Akbar’s Elephant* could stroll the Elephant Court of Angkor Wat, or that the positive/negative space inversions of *Aksary* or *Kayseri* just got off a plane from Istanbul, but they are here. The switchboard connects Tibet and the Yucatan – and it turns out they have a lot to say.

There is a temptation to call what I earlier referred to as the quality in Kelly’s work of

both an ancient past and a future a sense of timelessness, but that is too easy. It would be better said, better though more difficult, that the best of his works possess a *timefullness*, similar to what Mark C. Taylor found in Kierkegaard.

Time, understood as tensed, emerges only in connection with man’s purposeful activity.... It is the present, the moment in which freedom can be exercised, which differentiates the past (one’s actuality) from the future (one’s possibility). So understood, time is a reality which grows out of, and is related to, the lives of selves in the stance of purposeful activity. Time is properly grasped as life-time.

Left: *Temple Study* (1982). Cor-ten steel, paint, light elements. Collection the artist.  
Right: *Lumbini* (1977/1982). Stainless steel. Collection the artist.

The paths of Lee Kelly's art have been many, tangled and intertwined. That elaborate tracery, like the whorls of the grinding pad across an expanse of stainless steel or the patchwork fragments of white and yellow gold leaf that are his "signature," is another kind of space.

It is where, as David Seamon would have it, the "geographic ensemble" – elephants from India and Angkor Wat, the pyramids and ballcourts of Mayan ruins come together. I've tried to articulate the particular *genius loci* of his work. It's something like the space where postmodernism's shrug that there is nothing new runs against Pound's command to "make it new." It's something like the space, the place, of the redemption and renewal of Eliot's *Four Quartets*: "And what you do not know is the only thing you know / And what you own is what you do not own / And where you are is where you are not." But that is another story. Some other time, some other place.

I want to end circling back to where I began. In the poem which opens this book, Lee Kelly wrote:

The past is gone but for the heart  
and culture is not important  
Only the edges against the light.

Two edges, converging lines. In "How Poetry Comes To Me," Gary Snyder finds his poetry at another border, the boundary between knowing and unknowing:

It comes blundering over the  
Boulders at night, it stays

Frightened outside the  
Range of my campfire  
I go to meet it at the  
Edge of the light

Not so different, really – Han Shan, I don't think, would worry. This must be the place. The future comes one hour at a time.

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*The Future Comes One Hour at a Time*

The future comes one hour at a time,  
Day starts with grey light and pain,  
But with sun on the hills and friends the day moves on.

Sculpture making is a process of object making  
Which we use to explore our relationships with  
Each other and the world.

October 5, 2001

Lee Kelly





Lee Kelly at Leland Iron Works, August 2011





