The Experience of MODERN SCULPTURE

A Guide to Enjoying Works of the Past 100 Years

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Figure 3.8. Elizabeth Turk. *Cage: Box 3*, 2012. Marble: 24 × 8 × 4 in. Image courtesy of Hirschl & Adler Modern, NY. Courtesy and © Elizabeth Turk. Photograph by Eric Stoner.

Figure 3.9. Janet Echelman. *1.26 Denver*, 2010. Spectra Fiber, high-tenacity polyester fiber, and colored lighting: Sculpture dimensions, 80 ft. length × 60 ft. width × 30 ft. depth; Installation dimensions, 130 ft. length × 140 ft. width × 135 ft. height. Courtesy and © Janet Echelman. Photograph by Peter Vanderwarker.

Figure 3.9

Unusual or unexpected materials can produce a kind of perceptual shock. Seeing a teacup in fur, or a toilet in soft vinyl, gets us to pay attention, to look, to experience. A more subtle shock occurs when a material that we associate with traditional sculpture is used in a modern way. Elizabeth Turk carves marble into sinuous ribbons that weave themselves into harmoniously contained compositions (see fig. 3.8). Just as in Oldenburg's or Oppenheim's work, there is a jangling of our perceptions as we see two things: the object and the material. In Turk's case, the contrast is between the weightiness that we associate with works in marble, by Bernini or Michelangelo perhaps, and the lightness of being that is expressed by her sculpture.

Some modern sculptors use completely modern materials, like steel and plastic; others use ancient materials like marble in a completely new mode. Janet Echelman does both and employs advanced technology in the process. When, on a trip to India, her painting materials were lost, she found inspiration in the nets being made by local fishermen.[5] Her first breeze-floating sculpture was made in collaboration with the fishermen and over the years her aesthetic concept expanded to an ambitious — if unlikely — combination of diaphanous material, colored light, and movement. She aimed at "billowing voluptuous forms" at the scale of urban buildings.[6] Fulfilling her ambition required new technology and new software, with some works involving the collaboration of software developers, lighting designers, textile developers, architects, and engineers, and they can even have a scientific inspiration. When she was commissioned to create a work on the theme of the interconnectedness of the Americas, she based her sculpture on the form of a tsunami resulting from an earthquake in Chile in 2010.[7] But when that work, *1.26 Denver* (fig. 3.9), catches the wind and is illuminated at night, it transcends its engineering and becomes pure poetry. The natural appeal of color and motion is magnified in Echelman's larger works; when they float over a city plaza or park, private aesthetic pleasure expands into an instrument of community.