

MODULE 1: ORIGINS

Jeffrey Rubinoﬀ's Path to Sculpture



From rural Ontario to abstract sculpture via writing and painting

- Jeffrey Rubinoff grew up in a farming community in southwestern (London) Ontario.
- Only the eldest sons inherited the farms; younger sons and daughters had limited options.
- Many non-inheriting children worked hard to get excellent grades to escape farming life.

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Series 4-8, 1985, A 242 Cor-ten steel

From rural Ontario to abstract sculpture...cont'd

- Art was completely absent from Jeffrey Rubinoff's early environment, culturally and educationally.
- He initially focused on becoming a writer, but a pivotal change occurred when he attended a new university in Michigan, which offered studio art courses.

Discovering art felt like finding his true self:

“So art had no part of my life whatsoever—none—and it was not on the horizon anywhere... So I was writing at that time and wanted to be a writer, and I turned up at this university and what do I find—studio courses. And this was like somebody who is left-handed, being raised right-handed discovering who they really are. This was an enormous lesson for me.”

—Jeffrey Rubinoff, 2011 Yale Forum Sculpture Tour for Cultural Historians



A Breakthrough Exhibition & Market Reality: “Coffee Table Art”

- First solo show at the 1971 Ontario Science Centre in Toronto shortly after finishing grad school.
- Marked the beginning of his professional journey as an independent sculptor.
- The first dealer was Helen Mazelow. Dealer advised: “If it fits on a coffee table, I can sell it.”
- Jeffrey Rubinoff created both small and large works that focused on the creative possibilities of the tetrahedron. These works were all painted in bold colours that were subsequently sandblasted off.



Early Works 1: 1971, A 242 Cor-ten steel



Early Work 2: 1971, A 242 Cor-ten steel



Early Work 3: 1971, A 242 Cor-ten steel



Early Work 4: 1971, A 242 Cor-ten steel



Early Work 5: 1971, A 242 Cor-ten steel




Early Work 6: 1975, A 242 Cor-ten steel

FORMAL DESCRIPTION:

- Contrast between organic and geometric forms creates visual tension
- Implied movement (eruptions of molten shapes and movements of tetrahedra on rods)
- Sculpture is designed 'in the round' of interest from all angles

Result: All small works sold; larger works did not and are on display at the entrance of the park.



Rubinoff purchased the The Maplehurst Farm — the sculpture park land — in 1973, not to bring business to it, but to farm it and make art there.

“So I ended up with my inventory, which is what sculptors have done from time immemorial, if they do anything independently... My first lesson as a sculptor was that you were going to end up with your inventory, so you might as well just live with that.”
—Jeffrey Rubinoff, 2011 Yale Forum Sculpture Tour for Cultural Historians

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Early career disillusionment and rejection of commodified art

The Soul-Destroying Art World of the 1970s

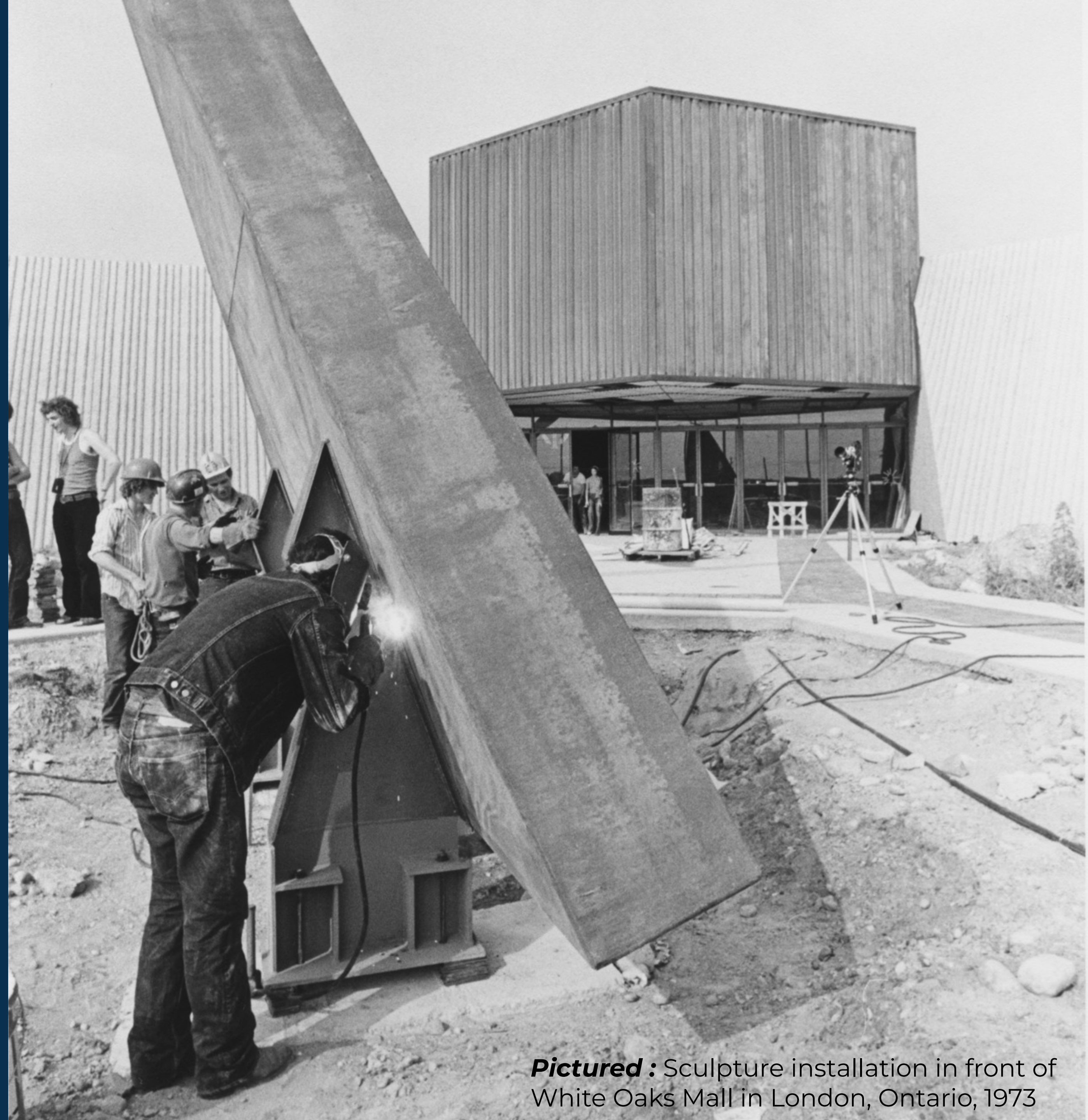
After early success, his father offered him a business opportunity with creative freedom: to become the developer of a major regional shopping center. The goal was to generate income so he could create without worrying about sales.

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Pictured: Jeffrey Rubinoff in front of White Oaks Mall, London, Ontario, 1973

The Soul-Destroying Art World of the 1970s cont'd

- During this period, he felt alienated by the prevailing trends in art and disconnected from authentic artistic values. He found success and satisfaction in his business activities, but at the cost of reduced artistic output from 1971 to 1980.
- *“Gradually by 1979 I really hit the wall with an existential crisis, I was **dying as an artist**... So the question that arose was, well, what if there is a creative run from art history itself?”*
—Jeffrey Rubinoff, 2011 Yale Forum Sculpture Tour for Cultural Historians



Pictured : Sculpture installation in front of White Oaks Mall in London, Ontario, 1973

Pictured : Sculpture by Jeffrey Rubinoff
in front of White Oaks Mall

The Soul-Destroying Art World of the 1970s cont'd

- In the 1970s, the art world's descent into **commodification** and conceptualism became for him "soul-destroying."
- Rubinoff considered himself an **avant-garde** artist, continually looking to novelty as the path to originality. His critique was that all the depth the art would need to be perceived as emanating from the artist. He felt there would eventually be a crisis of meaning in that mode of art making

The Soul-Destroying Art World of the 1970s cont'd

“And so gradually you were saying me, me, me, me, me, me; you weren’t saying art art, art, art—you were saying me, me, me, me, me, me, and the art resides in me totally. That was the picture that came out of this continual avant-garde. And it was a dead end.”

—Jeffrey Rubinoff, 2011 Yale Forum Sculpture Tour for Cultural Historians

Takeaway: Shifted perspective from disappointment to independence from the art market. It is important to note that independence didn’t mean separation, as from the 1980’s to end of the 90’s Rubinoff showed his work and marketed it through galleries in central Canada and in New York and Chicago.

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Pictured: Jeffrey Rubinoff in his studio in front of his “Sail” work. Created for his longtime friend and landscaping collaborator John Kirk’s clifftop residence on Denman Island



IN JEFFREY'S WORDS:

“What was going on [in the art world] was the complete commodification, which really was quite complete by the 1960’s. We were just part of this last residue, this next generation of producers for it. And so I became very disillusioned... it was very soul destroying.”

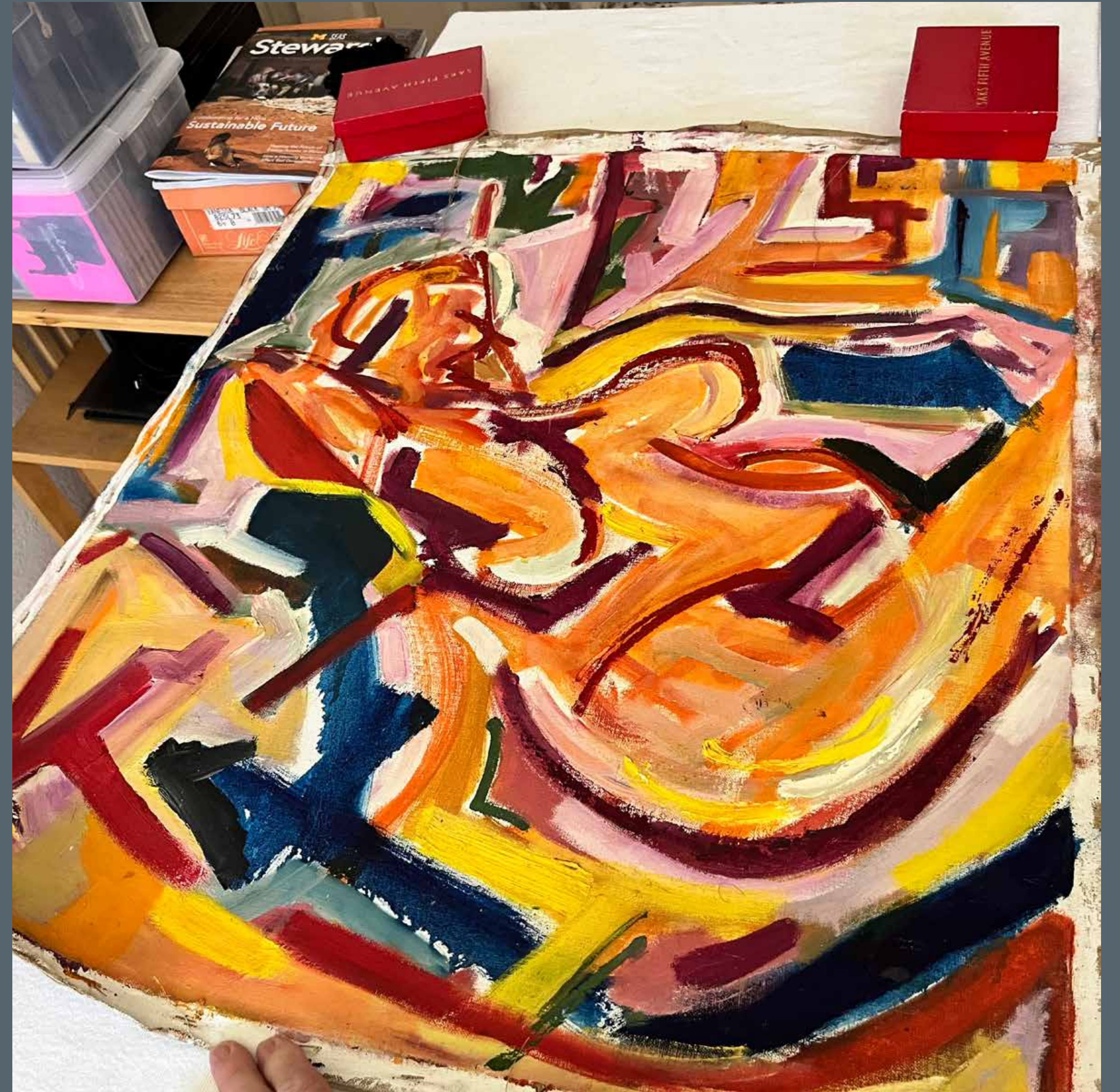
—Jeffrey Rubinoff, 2011 Yale Forum Sculpture Tour for Cultural Historians

Return to Art Through a Creative Existential Crisis

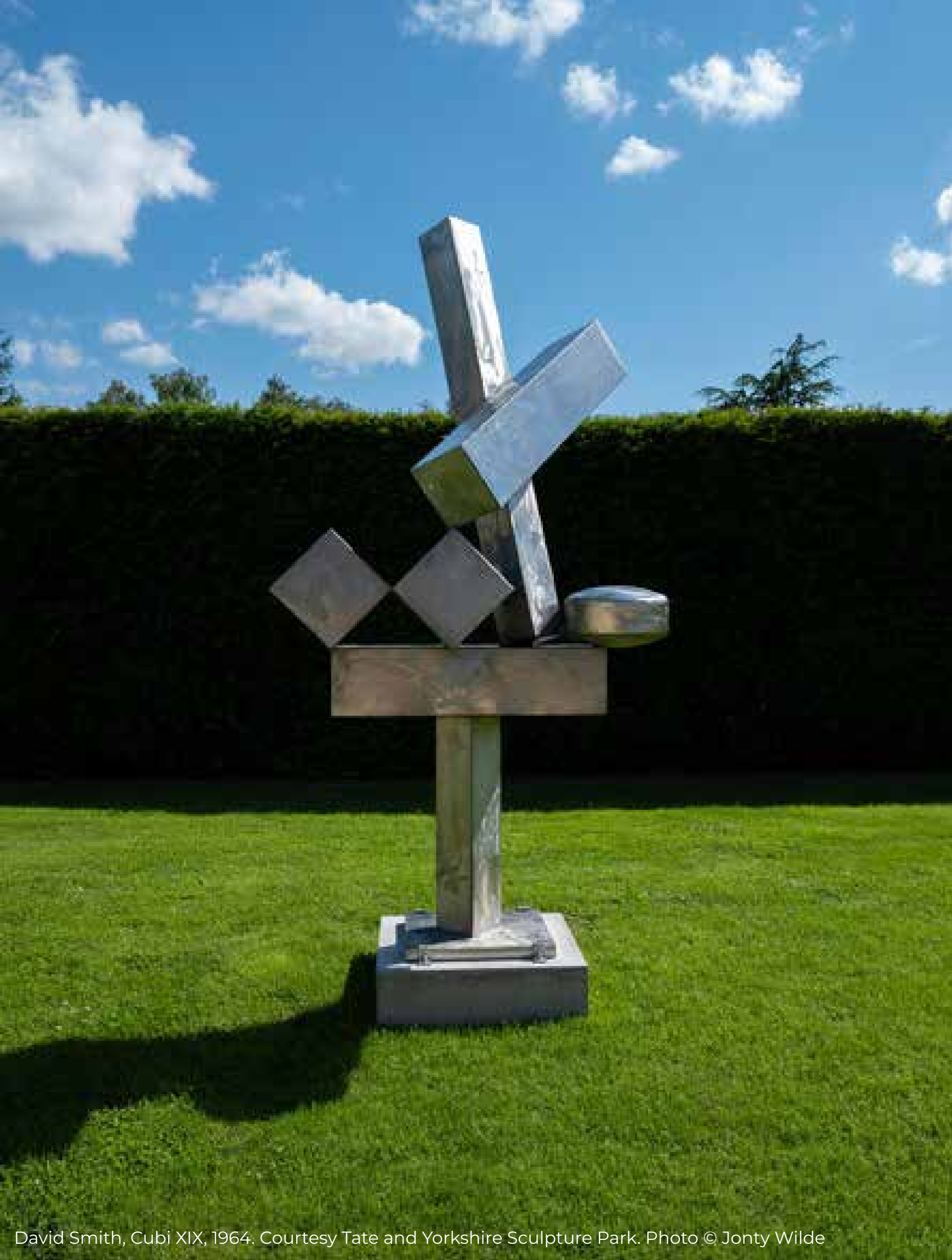
Turning Back to Art History

- Rubinoff remarked that a key stance of the avant-garde was the continual rejection of its art historical predecessors, in the search for novel forms and expressions.
- He challenged the depth of the art of the contemporary avant-garde and searched for a new way forward.
- He turned instead to the past – to art history – rather than rejecting it.

New approach: Can you grow original art from your artistic predecessor?



Painting by Jeffrey Rubinoff



Reconnection through David Smith

- By 1980, he realized he had stopped making art—his rejection of the art world led to greatly reduced creative activity.
- Despite moving to Hornby Island to escape the commercial art scene, he became aware of how dependent he still was on it.
- In order to revive his practice, he broke from 1960s avant-garde thinking and turned toward his artistic predecessors, something previously discouraged.

Reconnection through David Smith cont'd

- He began to see art history as a living resource rather than something to reject.
- He felt that sculptor David Smith's work stood out clearly among his contemporaries in sculpture gardens and parks, reaffirming Smith's power and influence. Smith's late work (The Cubi Series), especially in steel, was both inspiring and unfinished in some ways.
- Smith became his chosen point of reference. He studied Smith's sculptures travelling to various cities (e.g., Los Angeles) to fully understand his influence and where his work left off.





Reconnection through David Smith - Cont'D

- Noted Smith's recurring challenge: his sculptures had a "painterly" quality that flattened from certain angles.
- Smith began to resolve this late in life using stainless steel—this became a creative departure point for the artist.
- Rubinoff saw value in continuing from where Smith left off, testing whether a new artistic run could emerge from historical lineage.

Pictured : Close-up of 1-5, Jeffrey Rubinoff. 1981 Stainless 304 steel

Reconnection through David Smith - Cont'D

- This approach echoed Renaissance traditions of learning and extending through ones predecessor in contrast to the rejection of art history which was the default mode of 1960s avant guard circles
- Rubinoff's return to work began with the first piece in a new series, completed in 1981 and signed accordingly.



Series 1-1. 1981, Stainless 304 steel



Series 1-6. 1981, Stainless 304 steel



Series 1-8, 1982, Stainless 304 steel