

ART

by Jean Charlot

Brownlee's sculptures

An exhibition of recent sculptures by Edward M. Brownlee opens tomorrow at the Honolulu Academy of Arts. A few of the works are stone. Most are polyester plastic and welded metal, steel or bronze.

Early in the 16th century, Leonardo da Vinci jotted in his notebook the flattering portrait of a painter, presumably himself:

"Dressed tastefully, the painter sits at ease, facing his work. Moving effortlessly, his brush bears attractive colors. His dwelling is hung with fine paintings. The air is often filled with music."

How different is the lot of the sculptor! Leonardo, with an eye on his rival, Michelangelo, penned the following acidulous sketch:

"The sculptor produces his work by the sheer force of his arm. This most mechanical exertion results in profuse sweating. Mixed with the stone dust the sweat becomes mud. The sculptor's face is caked with it.

"His house is dirty, filled with marble chips and dust." Leonardo describes here the sculptor of his day. His tools were chisel and mallet. His material was stone.

Sculptors are welders

The Renaissance Master would have thrown his well-groomed hands high up in despair had he watched at his work the present-day



WELDER—Sculptor Brownlee uses his welding torch on "Sea Scavenger" in his workshop.

sculptor in metal, not only a sculptor but a welder to boot.

One cannot call Brownlee's workshop an artist's studio, even though much art has its origin there. Leisured loungings, esthetic discussions are out. And no model stand was ever provided, or needed.

When I went there to take notes, I recognized Brownlee from Leonardo's description. He was reasonably grimy, dressed in bluejeans and a

sweatshirt.

He worked at a sort of anvil. He lifted the visor of his welder's mask to greet me, and politely deflected for a moment the jet of blue flame from his blowtorch.

The scene evoked a smith in his forge. I looked for horseshoes but what I saw were metal contraptions so strange that they could shoe no horse, but perhaps only the cloven hoof of some Chinese dragon.

"Welding: to unite pieces of metal by heating until molten and fused, or until soft enough to hammer or press together."

This intractable trade is Brownlee's by choice.

I remain somewhat cynical, through long usage, when an art magazine blossoms in praise of an artist.

Praised in a trade publication

But I was truly impressed when, by accident, I found in the pages of a trade periodical, "The Maintenance Welder," an estimate of Brownlee as a master welder.

The lead article concerned



the monumental sculpture — weighing four tons and 28 feet in height — erected last year at the entrance of the Bank of Hawaii in Waikiki.

Esthetically, "Legend" is most impressive. The bronze prow of a giant canoe stands as a symbol of the audacious voyages of the prehistoric Vikings of the Pacific.

The bronze canoe is set on the tumultuous curves of a black terrazzo pedestal that brings to mind Homer's far-from-trite image of a wine-dark sea.

Technically, "Legend" seems equally impressive. Says "The Maintenance Welder":

"The base structure of steel reinforcement rods was shaped, and then welded, with Steeltectic, a high strength, mild steel Eutectic designed for low amperage non-stop welding.

Dramatic textures

"Brownlee has developed the technique of overlaying with EutecRod18FC to create dramatic textures of puddled bronze."

There follows more technical data, after which the trade magazine proudly concludes, "Welding can be beautiful."

Even though Honolulu dwellers may scarcely realize it, they are bound to contact Brownlee's works without need of entering an art gallery or museum.

"Legend" is, up to now, his most monumental achievement. It is somewhat awesome. Were I a bank customer having dropped a penny to the floor in its vicinity, I would hesitate before searching for it.

In absolute contrast with "Legend," even though wrought of the same materials, are the sculptures planted in the sand box of the Ala Moana Center.

Seen by themselves, these black sculptures suggest in semi-abstract fashion a horse, a waterfall, a broken shell.

They were conceived not for visual effect but for tactile purpose. Meaning that they are not to be looked at but felt.

Creations in Germany

In Germany, long ago, the Bauhaus school created tactile sculptures. I saw art lovers, eyes closed, delicately caress their varied textures in search of esthetic delights.

At the Ala Moana playground, Brownlee's tactile creations are paid a more unruly sort of homage.

The very young art lovers are quite unconscious that they are art lovers, and lovers of tactile art at that!

Clusters of excited children hang in, ride upon, fall from, slide along, squeeze through these sculptures. Rather than with their fin-



USEFUL—This Brownlee sculpture is for children. It's at the sand box in the Ala Moana Center. — Star-Bulletin Photos by John Titchen

gertips they experience art mostly with the seat of their pants.

Watching them at play, the query is raised and answered all at once, "When is an abstraction not an abstraction?"

Brownlee's present show offers a variety of techniques, welded metal, polyester, and even carved marble.

Seeing his love of hard work, his preference for steel — the hardest of metals — one would expect the artist to match his material with hard and polished statements meant as a hymn to the machine age.

Brownlee's poetic vision

Instead, he prefers to adapt steel and bronze to the requirements of his poetical vision. "Hina's Moon" and "Pueo's Dream" are based on ancient Hawaiian legends.

Antique Chinese bronze motives feed the menacing mystery of pieces such as "Han Dragon."

I imagine the larger pieces set at random in the forests of Yucatan, where I roamed as a budding Mayan archeologist. Overgrown with roots, they would fit well with other architectural fragments, fallen from ruined temple cornices.

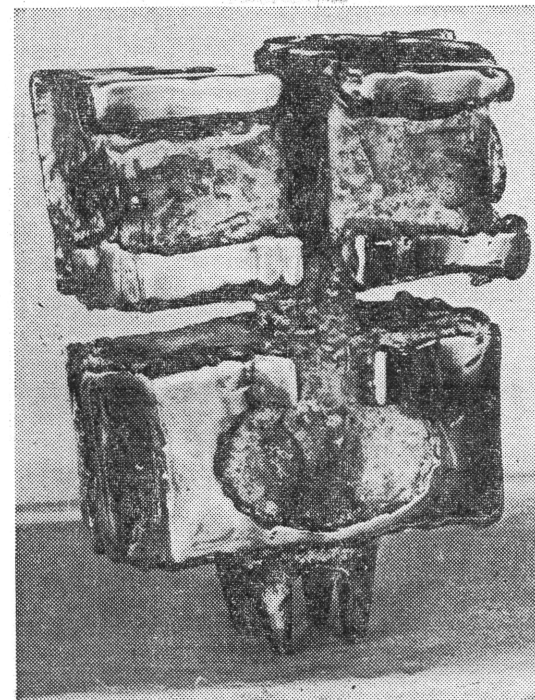
By contrast, some items are precious enough and small enough to be visualized as paperweights on some executive desk.

The group of marbles stands apart. The welder, gloved and masked, and hot from the flame of the blow-

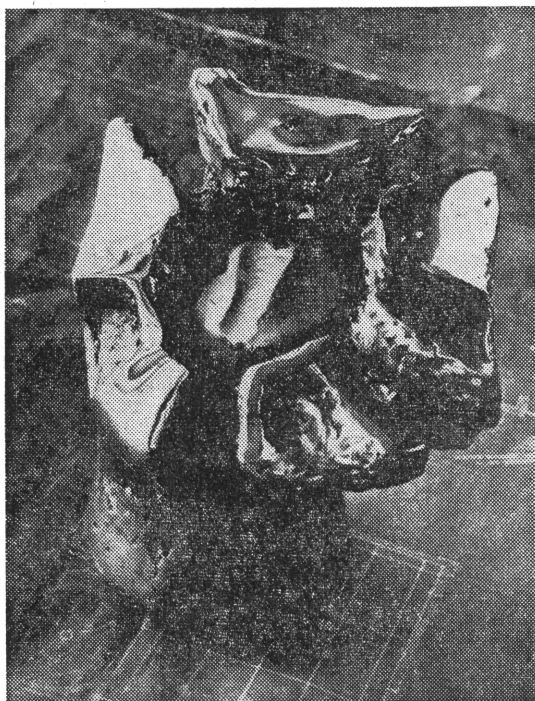
torch, relaxes.

For Brownlee, marble must seem brittle after his fight with steel.

Gentleness infuses the group, carved out of one-inch-thick slabs. My favorite is "Wholeness," of rose aurora marble.



Brownlee's "Cubist III," a bronze-on-steel work.



"Sommerset," a bronze-on-steel sculpture by Brownlee.