

Trova's Falling Man Gains Dignity

By PETER FRANK
NEW YORK

THE LATEST EXHIBITION of sculpture by Ernest Trova at New York's Pace Gallery was marred by a misunderstanding between the gallery and the city's Department of Parks and Recreation. The exhibition itself was Trova's most exciting New York exposure in several years, revealing a new spirit in the work of the noted St. Louis artist.

The dispute between the Parks Department and Pace concerned a proposal to install three of Trova's monumental steel works on the Mall in Central Park. Only a few days before the installation was to take place, Parks Commissioner Edwin L. Weisl, Jr., announced that the plans had been cancelled.

The Parks Department had recently adopted a policy against commercial activities in Central Park, and, as the sculptures were in effect to have been an advertisement for the show at Pace, they seemed in violation of this policy.

The gallery, which had invested a good deal of money in preparatory construction operations, was miffed. Arnold Glimcher, director of Pace, attacked the Parks Department decision as shortsighted and arbitrary.

ANOTHER outdoor project — an outright private purchase — went ahead as scheduled. "Profile Canto West" was installed in the plaza of the Heywood Tower, a middle and low-income apartment building on Amsterdam Avenue at Ninety-first Street. The purchase and installation were a result of a collaborative effort between Trova, Pace, and the construction company responsible for the building.

Heywood Tower stands in an economically and ethnically mixed neighborhood, dotted

with brownstones and apartment buildings in widely disparate states of faded elegance, disrepair and renovation. The vitality of this melting-pot neighborhood excited Trova, who felt that it provided an appropriately humanistic context for his work.

This humanistic context has always been appropriate to Trova's art. Originally influenced by Abstract Expressionism in the 1950s. The St. Louis-born artist found himself most sympathetic to the figure-oriented painting, among others, Willem de Kooning and Frances Bacon and Jean Dubuffet. In this respect Trova falls into a Midwest "tradition" of imagistic abstraction focusing on the figure. This tradition, originally as expressionistic as in the art of the Chicago "Monster" School, has in recent years become more aloof and comical, and at the same time even more mordant. The Chicago "Hairy Who" group exemplifies this tendency. So, for awhile, did Trova.

Switching from painting and assemblage to sculpture in the middle 1960s, Trova subjected his "Falling Man" — a sleek, faceless, armless, metal-coated humanoid — to various mechanical indignities which further dehumanized the poor creature.

TROVA'S WORK in the past three years has reflected a greater ambivalence about the human condition, and lately even a complete about-face. The manipulated Falling Man still occasionally appears in the familiar unhappy circumstances.

At the Pace was a Falling Man whose upper torso comes apart in hinged sections. But Trova's imagery has become less representational. The work of sculptors such as David Smith and Anthony Caro, emphasizing dynamic formalizations, monumental scale and quasi-industrial

(but still elegant) materials, has left its mark.

Within this emphatically visual format, most clearly realized in the continuing "Profile Canto" series, Trova voices a mild optimism with regard to man's state. Integrated into the graceful and energetic arrangements of circles and squares, planes and solids, is the irregular silhouette of the Falling Man figure. The figure still seems anonymous, but no longer as hapless as before. While still not in control of its situation — curved and flattened as if travelling through a wringer — the Falling Man gains a new dignity from the strength and vigor of the formats themselves.

Nearly invisible in the abstract formations, the figure paradoxically enjoys more individuality and complexity than it had in its days of gears, wheels and superefficient tortures. The Falling Man has become a part of its sculpture context, rather than a victim.

AN EVEN NEWER series than the Profile Cantos is the Gox series. In these the Falling Man seems totally absent, his place taken by syncopated cascades of geometric forms that vaguely recall Art Deco. The overall forms assumed by the Gox sculptures, however, are decidedly reminiscent of the human figure. Erect, with curvilinear forms demarcating rudimentary heads and buttocks and straight forms suggesting limbs, the Gox works ultimately reveal themselves as the most abstracted, and most affirmative, manifestation of Trova's universal persona.

The Falling Man, although reduced to an interplay of stylized lines and volumes, is finally its own man. Its spirit is upbeat, even playful, its energy is its own, its scale is expansive but not overwhelming. Although it looks less

humanoid than ever, each Gox form that the Falling Man assumes is markedly different from the others.

Ernest Trova's new Falling Man formats, and the Gox series in particular, promise to be fruitful areas of endeavor for this talented, restless, and accomplished artist.

Those who sympathized with the existential angst of Trova's earlier work may find the creeping positivism of his recent sculpture sort of a cop-out. But existentialism need not imply pessimism, only a concern for man's situation — and positive attitudes are only too welcome in this day and age.

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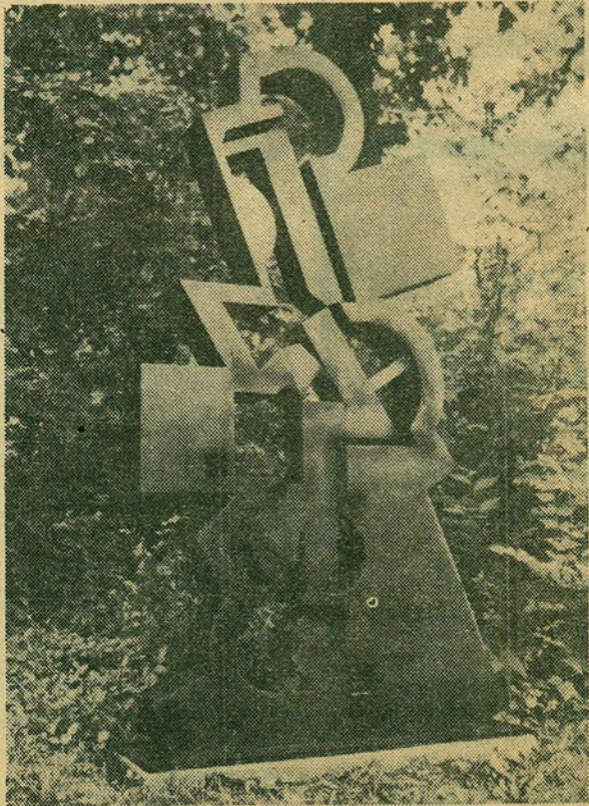
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"Gox II" 6½ feet tall in Cor-Ten steel