

Earth, Sky, and Sculpture

STORM KING ART CENTER

ESSAYS BY

H. Peter Stern

Peter A. Bienstock

Irving Lavin

Joan Pachner

PHOTOGRAPHS BY

Jerry L. Thompson

STORM KING ART CENTER

PRECEDING ILLUSTRATIONS

Page 1, path into the gorge of Moodna Creek; pages 2–3, autumn frost at sunrise, looking west toward Schunnemunk Mountain; pages 4–5, Alexander Calder's *The Arch*; pages 6–7, looking east toward the Hudson Highlands with David Smith's *Three Ovals Soar* in the foreground; pages 8–9, a view to the west toward Schunnemunk Mountain, past two steel plates of Richard Serra's *Schunnemunk Fork*; pages 10–11, Mark di Suvero's *Pyramidian*; pages 12–13, looking east at Andy Goldsworthy's *Storm King Wall*; pages 14–15, Isamu Noguchi's *Momo Taro*; pages 16–17, Alexander Calder's *Five Swords* with Mark di Suvero's *Pyramidian* and Schunnemunk Mountain in the distance; pages 18–19, the view south from the museum building including the maple allée and Mark di Suvero's *Pyramidian*, his *Mon Père Mon Père*, and his *Mother Peace*; pages 20–21, looking east toward the Hudson Highlands with di Suvero's *Pyramidian* in the middle distance.

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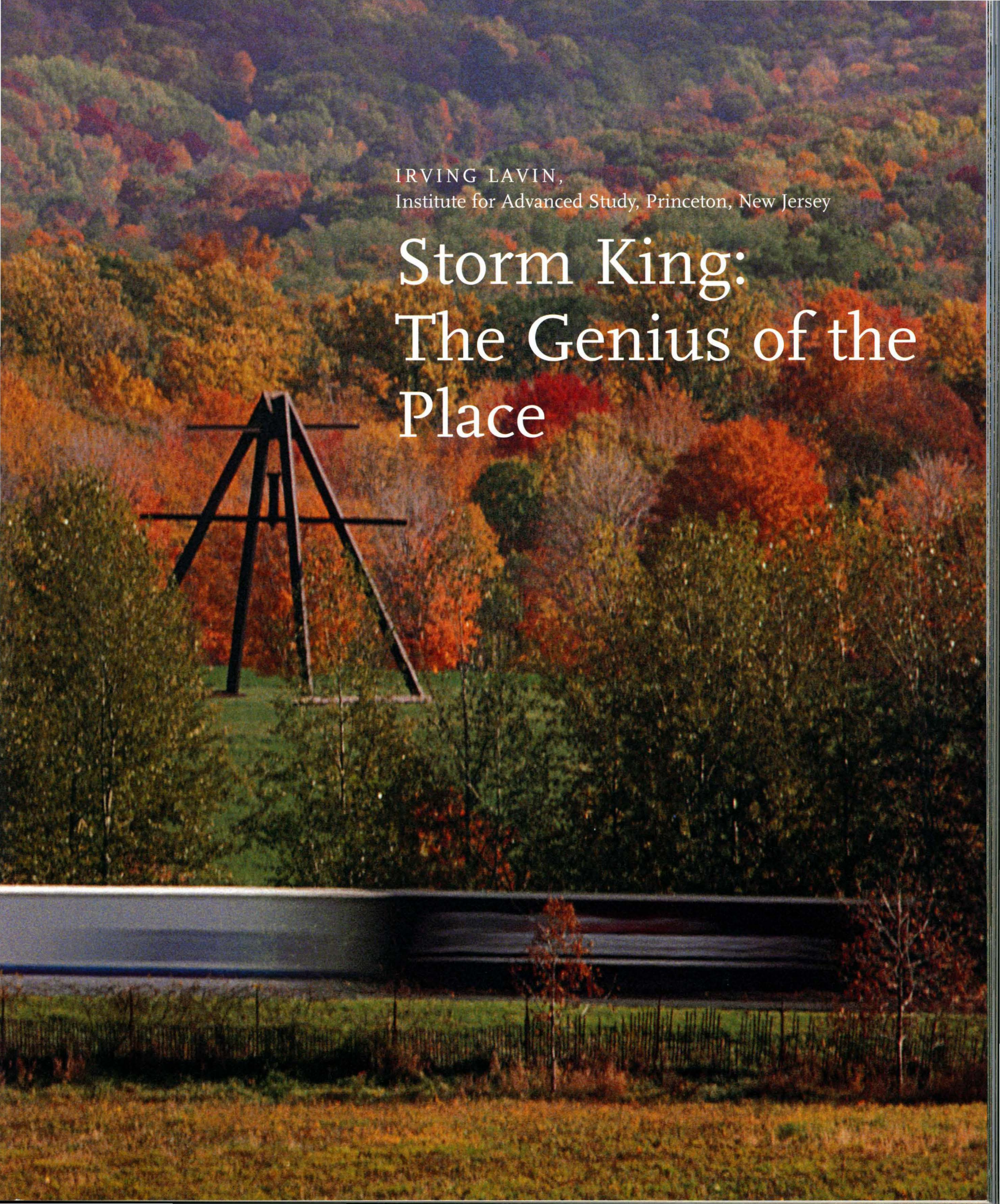
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IRVING LAVIN,
Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton, New Jersey

Storm King: The Genius of the Place



Figure 1
The Storm King Art Center
with Mark di Suvero's
Pyramidian, looking east past
the New York State Thruway
to Storm King Mountain.



Figure 2
View west from the Art
Center, past di Suvero's
Mother Peace and the New
York State Thruway toward
Schunnemunk Mountain.

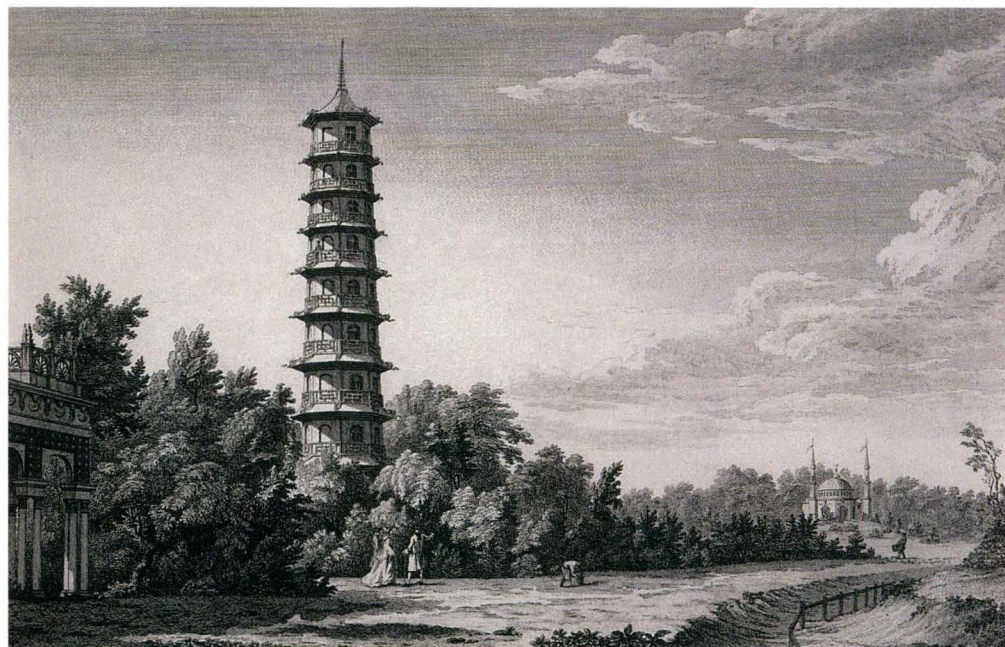
Figure 3
Tribolo, *Hercules and Antaeus*, fountain, ca. 1540.
Florence, Villa Medicea di Castello.



Figure 4
Bernardo Buontalenti, *Prima Grotta*, 1583–1588. Florence, Giardino di Boboli.



Figure 5
The Pagoda in the Royal Gardens at Kew. From William Chambers, *Plans, Elevations, Sections, and Perspective Views of the Gardens and Buildings at Kew in Surrey, London*, 1763.

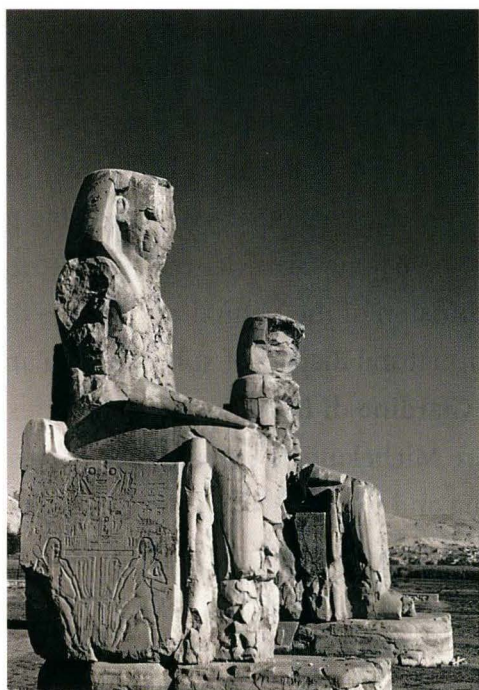


Storm King is an extraordinary, indeed, unique experience. Approaching this Sanctuary—which is how I tend to think of it—eastward from the busy New York State Thruway, surrounded by the ancient looming humps of the Appalachian Mountains, one cannot elude the feeling that one is entering an enchanted world (fig.1). In the middle distance Mark di Suvero's huge *Pyramidian* (pyramid + meridian), melding earth and heaven in its very name, announces the principal theme of the place. Although it may be said to have resulted from the convergence of many factors, personal as well as circumstantial, and to incorporate many historical ingredients, artistic as well as ecological, the Storm King Art Center, in the valley between Schunnemunk and Storm King peaks, is ultimately without precedent, and even—despite its renown and widespread influence—without real parallel.

In a profound sense the placement of sculpture—that is, nonfunctional, human-made objects—in the landscape is inevitably, if unconsciously, a

reflection of our conception of our own relationship with the world around us. The modern history of that conception begins in the Renaissance, when people rediscovered and sought to emulate the fabled villas and gardens of antiquity. Often this emulation consisted simply in reinstalling fragments of ancient statuary in outdoor settings. But often also both objects and nature were manipulated to create large-scale, complex works of art, ultimately quite different from their ancient prototypes, in which the relationship is explicitly defined. Essentially three approaches emerged. In the formal garden the ideal order discernible in the natural world was extrapolated and distilled into visible perfection, with humankind exerting its superior intelligence and will upon the wild forces of confusion and profusion. At the Villa Medicea di Castello near Florence, the fountain of Hercules and Antaeus is a metaphor for the ruling dynasty of the city: the wrestling figures are raised high above the polygonal basin and surrounding parterre; just so, in the sculpture itself, the ancient hero defeats the bestial adversary by lifting him above his mother earth, the source of his otherwise invincible power (fig. 3). At the opposite extreme was the equally artificial realm of the grotesque, in which the confusion and profusion of the natural world were themselves augmented into a patently unnatural display of subterranean amorphism. In the famous grotto of the Giardino di Boboli earthly creatures are literally part of the landscape, as were Michelangelo's unfinished Slaves (later moved to the Galleria dell'Accademia and replaced by plaster casts) (fig. 4). Here our human rationality glimpses the primordial chaos of its alter ego. Finally, there is what might be called the "natural" nature familiar to us from the English park. Viewed from a "picturesque" distance, sheep and deer and hoary hermits (sometimes paid actors) appear withdrawn from sophisticated society, ruminating the real meaning of it all. It is no accident that the characteristic human-made feature of the English park was not a sculpture but an often ruinous or fragile architectural "folly," a term that gives ironic but pure expression to the essential artifice and ephemerality of human endeavor (fig. 5). I do not think it a gross exaggeration to say that the modern history of articulating the relationship between humankind and landscape consists in permutations of these alternative but complementary conceptions.

What then is it about Storm King (I hesitate to call it a landscape or a park) and these artworks (I hesitate to call them simply sculptures) that makes such powerful magic? Of course, magic is by definition uncanny, but I suspect that at least in some measure the explanation lies in the innovative character of the institution itself and the work it has achieved. I would classify these distinctions as physical (scale), aesthetic (relationship between objects and setting), intellectual (program and meaning), and social (relationship between patron and audience). There are partial precedents in all these respects, but not, I believe, for what Storm King represents as a whole, the *genius loci*.



ABOVE

Figure 6
Stonehenge, 1800–1500 B.C.
Salisbury Plain, Wiltshire.

Figure 7
Stone Heads, on the slope
of Rano Raraku, 17th century
or earlier. Easter Island.

Figure 8
Colossi of Memnon
(Amenophis III, ca. 1390–ca.
1353 B.C.).

OPPOSITE

Figure 9
Alexander Calder, *The Arch*.

Figure 10
Mark di Suvero, *Mother
Peace*.

Figure 11
Mark di Suvero, *Mother
Peace*, detail.

Figure 12
David Smith, *Three Ovals
Soar*.

Large-scale sculpture obviously has an ancient history. If one thinks of the megaliths (“big stones”) of Stonehenge and the gigantic stones heads of Easter Island (figs. 6, 7), one might well identify the emergence of civilization itself with the urge to augment not only the quality of human creativity—sophisticated tools, farming and husbandry, community living—but also the scale. On the other hand, size alone is an insufficient measure of the significance of these “superhuman” monuments. The unimaginable ingenuity and labor involved in carving and erecting such works would be meaningless without an understanding of the context in which they were meant to be seen, if only because the stones were transported long distances to their carefully chosen sites, on the Salisbury Plain, or on great artificial island platforms literally “facing” inland. They define the landscape and seem to embody in themselves the awesome vastness of the world they inhabit. Or think of Egypt, one of the earth’s most ancient civilizations, where super-life-size human figures were created virtually from the outset (fig. 8). We call such works colossal, a concept invented by the Greeks—to whose mentality it was originally quite foreign—precisely to comprehend those outlandish Egyptian giants (Herodotos uses the word *colossal* exclusively for that purpose); the Greek sense of scale being determined by reference to the human body, colossal is ultimately an anthropomorphic notion. The alternate term *monumental* derives from the Latin word for “reminder” and has inherently nothing to do with size; its use in reference to size imputes anthropomorphic measure to the value of recollection. Neither of these concepts is applicable at Storm King, where the sense of scale is conveyed by the relationship between the objects and the environment, which includes the sky as well as the land. Earth and sky are physically conjoined by Alexander Calder’s vaulting figure called *The Arch*, which seems to spring from the earth to reach for the sky and complete its arc (fig. 9). Mark di Suvero’s *Mother Peace* actually includes the landscape in the transparent sign language of its message, which is to say Peace on (Mother) Earth (figs. 10, 11). Storm King thinks big, and the visitor to this other-world is lifted up and out of our ordinary, anthropomorphic existence to become something akin



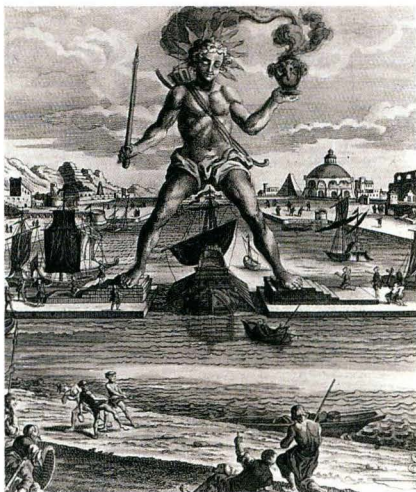


Figure 13
Maerten van
Heemskerck,
Colossus of Rhodes,
engraving, 1572.



Figure 14
Pietro da Cortona,
*Deinokrates Shows
Mount Athos to
Pope Alexander VII*
(1655–1667),
drawing. London,
British Museum.



Figure 15
Giambologna, *The Appenine*,
ca. 1583. Pratolino, Villa
Medici.

to those ancient nature spirits—what else are David Smith's *Three Ovals Soar* (fig. 12)?—of which, or of whom, we human beings have been subtly aware ever since we became conscious inhabitants of this world. Landscape-embracing sculptures were conceived in antiquity: the Colossus of Rhodes stood astride the harbor of that city (fig. 13); Deinokrates offered to carve Mount Athos into a figure of Alexander the Great holding a city in his hand (fig. 14). The idea was reiterated by Giambologna in his mountainous (containing a chamber in the head) personification of the Appenines in the garden at Pratolino (fig. 15). But nowhere else has a portion of the land and sky the size of Storm King been appropriated exclusively to the display of artworks conceived on a correspondingly mythic scale.

Measurements quite apart, many of the objects at Storm King were conceived in relation to a specific site, which was also frequently reconfigured to suit its new inhabitant. I am aware of no precedent for this degree and magnitude of conflation between nature and art. The sculpture and its setting seem to have been, and in large measure actually were, made for each other. Isamu Noguchi went to Japan, selected the stones, and shaped them together with the underlying hillock to create his *Momo Taro*, named for a mythical boy-hero born from a peachstone, whose conquests made him practically synonymous with the territorial and national destiny of Japan (fig. 16). One cannot properly speak of Storm King as a garden or even as a park since nature as such is not here an end in itself. Nor can we properly speak of an outdoor museum, since nature is not just the setting but an active participant in the show. David von Schlegell's significantly untitled aluminum squares—mysterious, glistening, fragile quadrupeds from some outer space of the mind—alight and give suspenseful life to the meadow around us (fig. 17). The powerful surge of Robert Grosvenor's untitled steel arc raises the very curvature of the earth to the explosive tension of a bow spring (fig. 18). At every turn the view is populated by things human-made to suit, while the character of the landscape—its nature, one might say—is defined by the objects it contains. The relationship is profoundly reciprocal. This is the reason I use the terms *landscape* and *sculpture*, which define separate domains, only reluctantly, *faute de mieux*: at Storm King the two categories fuse in a new kind of vision for which, in truth, we have no ready name. Symptomatic of this fusion is that traditional pedestals rarely intervene between the two domains.

Storm King does not recount the kinds of “stories” we associate with traditionally programmed garden sculptures that glorified important patrons, as in the great villas of the Renaissance, or celebrated civic heroes in public parks. Nor, on the other hand, are the sculptures purely “ornamental,” or even pleasure giving in the usual sense—no waterworks, no fountains! Storm King is not Tivoli, or Versailles, or Central Park. Indeed, there is a certain austerity about the place. And all this mainly for two reasons.

Figure 16
Isamu Noguchi, *Momo Taro*.

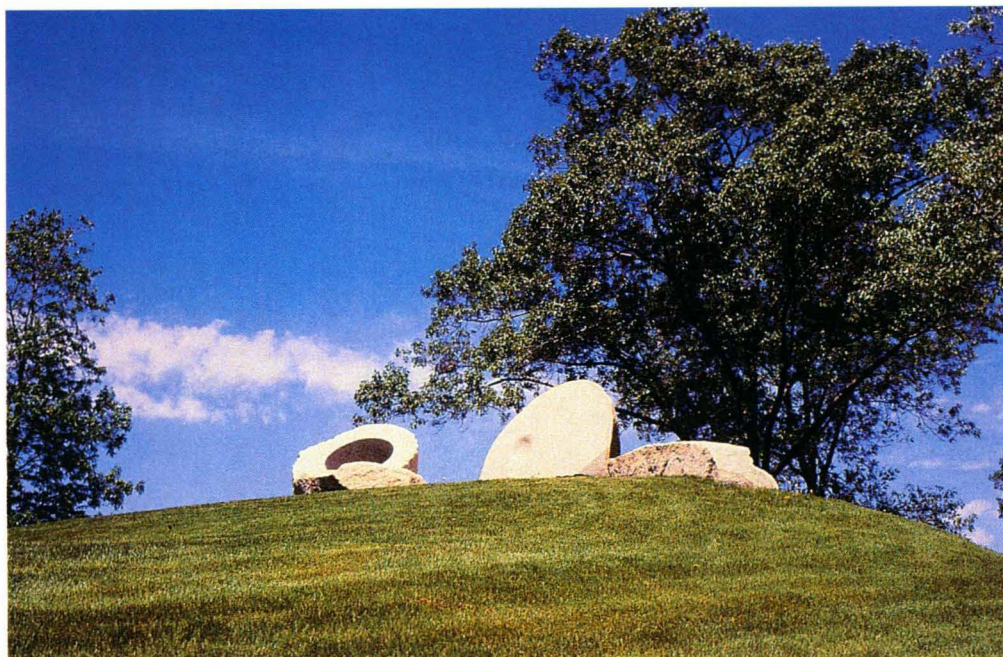


Figure 17
David von Schlegell,
untitled.

Figure 18
Robert Grosvenor, untitled.



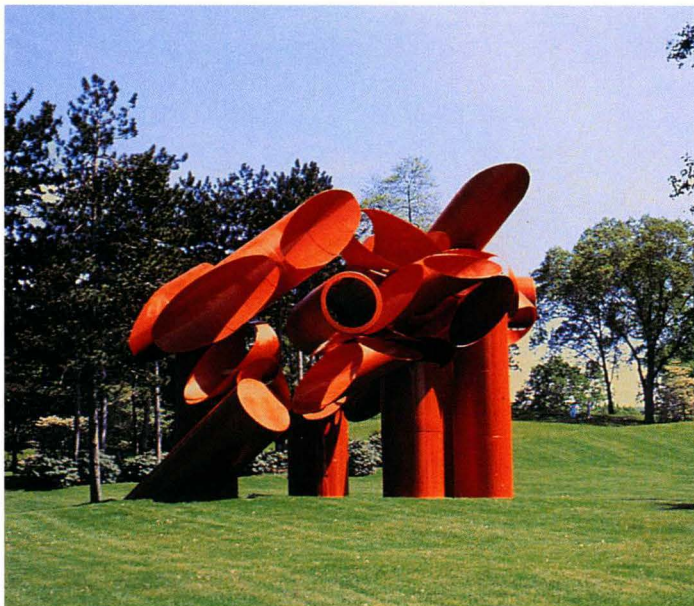


Figure 19
Alexander Liberman, *Iliad*.



Figure 20
Richard Serra, *Schunnemunk Fork* (with Schunnemunk Mountain in the distance).

Whatever their particular “subjects,” the objects at Storm King were acquired and situated as works of art, with a view (pun intended) primarily to their visual qualities and relationships to one another and to their settings. Moreover, the works are for the most part abstract in nature (pun intended) and hence convey different kinds of meaning in ways different from those of traditional outdoor sculpture. At Storm King this meaning often lies precisely in the relationship between art and nature, the one conditioning the other. Alexander Liberman’s *Iliad* stalks across the earth like the armored Achilles before the walls of Troy, resounding with the hollow clangor of bloody war (fig. 19). The four tines that constitute Richard Serra’s *Schunnemunk Fork* measure and are measured by the surrounding space and the underlying terrain, which they penetrate as if to impregnate the great mountain in the distance whose name they also bear and with which they are thus literally merged in a single act of creation (fig. 20). (Poseidon plunged his trident into the Acropolis to engender the spring that made Athens possible.) The landscape acquires meaning from these sculptures, and vice versa. To the degree that they are abstract, the works at Storm King may be described as “pure” sculpture without anecdotal, representational, or narrative intent (although certainly not without content). By the same token the landscape is conceived as pure form, and not because it is artificially constrained into regular patterns, as in a French formal garden, or because it is artfully disguised as rustic nature perceived in a picturesque “view,” as in the English park. At Storm King the settings, even distant mountains, co-respond in equal partnership with the works of “sculpture” on display. How can one ever again study the spatial intersections of gracefully branching limbs without thinking of David Smith’s *Study in Arcs* (fig. 21)? And vice versa. Or see George Rickey’s *Two Planes Vertical-Horizontal II*, without

Figure 21
David Smith, *Study in Arcs*.



Figure 22
George Rickey, *Two Planes*
Vertical-Horizontal II.



gasping at the wonder of trees growing straight up on an inclined plane (fig. 22)? And vice versa.

Finally, as an independent, privately sponsored foundation, Storm King is not an appendage of some other entity, be it a noble residence, a branch of government, a business enterprise. And Storm King was conceived from the beginning as a public facility. In this sense it represents a new dimension of social consciousness and responsibility in the appreciation of nature as well as art.

The mythic scale, the ideal intermarriage between humanity and nature, the reach for universal expression and meaning, and the reciprocity between private citizen and society at large—in all these innovative aspects Storm King reflects its creation in a specific place and time, the United States after World War II. In this sense Storm King is also a uniquely American experience. Nothing conveys the fundamental, sometimes seemingly incongruous, values embodied in this experience more movingly than the magnificent, also uniquely American prospect westward from the upper terrace toward the mountain horizon (fig. 2, page 55). The picturesque vision includes that equally magnificent creation of the American dream, the New York State Thruway, with its equally magnificent human-made objects of our daily lives, reincarnated Conestoga wagons, lumbering bravely across our field of comprehension into an unknown but promising future. It's the American way. And it's a magical place.