

# Space, Emptiness, & Shadows

## Nigel Hall

by Stefanie Bickel, translated from  
the German by Anthony B. Heric

From June to September, the Kunsthalle Mannheim is featuring an exhibition of work by Nigel Hall, one of today's most important British sculptors. Hall's work can be found in the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Tate Gallery in London, and in the Musée National d'Art Moderne in Paris, to name just a few museums. He is also not unknown in Germany. He has been exhibiting his sculptures for almost 35 years, and, from the very beginning, he understood how the context of his sculptures—how space permeates his works—is as important as the physicality and mass of the sculptures themselves. He has developed a stringent, personal language of form. In Mannheim, and at a concurrent show at the Gallery Scheffel in Bad Homburg, the artist's most recent sculptures provide an opportunity to reflect on his work.

Hall was born in Bristol, England, in 1943. One of his earliest childhood memories is of bombing raids during the war. In retrospect, this time provided him with a feeling for space and

shadows and a sure instinct for where things are located in space. When he was eight, his family moved to the countryside, where Hall spent much time alone outside. At this young age, he began drawing interesting landscapes, fascinating places, and architecture in the countryside. To this day, he has kept his interest in landscape, in open spaces, and in movement through space by attentively observing his environment. Every year for the last 17 years, he has traveled with his wife to the Alps, to Engadin in Switzerland where he hikes and draws.

After finishing his studies at London's Royal College of Art in 1967, he won the Harkness Fellowship and lived in Los Angeles from 1967 to 1969, also traveling throughout the U.S., Canada, and Mexico. He was especially impressed by the wide-open desert spaces of the American West, which made a lasting imprint on his work. The empty landscapes, the absolute stillness, and the presence of open space found immediate expression in an early work, *Soda Lake* (1968). Just as elements such as rocks, plants, or telephone poles punctuate space in the desert, giving it direc-

tion and providing borders, in *Soda Lake* (the name of a dry lake bed in the Mojave Desert) Hall used the elements of line and ellipse and, fundamental to experiencing space, verticals and horizontals to describe and define. Already in this early work, the space between the individual elements of the sculpture (which in this case are so large that one can pass through them) is just as important as the material and physical elements of the work itself.

The three-dimensional line in space, already present in *Soda Lake*, shaped Hall's work into the '80s. The most important material he used was aluminum, frequently painted in strong colors. The works from this period, distinguished by an uncanny lightness, are often wall installations and resemble three-dimensional drawings, almost as though the artist had drawn a line into the room. They jut away from the wall, up and into the exhibition space, and cast a fine, linear shadow. This immaterial part of the work, the shadow, the line made of light and darkness, is just as important as the physical metal line. The two together give the piece direction and dynamism.

Snow Light 2004. Polished wood, 160 x 160 x 29.6 cm.



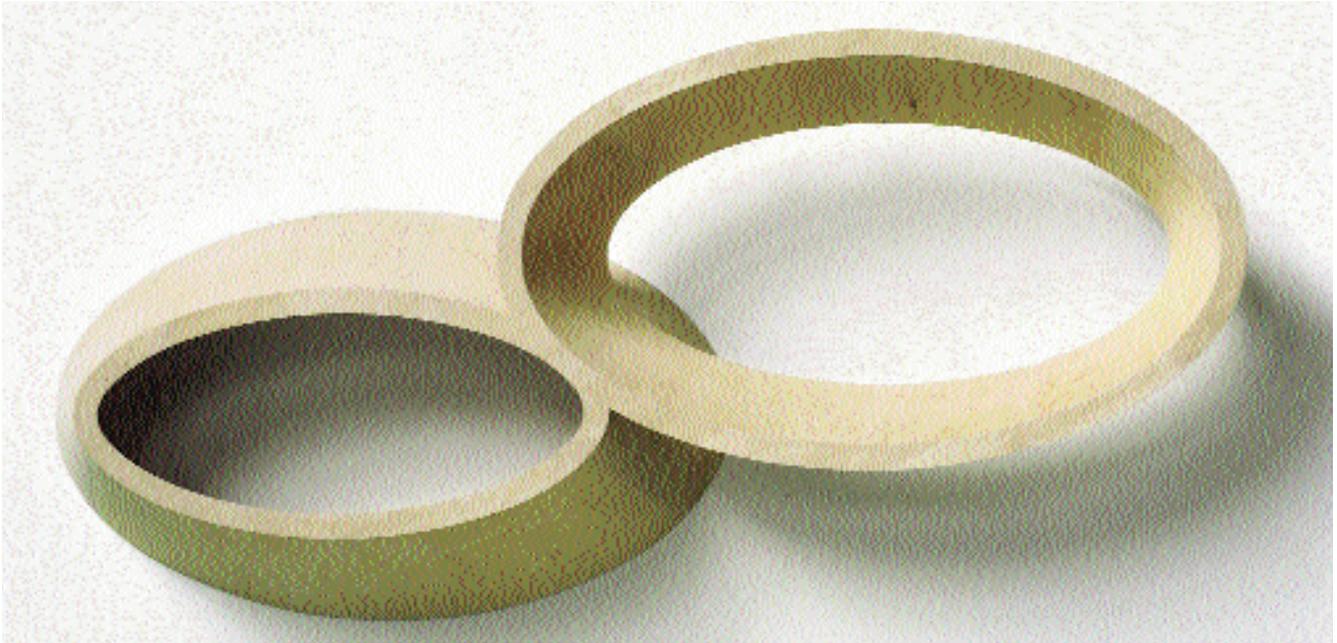
From 1984–86, Hall’s works became gradually denser and more fixed. Metal plates replaced the linear structures. The sculptures became more material and physical, even though transparency and permeability remained integral elements of Hall’s sculptural thinking. At the beginning of the ’90s, the first works in wood appeared. Although they sometimes have a diameter of more than two meters, they appear in no way massive. The light-colored birch appears much more as a sort of resonant body, like a musical instrument. The sculptures are covered with a white stain, then painted with a clear water-based varnish, and finally polished with wax. This process leaves the grain and knots of the material clearly recognizable: its true nature, the growth of this special material, is not hidden. Taking a closer look, the observer can even recognize the places where the individual pieces of the work have been joined. This factor, that nature’s growth and the artist’s hand intertwine, does not diminish the precision of the work. On the contrary, Hall finds it to be an enhancement. Even the works made of Cor-ten steel, which he has used since the end of the ’80s, are “raw,” with the open skin of the material exposed to the process of oxidation.



In Hall’s work, wood and steel show themselves as they are—natural, pure, and unmanipulated. He has mastered the inherent properties of two radically different materials: one warm, the other cold; one can be worked by hand, the other can be formed only with the help of machines and tremendous amounts of energy. And while one is sensitive to moisture and temperature changes (it can swell, tear, and warp), the other is suitable for display outside in the open landscape, exposed to wind and weather. Over the course of years, it can be snowed under and heated by the sun, withstanding both. In the Mannheim and Bad Homburg exhibitions, however, none of Hall’s large outdoor works are on display; both shows focus on the large wood pieces and drawings.

The birch wood that Hall uses has a light, gentle tone, which stands in stark

Top: *River*, 1998. Painted steel, 332.5 x 474 x 254.5 cm  
 Left: *Drifter*, Dipytch, 2004. Polished wood, 231.5 x 182.3 x 31



contrast to his sometimes gaudily colored aluminum rods of the '80s. And while these works encompass the room like a line on paper, making it tangible through sweeping directions and sometimes generous twisting, Hall's newer works are more substantial. They establish the lines of the form at once. The sculptures, opened and closed, tapered and cubic, enclose a space, which is either hidden or visible to the eye of the beholder. Except for a few pieces, the basic forms are based on ellipses and circles, and, except for a few, they are not massive. Smaller or larger openings permit perspectives into and through the work.

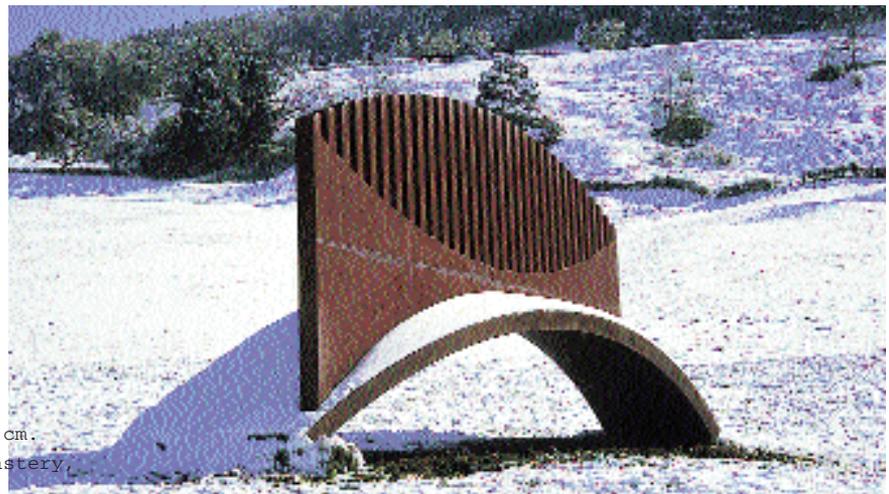
Verticals and horizontals play a substantial role in many of Hall's works, especially the vertical. Hall, who spent the first years of his life on the coast (in Bristol), developed a close connection to the ocean. Its surface forms an absolute horizontal—stronger than most landscapes on shore—when the wind is still. The mast of a ship is related to this horizontal at a 90-degree angle and forms an absolute vertical. The two elements represent two fundamental geometric states that can be clearly and

physically experienced. In a landscape as well as in sculpture, the vertical always corresponds to the standing human figure, due to upright stance and the right angle made to the surface of the earth. The vertical stabilizes, supports, and connects sculpture with the upright position of the observer. Hall's interest in the vertical is reflected in his early work. In *Soda Lake*, for instance, pieces are hung perpendicular to the ceiling, thus making them 100 percent vertical.

Hall's newer works of wood, like many of the '80s pieces, are frequently wall installations. The size of the openings turned toward the viewer and the number and density of the linear hori-

zontals or verticals that run through a work provide the dynamic and direction with which it projects itself into the space. The offset individual elements repeatedly interrupt the perfect symmetry, present their surfaces to the viewer at different angles, and come to life with the play of light and shadow on their surfaces. The combination of various polarities makes them seem alive: light and shadow, solidity and emptiness, the curved and straight lines, elements that come forward and others that shy away. The intersections of the various elements allow the eye to move along and follow the lines through space.

Although Hall's sculptures take their vocabulary of form from a few funda-



Top: *Like Thunder* 2004. Polished wood, 129.5 x 280 x 37.5 cm. *Night Spring*, 2001. Corten steel, 360 x 828 x 192 cm. Work installed at the Schoenthal Monastery, Langenbruck, Germany.



mental geometric shapes and are purely abstract, they often have poetic names. The titles, which suggest integrated references, also provide clues to his varied sources of inspiration: *Hour of Dusk*, *Hour of Dawn*, *Ship-to-Shore*, *Hidden Valley*, *Like Thunder*, *Kiss*, *Passage*, *First Light*, or *Big River*.

It is clear that many of the works refer to experiences, to walks through landscapes or particular places, to times of day, or to natural processes. Often the titles are associated with physical conditions or echo poetry. In each case, it is apparent that Hall's sculptures are not constructions that arise from purely theoretical processes. They grow much more organically. A work carries in itself its potential vocabulary of form and contains the idea for the next step, and both are always linked to the artist. Hall illustrates neither landscapes nor experiences but takes substantial elements of both and translates them into sculptural expression. This expression is completely independent in and of itself, but it is nevertheless firmly enmeshed in the world.

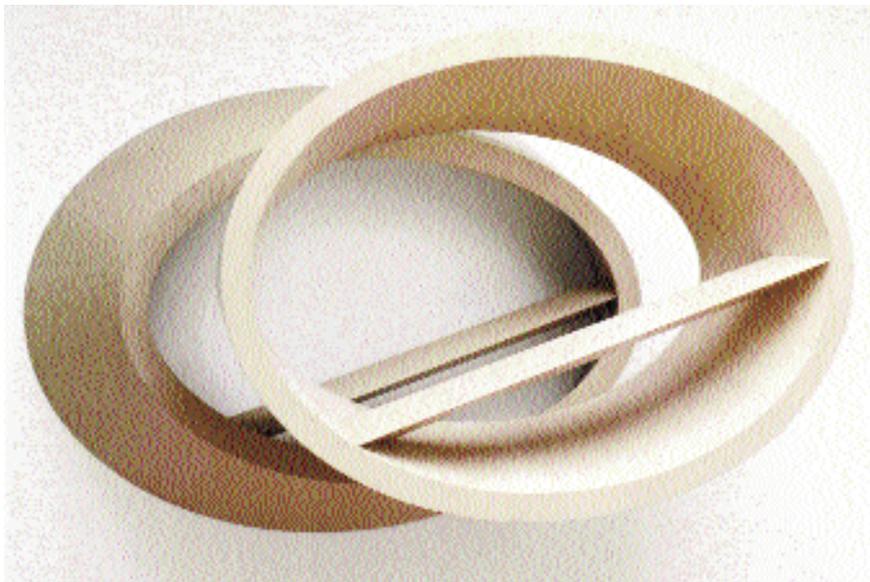
*Hour of Dusk*, for example, consists of two conical circles, a larger and a smaller, which are arranged one on top of the other. The upper, larger one opens to the viewer, and its upper half is intersected by four horizontals,

Left *Rising* 2002. Painted steel, 500 x 136 x 125 cm. Below *Hidden Valley* 1999. Polished wood, 146 x 238 x 78 cm.

which are generously spaced to allow for much space and light between them. The lower circle, also funnel-shaped, turns the smaller opening toward the viewer and thus hides its space, which is more easily imagined than actually seen. It is also intersected by two horizontals, this time placed very close to one another so that they further block the view and visually deny the viewer access. The hour of dusk reminds one of the setting sun, how it slips between the clouds and sinks below the horizon as night slowly falls. The upper part of the work is filled with light, the lower part with shadows. The shadowed part is substantially smaller: light, although broken, still dominates the work, but the foundation is composed of shadow. Anyone who has paid close attention to a sunset will recognize the experience in Hall's work. It is abstract geometry, but it communicates with poetry and sensory perception.

This work is not only linked to the ordinary and elemental experience of the disappearance of light during dusk, but it also relates to a personal experience, the death of Hall's father in 1999. The mystery of leaving found its way into artistic expression. The work does not illustrate; instead, a clear, abstract language of form and an ambiguous title combine to create a chain of association for the viewer. The visual and physical experience of the work is joined to the links forged by the act of seeing and walking around it.

Hall's work also has to do with time and the artist's growth over the course of 35 years. Standing in front of Hall's work today one can clearly sense the mature artist, whose works speak of great density, clarity, and beauty and of a powerful resoluteness of expression. His sculptures and objects distinguish something that one could describe as a true act of artistry—a condensation, a subliminal transformation from inside and outside, a perception and organization down to the very essence, which is so concentrated, so focused that, like an arrow aimed at its target, it has a directness that, in the end, cannot be stated but can only be described. Through associations, designations, and comparisons, one can circle the being of his work, get close to it—but



Top: Hour of Dusk, 2000. Polished wood, 221 x 167 x 30 cm. Bottom: Winterreise 2003. Polished wood, 122.5 x 122.5 x 22

it is impossible to hold down or codify—it requires an experience, letting oneself become involved, a meeting.

It is absolutely necessary to view Hall's sculptures, as is true for all three-dimensional works, from different directions and perspectives. The sculptures stand in space, penetrate, describe, and define it, converting it into another, charged dimension. Depending on the viewing angle and point of view, the work changes: the dimensions shift, deflect forward and back; a circle becomes an ellipse and back again; large and small elements change. A similar experience can be had when hiking, especially when hiking through the mountains. Perspectives open and close. What at first looked like a solid wall of rock later becomes an opening into a valley. Space yields forward and back. Light and shadow substantially determine the perception of the landscape. To comprehensively experience a landscape one needs time. Time to move through it, time to observe, and time to open oneself up to it. Hall's work must be experienced similarly. Depending on the angle of the light and how it changes over the course of a day (and also depending from where and from how far away one observes), Hall's works change. The work can only be comprehended when one takes time and allows oneself to relax into it. Then, the sculptures develop an almost meditative quality, radiating a great stillness like the landscapes that Hall prefers, deserts and mountains. However, at the same time, through their soft interplay of light and shadow and the often slightly offset elements, they imply a sort of gentle movement, almost like breathing. Hall himself says of his works, "None of them attempts to describe the landscape, but they do share certain characteristics: a stillness; a reference to verticality and its relationship to place and to the viewer; and a quiet, meditative quality which requires time. Like landscape, they are worth being viewed from all angles."

*Stefanie Bickel is a writer living in Wiesbaden, Germany.*

