

cynthia byrnes contemporary art

My year-long sculpture fellowship in France (part 1)

Hi all,

I'm writing eight months into a year's fellowship in southern France, after receiving the Prix de Henry Clews from the La Napoule Art Foundation, just west of Cannes. I've put together a narrative on my time and some of my projects here – heavy on pictures and light on words. I'll follow up towards the end of this summer with some updates and photos of the final exhibition. But for now, here's 'Part 1,' a glimpse inside my process and aims for the year.

Quick background:

The Prix de Henry Clews is a prize given to a sculptor once every two years, and named after the American artist who bought a run-down château on France's Côte d'Azur after the First World War and who, with his wife Marie, renovated it and turned it into his studio. Marie then turned it into an arts foundation after Henry's death.



The Château de la Napoule, home of the La Napoule Art Foundation

The First Few Months

I arrived at the end of August, and spent the first three months developing ideas, outfitting my two studio spaces, and exploring the château, its gardens, the coastline, and the ochre-red hills nearby. I spent lots of time in these spaces, taking photographs, making sketches, and writing down impressions at all times of the day and in all weather, while considering what type of sculpture I want to be creating at this point in my life.

I'd become a bit stuck in recent years — feeling like I was creating repetitive sculptures that would sit, isolated, on pedestals. I've longed to have the time and mental space to throw myself into work that is more place-based, while also pushing the boundaries of the qualities of balance and equilibrium that I've explored for so long. This fellowship has been that opportunity! Early in my time here I was offered an exhibition at the Château this coming summer and I decided to say yes. It felt risky, as it would mean creating a set of exhibition-ready works during a time of experimentation which often brings with it failure. And I have had failures! But also successes. And with each I've learned a lot, gotten better at things I've done in the past, and started some new directions. So an exhibition **opening June 24th** is what I'm now preparing for.

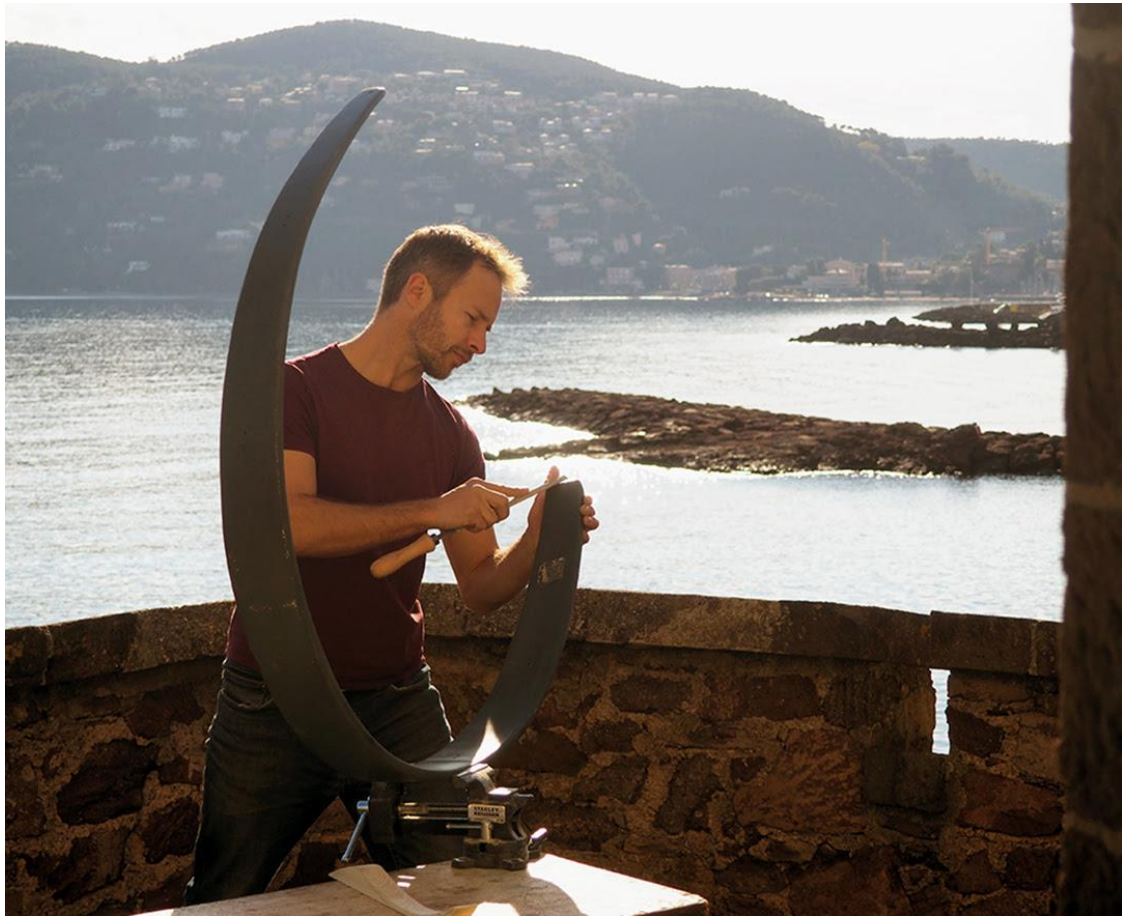
My Work Spaces





One of my studio spaces in its full, glorious, messy state, and in its presentation-ready mode

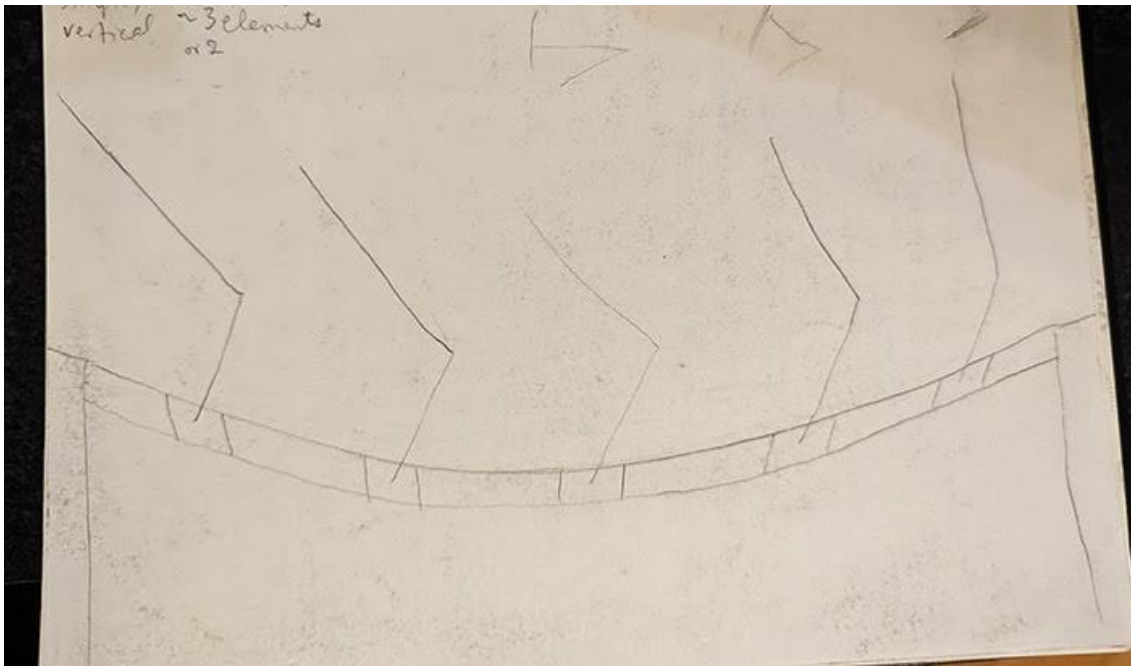




Inside and outside of my other studio, which is for the dirtier parts of my work

Deeper Explorations of Balance and Equilibrium

In parallel to considering the sites that I might use for projects, I was reflecting on balance and equilibrium, which have been a major part of my work for years. I've mostly explored the physical manifestation of balance up till now, but I'm increasingly interested in its more internal aspects – emotional, psychological, interpersonal, and even systemic equilibrium and how these can be expressed in sculpture. When I look at the world around me — whether individuals, groups, ecosystems, or nature itself — equilibrium is rarely present. Rather, it's a constant swinging from one side of equilibrium to the other, with an internal tension the only thing keeping that oscillation from being out of control and losing all relation to that central point of stillness. I've realized that this is part of what I want to explore in my work in the coming phase of my life. Here's an early sketch for an idea in this vein, an exploration of adaptability. I'd loosely hang two wires so as to create a parabola (actually, the term for the curve a hanging wire makes turns out to be called a 'catenary') then attach several evenly-spaced platforms to it. The center platform, being at the bottom of the catenary, would be level, but each of the others would be at an angle that increases as they get further from the center. If I create the same basic sculpture over and over on each platform, what physical changes to that form would need to be made to adapt and find balance at each angled platform?



Here's the first version I made of it — I stretched thin cables between two sawhorses, secured five small metal platforms to them, and placed a single form made of three parts on the middle platform, carefully-balanced:



Then I made four more of the same three-part form and changed only the angle of the third part in relation to the second. It's just that variation that allows each of these other four forms to adapt

to the angle of its platform, and find equilibrium. I also like the sense of suggested movement from one to the others. I'm working on a large, outdoor version of this piece now, which will span two large trees in the chateau's garden.



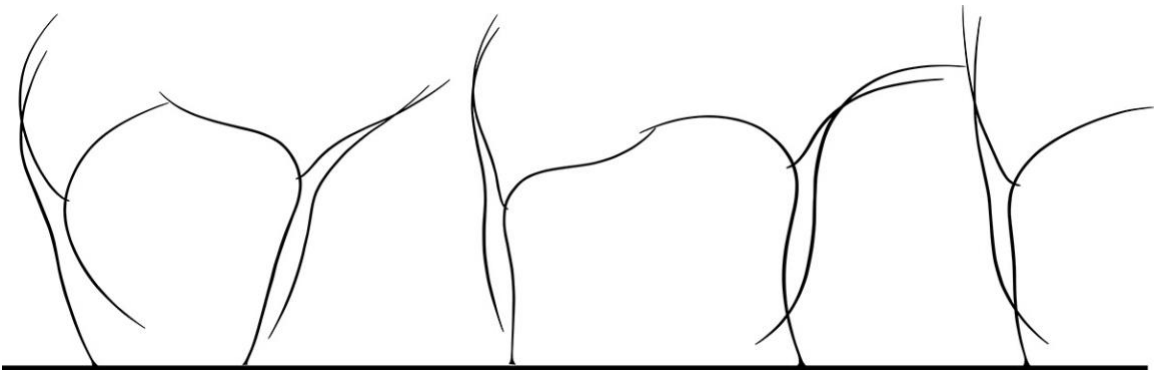


Another project that I started early on, but that will not reach its culmination this year, began with a single form that I made for an exhibit six or seven years ago:



Reaching Up and Out, 2014

I was interested in expanding on the gesture in it, and as I arrived in southern France I thought of some of Matisse's paintings of dancers, the centripetal and centrifugal forces suggested in them, the interactions hinted at between the figures, the sense of being out of equilibrium on an individual level but in it as a group. I wanted to see what this would look and feel like in a sculpture. So I began by developing many more simple sketches in the same direction as the first form, and then picked five that felt right in connection to each other:



And then I started exploring the third dimension, first in foamcore, then in wood, at a small-scale. Someday I'll realize this at a slightly larger-than-human scale, in metal, outdoors in a garden. But that will need to wait.





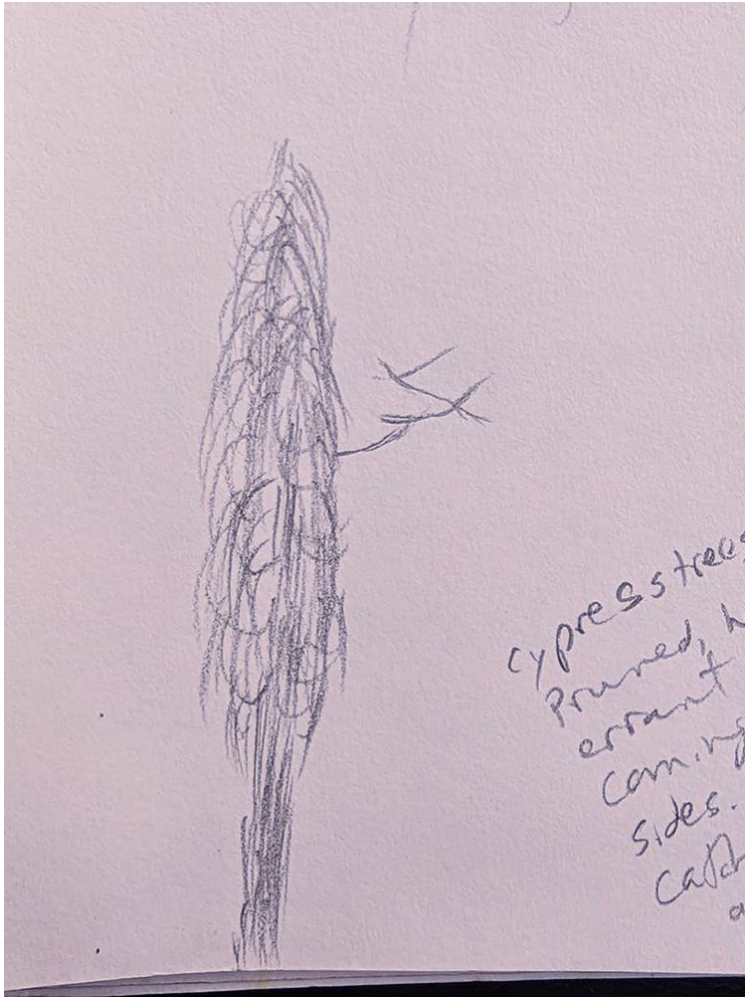
And a little 30-second video that shows more of the dynamics of the piece:



A Sense of Place

As I've lived and worked within the chateau and gardens, I've seen countless small, transitory moments around me that have come to define the place for me: a group of seabirds swooping off a

tree, wind churning leaves up and over a stone bridge. These moments were fleeting, but also defining of the place for me. A primary insight I had was that a sculpture, one highly site-specific, can capture the essence of these ephemeral moments specific to a place, and by doing so preserve them forward in time, allowing me to share something essential in my experience of a place with others, indefinitely forward in time.



An early sketch of an early idea — a sculpture cantilevered off the side of a large cypress tree



A higher-tech way to sketch a concept, with a pencil sketch laid over a LIDAR scan

And lastly, a work I recently completed — my second studio space is above the crypt where the Henry and Marie Clews are buried. Above the studio is an empty room without any door, window, or other access — a space they designed for “their spirits to meet in the afterlife.” And many weddings take place in the garden next to it, which is named “Le Jardin des Amoureux” (“The Lovers’ Garden”). One of my projects was to create a pair of abstracted figures placed near each other, gazing out at the sea. Each is in a state of stillness, but barely so, and there’s a tension that results: they are drawn together, yet if they lean any further they become vulnerable.



With a nearly-completed work, in front of my 'tomb tower' studio

I'll send out an invite to the show in the coming days, and then a set of installation images sometime this summer. In the meantime, be in touch!

all best,
Will