ART CANADA INSTITUTE | INSTITUT DE L'ART CANADIEN

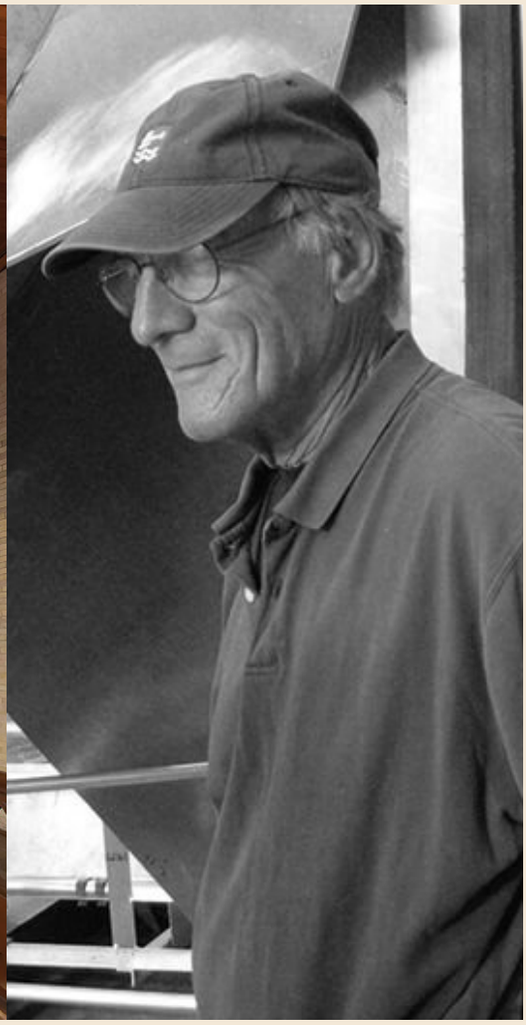
JUNE 25, 2021

MASTERY OF METAL

THE SCULPTURE OF ROBERT MURRAY

Some of Canada's best-known public sculptures are by the revered abstract artist Robert Murray. In ACI's new online exhibition we are showcasing his large-scale steel and aluminum constructions and their transformative effect.

Robert Murray, *Cascade*, 1983, University College Collection, Art Museum at the University of Toronto.



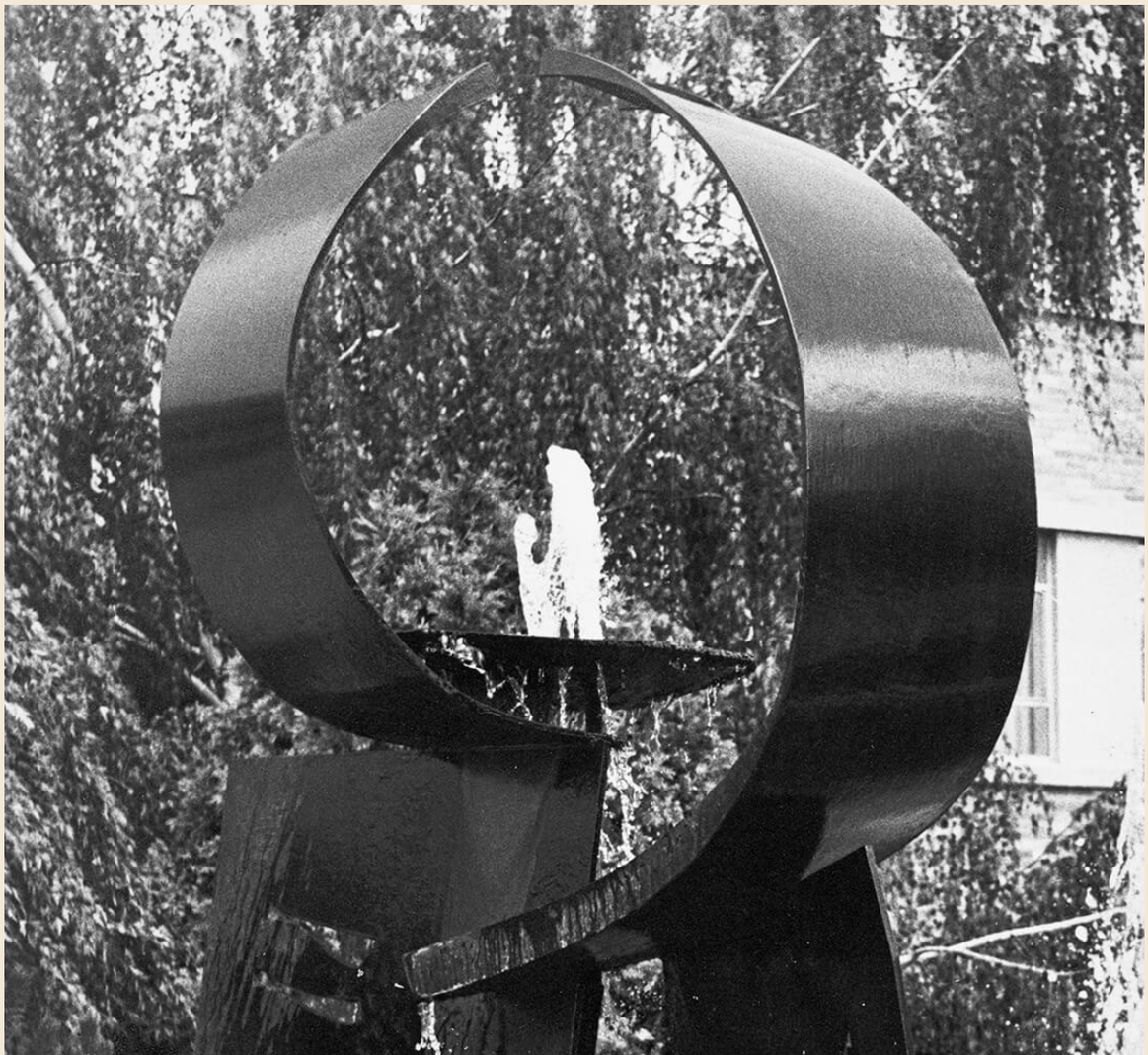
Robert Murray, 2011, photograph by Dudley Witney.

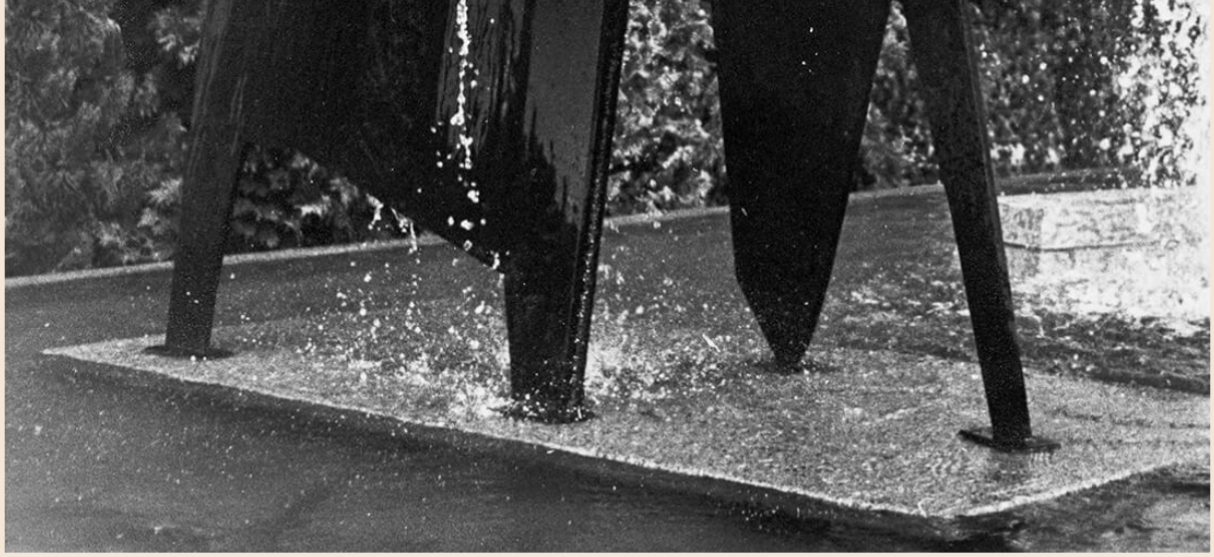
2021 is Toronto's official Year of Public Art and the next few months are the perfect time to enjoy it. Since the 1960s, Vancouver-born Robert Murray (b.1936) has created monumental and brightly coloured outdoor works. They have been recognized internationally and exhibited alongside art by iconic sculptors, including the Americans Donald Judd and Alexander Calder. A graduate of the Regina College School of Art and a five-time participant of the famed Emma Lake Artists' Workshops, Murray was deeply immersed in the development of abstraction in Canada in the late 1950s. After moving to New York in 1960 on a Canada Council grant, Murray worked with metal fabricating plants to build bold and ambitious works that established him as one of the world's leading abstract sculptors. Exploring the critical years of Murray's artistic development from the 1960s to the 1980s, the Art Canada Institute online exhibition *Mastery in Metal: Robert Murray and the Art of Industrial Fabrication* reveals how, using methods of industrial fabrication, the artist's early minimalist creations gave way to more lyrical and elaborate sculptures.

Sara Angel
Founder and Executive Director, Art Canada Institute

***Rainmaker*, 1959–60**

A CONTROVERSIAL ART COMMISSION





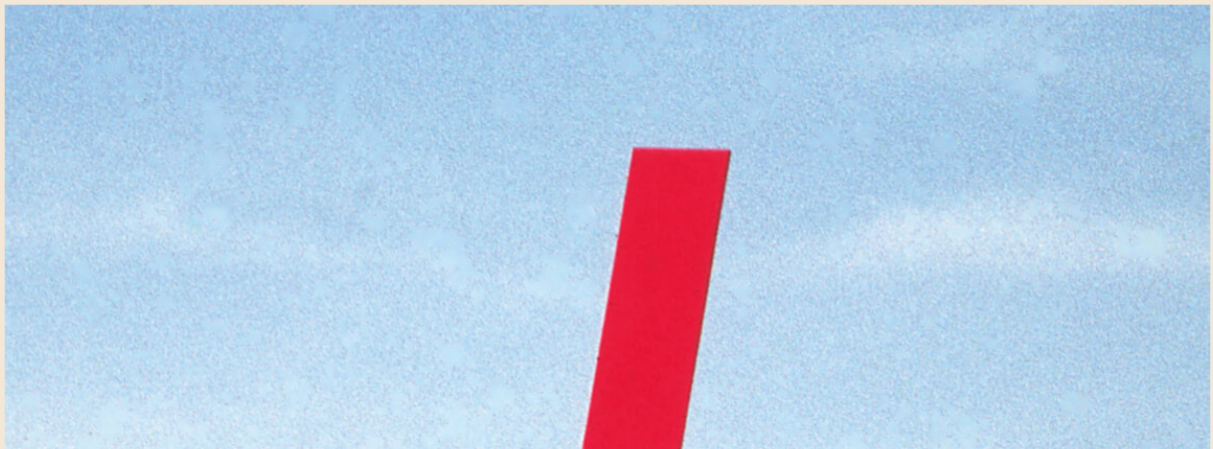
Robert Murray, *Rainmaker*, 1959–60, City Hall, Saskatoon.

Murray's first public art commission, an abstract fountain sculpture for City Hall in Saskatoon, caused an outcry among some members of the public who felt that a figurative artwork would have better represented the city. *Rainmaker,* 1959–60, is a black-green steel sculpture consisting of two opposing curves resting on vertical bases. Created shortly after Murray graduated from the Regina College School of Art in 1958, this was his first large-scale sculpture, which he built in collaboration with the local foundry and fabricator John East Iron Works. In spite of the controversy caused by *Rainmaker,* Murray had found his calling in monumental non-representational sculpture, and he began a life-long practice of building work with industrial fabricators.

Visit the Online Exhibition

***Ferus*, 1963**

MONOCHROME MINIMALIST



Robert Murray, *Ferus,* 1963, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

Ferus, 1963, is one of Murray's earliest large-scale sculptures to feature pared-back minimal forms—it is an artwork about its own reality and not an imitation of some other thing. The work was originally installed on the edge of Lookout Island in Georgian Bay, Ontario, where the artist has spent many summers. The bright red piece is composed of a vertical cylinder supporting a raised, slanted plank. Murray explores the dualities between these two components—round versus flat, grounded versus elevated—while unifying them through the use of monochromatic colour. The initial version for *Ferus* was made with wood and iron, but on encouragement from several friends Murray created this steel version at the Treitel-Gratz factory in New York.

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Painted Sculpture Exhibition

A MEMBER OF THE NEW YORK AVANT-GARDE

Installation view of the exhibition *Robert Murray, Painted Sculpture* at Betty Parsons Gallery, New York, 1965, photograph by Robert Murray.

When Murray arrived in New York in 1960, the eminent American Colour Field painter Barnett Newman (1905–1970) introduced him to a host of figures in the avant-garde art scene, including the renowned Manhattan art dealer Betty Parsons. She gave Murray his first solo exhibition in 1965 at her eponymous gallery—an exhibition that featured imposing monochromatic vertical structures. During this period, Murray's method was still evolving. The industrial fabricators he worked with in New York were set up only to make designed objects from blueprints. Although this initially worked well for Murray, he soon began searching for a more dynamic and direct way of building his sculptures.

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***Cumbria*, 1966–67**

AT THE FOREFRONT OF PUBLIC ART

Installation view of *Cumbria,* 1966–67, in Battery Park, New York, 1968, photograph by Robert Murray.

Located today on the University of British Columbia campus, this dynamic (and recently restored) sculpture was one of Vancouver's first public artworks. Created for the Vancouver International Airport, where it was installed from 1969 to 1993, *Cumbria,* 1966–67, was larger than any sculpture Murray had previously constructed. Its size was made possible by a new 1966 partnership established by the artist and Lippincott, Inc., the industrial fabrication plant in North Haven, Connecticut, which focused on producing large-scale metal sculptures. This bright yellow work is composed of two parallel plates of metal that rise from the ground at a steep angle, evoking the trajectory of airplanes lifting off the runway. According to Murray, *Cumbria* "can be understood as a long narrow line one moment and a hanging heavy slab or a weightless spread of colour the next."

Visit the Online Exhibition

***Athabasca*, 1966–67**

INNOVATIONS IN INDUSTRIAL FABRICATION

Robert Murray, *Athabasca,* 1966–67, Gallery Stratford.

A sense of mystery surrounds *Athabasca*, 1966–67, as its components become visible or invisible based on the viewer's position in relation to it. It is comprised of two curved walls separated by a close distance, and visitors are able to enter and walk through the sculpture and experience different effects. For instance, when facing the convex side of the outer wall, the inner wall remains hidden, giving the sculpture the appearance of a monolithic object. Although the work is painted dark brown, its faceted, smooth surfaces reflect light in different directions, producing a shimmering effect. Displayed on the grounds of Gallery Stratford, *Athabasca* exemplifies the new range of forms and opportunities for creative experimentation that arose from Murray's ongoing partnership with the industrial fabrication plant Lippincott, Inc.

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***Chilcotin*, 1969**

PLAYING WITH PERCEPTION

Robert Murray, *Chilcotin,* 1969, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

"There is a kind of Alice-In-Wonderland quality" to *Chilcotin,* 1969, explains Murray. "It has the appearance of a table as you walk up to it, but by the time you've got there this literalness disappears and you almost feel you are shrinking." A piece that has to be experienced from afar, *Chilcotin* resembles a table, but in fact it is six feet tall. Murray used Q-decking to create an expansive horizontal surface supported at one end by a sawhorse leg and L-shaped bridge and at the opposite end by two posts. A work whose scale plays with our visual perception, the sculpture is notable for its ever-changing colour, which ranges from lemon yellow to orange yellow depending on how the light falls on its surfaces.

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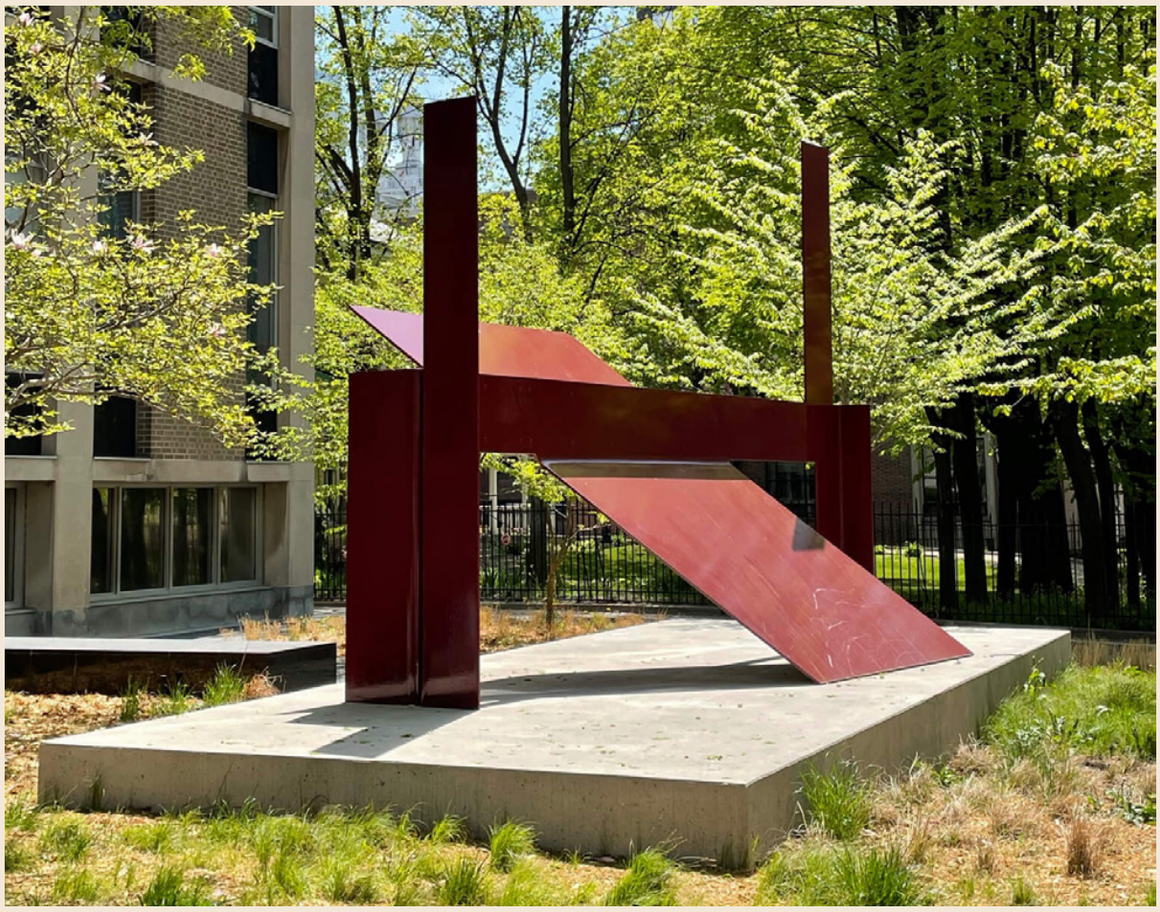
***Becca's H*, 1969**

A UNIQUE SCULPTURAL VOCABULARY



Robert Murray, *Becca's H,* 1969, University of Toronto.

Located on the University of Toronto St. George campus, *Becca's H,* 1969, consists of an H-shape structure whose crossbeam seamlessly transitions into a slanting rectangular plane, injecting movement into a static frame. The piece recalls pioneering American Abstract Expressionist sculptor David Smith's (1906–1965) large-scale stainless steel sculpture *Becca,* 1965, which is similar in shape and name. These commonalities are no coincidence, as Murray cites Smith as a major influence on his work. However, Murray has forged his own distinctive sculptural vocabulary shaped by his fascination with colour. He explains, "I would rather my pieces were seen as colour than anything else. Perhaps because I began as a painter rather than a sculptor I still tend to think of my sculpture not as three-dimensional paintings but as three-dimensional colour."

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***Skagway*, 1977**

METAL IN MOTION

Robert Murray, *Skagway,* 1977, Kelowna Art Gallery.

In the early 1970s, Murray began exploring asymmetry and the ways that it can evoke a sense of movement as curves and planes shift with the viewer's perspective—*Skagway,* 1977, is one of many works from this pivotal period. The sculpture is composed of folding and curving plates of metal that evoke the delicacy of paper. Light reflects off of the work's lively surfaces at different angles, causing radical changes in the rich red colour of this monochromatic sculpture that is located outside the Kelowna Art Gallery.

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***Hillary,* 1983**

A PILOT'S VIEW OF THE LANDSCAPE

Robert Murray, *Hillary,* 1983, Grounds For Sculpture, Hamilton Township, New Jersey.

Hillary, 1983, was inspired by the asymmetry of topography, the curves of rivers and mountain ranges, the undulations of fields and hills, and the gestures of the land that Murray witnessed while flying his own plane. An aviation enthusiast since childhood, the sculptor served in the Royal Canadian Air Force reserves in high school and obtained his pilot's license in his early thirties. *Hillary* exemplifies not only Murray's increasing mastery of fabrication, but also his ongoing investigation of landscape as an inspiration for abstract sculpture. It consists of an undulating plate of metal lightly touching the ground at one corner, while two vertical bases provide additional support. The work is installed in Grounds For Sculpture, a sculpture park and museum in Hamilton, New Jersey.

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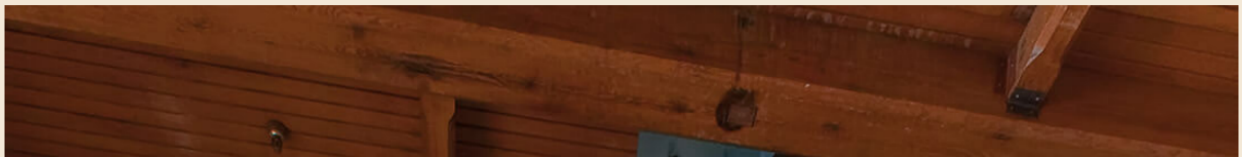
***Cascade*, 1983**

THE DRAMA OF LIGHT AND COLOUR



Robert Murray, *Cascade,* 1983, University College Collection,
Art Museum at the University of Toronto.

Commenting on his practice, Murray explains that a sculpture's form can create mesmerizing shifts in colour: "For instance, a piece painted blue may seem green in one area or warmly red somewhere else, but never the blue as you saw it in the can." Although Murray's work of the early 1960s often aligned with that of Minimalist sculptors, his compositions ultimately shared more with the Colour Field painters, who took hues as their subjects, worked in large scale, and used the natural world as a point of departure for abstraction. With the dramatic *Cascade,* 1983, twisting and curving forms exploit the effects of light and shadow on the sculpture's blue surface.

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Image Credits: **[1,12]** Robert Murray, *Cascade,* 1983, painted aluminum, 670 x 467 cm. University College Collection, Art Museum University of Toronto (UC711). Installation view of *Cascade* at the University of Toronto, n.d. Photo credit: Toni Hafkenscheid. **[2]** Robert Murray, 2011, photograph by Dudley Witney. **[3]** Robert Murray, *Rainmaker,* 1959–60, painted steel, 243.8 cm. Collection of City Hall, Saskatoon. Photo credit: Robert Murray. **[4]** Robert Murray, *Ferus,* 1963, painted steel, 360.8 x 111 x 56 cm. Collection of the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, purchased 1999 (40049). Photo credit: Robert Murray. **[5]** Left to right: Robert Murray, *Marker,* 1964, painted steel, 220.8 x 53.5 x 88 cm, Collection of the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, Gift of Joseph H. Hirshhorn, 1966 (66.3708); Robert Murray, *Montauk,* 1964, painted steel, 274.3 cm high, location unknown; Robert Murray, *TO,* 1963, painted aluminum, planar column 275 cm high, tubular column 271.1 cm high, Collection of the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, Gift from the Junior Women's Committee Fund, 1966, 65/60.1-.2. © Robert Murray; Robert Murray, *Adam and Eve,* 1962–63, bronze, 109.1 x 16 x 15 cm, Collection of the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, purchased 1970 (16622). © Robert Murray; Robert Murray, *Chief,* 1964, painted steel, 231.4 cm high, Collection of Frank Stella. Installation view of the exhibition *Robert Murray, Painted Sculpture* at Betty Parsons Gallery, New York, 1965. Photo credit: Robert Murray. **[6]** Robert Murray, *Cumbria,* 1966–67, painted Cor-Ten steel, 437 x 968 x 571 cm, Collection of the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, University of British Columbia, gift of Transport Canada, 1995. Installation view of Cumbria in Battery Park, New York, 1968. Photo credit: Robert Murray. **[7]** Robert Murray, *Athabasca,* 1966–67, painted Cor-Ten steel, 365.76 x 243.84 x 243.84 cm. Collection of Gallery Stratford. Robert Murray stands next to *Athabasca*, installed at the Fifth Avenue entrance of the Jewish Museum in New York City for *Sculpture in Environment,* October 1967. Photo credit: Roxanne Everett/ Lippincott's, LLC. **[8]** Robert Murray, *Chilcotin,* 1969, painted Q-decking, 182.9 x 458.5 x 298.5 cm. Collection of the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, purchased 1974 (18135). Photo credit: National Gallery of Canada. © Robert Murray. **[9]** Robert Murray, *Becca's H,* 1969, painted steel and aluminum, 388.6 x 513.1 x 228.6 cm. Collection of the University of Toronto. Photo credit: Jocelyn Anderson. **[10]** Robert Murray, *Skagway,* 1977, painted aluminum, 195.6 x 276.8 x 91.4 cm. Collection of the Kelowna Art Gallery, Gift of Toni Onley, 2001. Photo credit: Dan Dragan. **[11]** Robert Murray, *Hillary,* 1983, painted aluminum, 167.6 x 467.4 x 650.2 cm. Collection of Grounds For Sculpture, Gift of The Seward Johnson Atelier, Hamilton Township, New Jersey. Photo credit: Robert Murray.