

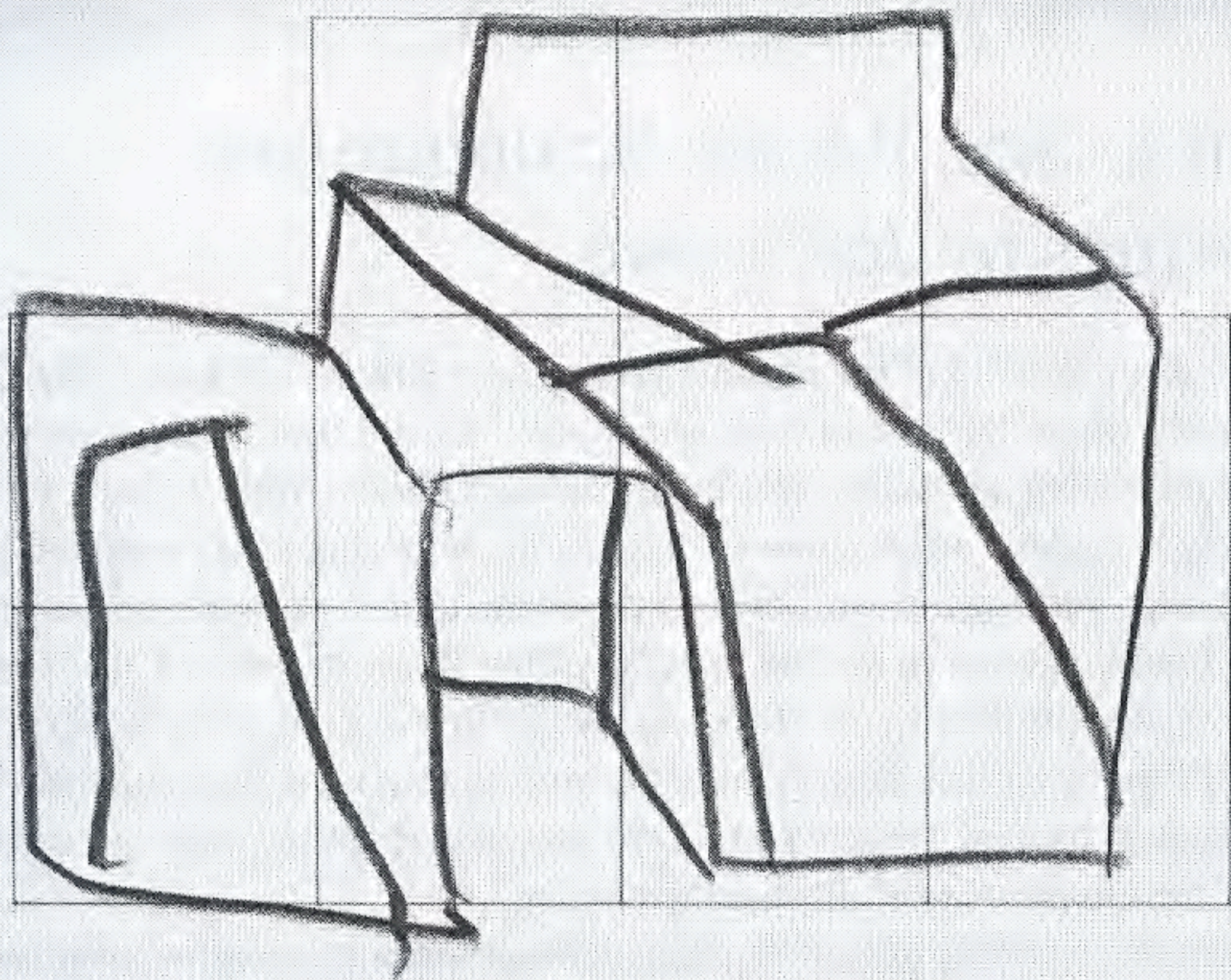
What to See: Recent Sculpture and Drawings by Jeff Lowe

After the death in 1975 of the abstract artist Roger Hilton, Jeff Lowe was driving in Cornwall, where Hilton had lived as a St. Ives artist. Lowe, who has owned one of the painter's late gouaches, had been reading Hilton's *Night Letters*, in which the largely bedridden artist wrote to his sleeping wife about his condition, his art and his needs. Parking his car, Lowe realised that, quite by chance, he was outside Hilton's house. Invited in by the artist's widow Rose, he noticed that boxes of effects crowded the floor space. Rose was shortly to move out, and she feared that a mural, painted by her late husband directly onto an interior wall, would be covered over by its next owners. By accident, Lowe saw, as perhaps few other people would ever see, the unique artwork in its unique space.

Just one example of Lowe's many connections with a variety of prominent British artists, this anecdote is suggestive of his multifaceted concerns as a sculptor. Lowe's work has a strong architectural sense, both within itself and with regard to the importance of its setting. In addition to construction projects in south-east London and Portugal, he has recently designed a new, six-storey tower to incorporate his studio, living and showing spaces. On a smaller scale, a broad visual vocabulary informs his sculpture whose points of reference span abstract, minimal and environmental arts, literature and African sculpture, among others. He admires the work of Basil Beattie and John Walker, for example, whose paintings he feels approach the condition of sculpture.

Citing Phillip King's iconic *Genghis Khan* (1963), Lowe stresses the importance of sculpture having a strong image. In the 1960s, prior to Lowe's own education as a young artist, no one had seen works like Anthony Caro's *Prairie* (1967) or *Early One Morning* (1962) before. The work of earlier sculptors such as Reg Butler and Lynn Chadwick lacked the pictorial sense necessary to make an image self-contained within its physical space – to stand alone. In construction, Lowe responds to what he sees, rather than remaining bound to an unreal, imaginative concept. As with his meeting with Rose Hilton, he is open to chance. Organic in their production, his works require the viewer, and the artist, to exercise the discipline of looking.

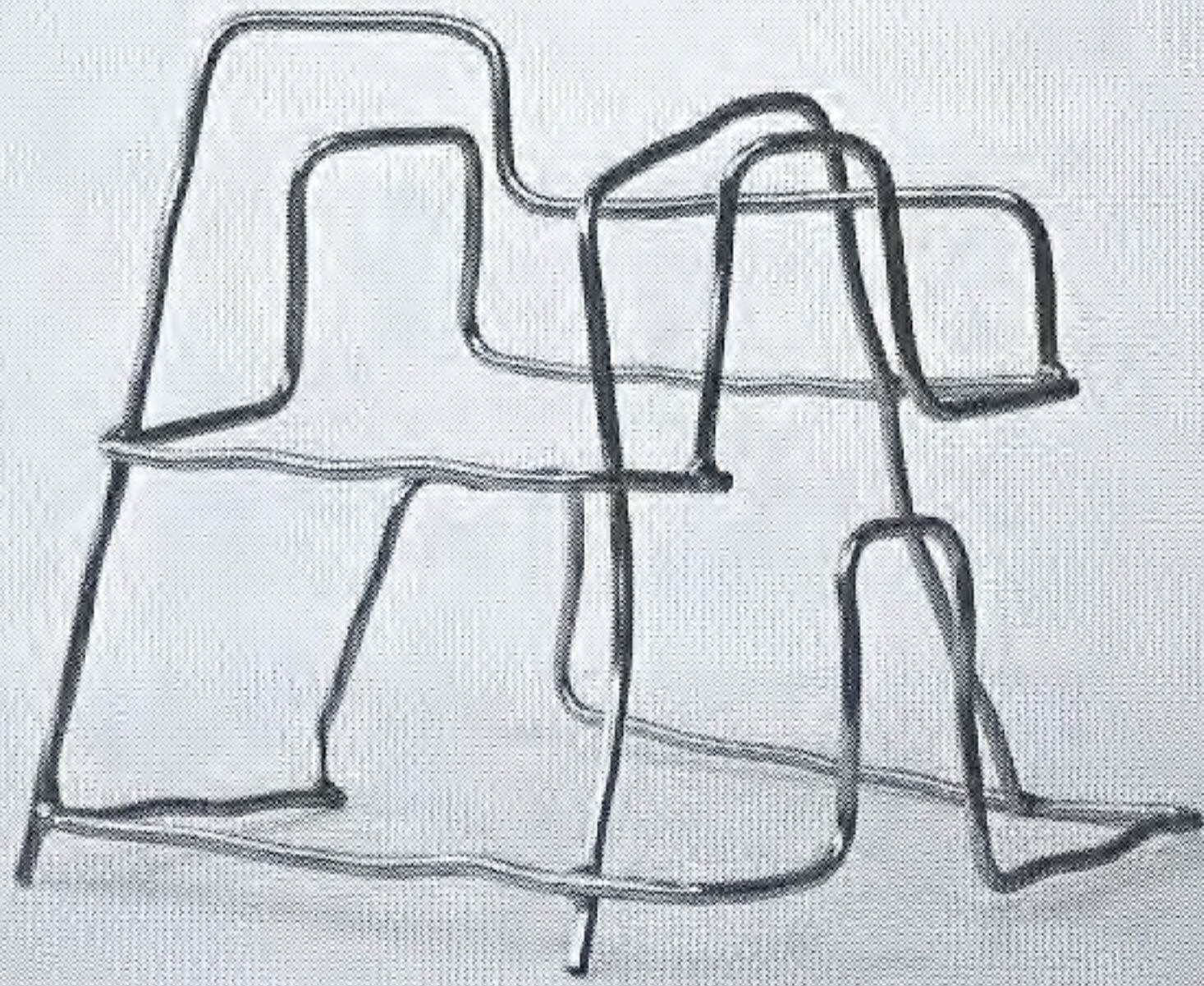
At London's Whitecross Gallery in 2007, Lowe exhibited a series of



'Drawing No.8', 2008, (graphite on paper), 22x30cm

sculptures and drawings whose relationships might provide a key to his recent work. Lowe's graphite lines on paper form structures resembling towers, doorways and walls: interior, exterior and liminal spaces. Overlaid upon grid-lines whose squares together comprise rectangular or hard-edged shapes, Lowe's linear constructions imply more dimensions than they, themselves, have. Ambiguously but deliberately formed, the drawings suggest possible and impossible spaces – entrances, exits and visual traps. Far from being visual puns, however, the images raise the question of how to look at a sculpture, or how to see a piece as being sculptural. Shown alongside three-dimensional panels in which the graphite lines became relief, the drawings were, in the words of the exhibition's title, 'Drawn Out'.

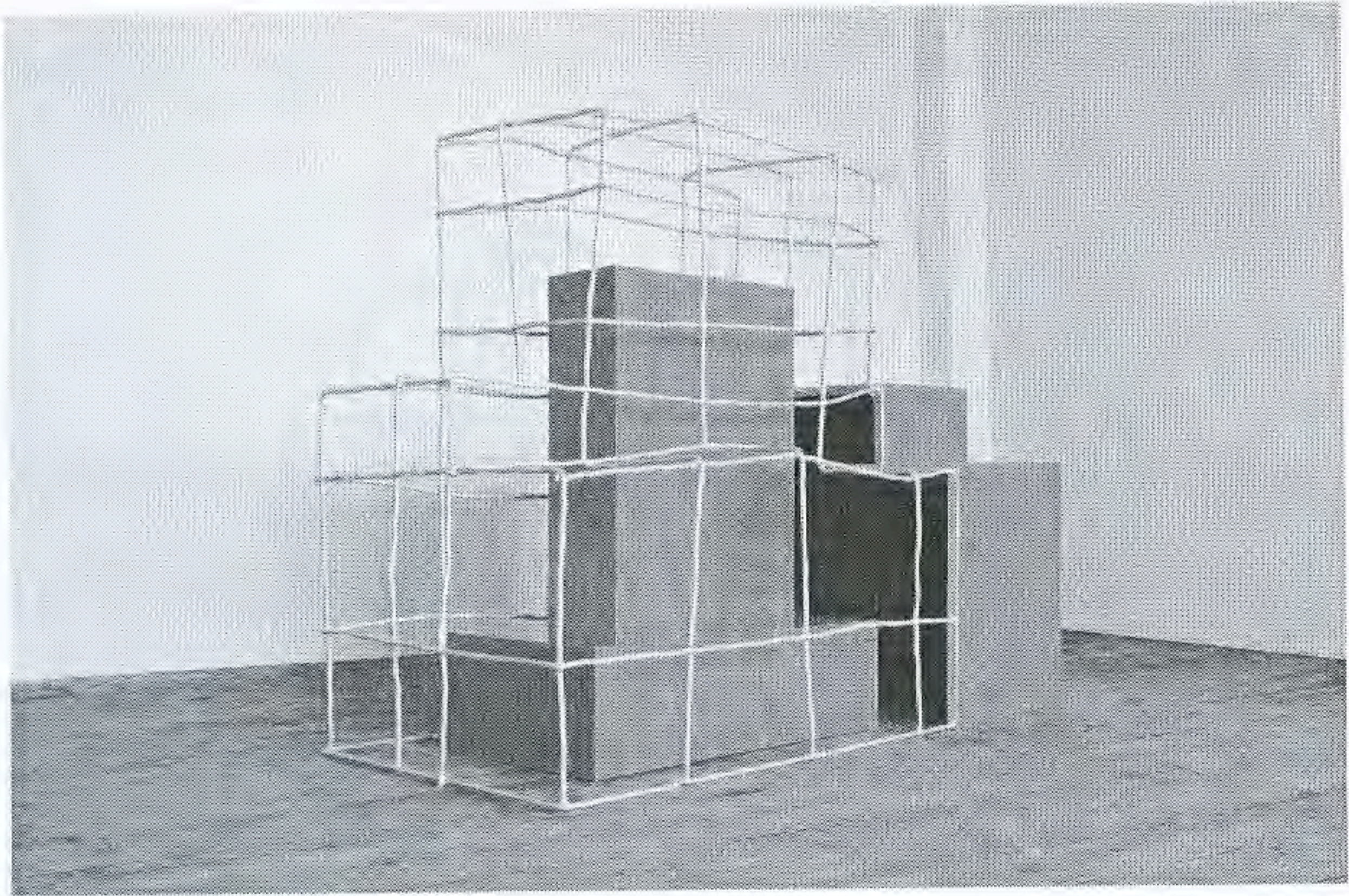
Lowe is, though, first and foremost a maker, in dialogue with the object and its materials. Unlike the body moulds of Antony Gormley and the casts by Rachel Whiteread of Victorian interiors, Lowe's sculptures do not make themselves. To him, concept is not sufficient for the success, or existence, of a piece. Rather, he upholds the 'truth to materials' tenet of sculpture, considering Nicholas Pope and David Nash to be more appropriate points of comparison. Lowe knows when to



'Brass-coated steel No.1', 2009, 34x35x38cm

look away and let the object take over. With his coloured powder- and metal-coated pieces, he is interested in industry and in patination, an act of the artwork itself. Since his mid twenties he has collected African art and considers the work of the Dogon tribe to be the highest art to which to aspire, due to its craftsmanship and diverse surface textures. Originally buying examples from the same Paris shop which Picasso, Henry Moore and Anthony Caro had frequented, Lowe is part of a tradition by which 'the language of sculpture', to use William Tucker's phrase, is handed down. He was taught at Saint Martins by Tucker, Caro and King, all of whom were associated with the New Generation sculpture show at The Whitechapel Gallery in 1965. There, use of colour and of new materials such as fibreglass and plastics were emphasised, along with the aesthetic that a sculpture be self-sufficient.

Lowe has experimented with a gamut of such variables for the past thirty-five years, but in his recent work it is possible to identify a persistent yet adapting project, that of 'drawing out' his architectural sketches into panels, wiry steel structures and similar wire maquettes. Coated with brass, zinc, nickel or copper,



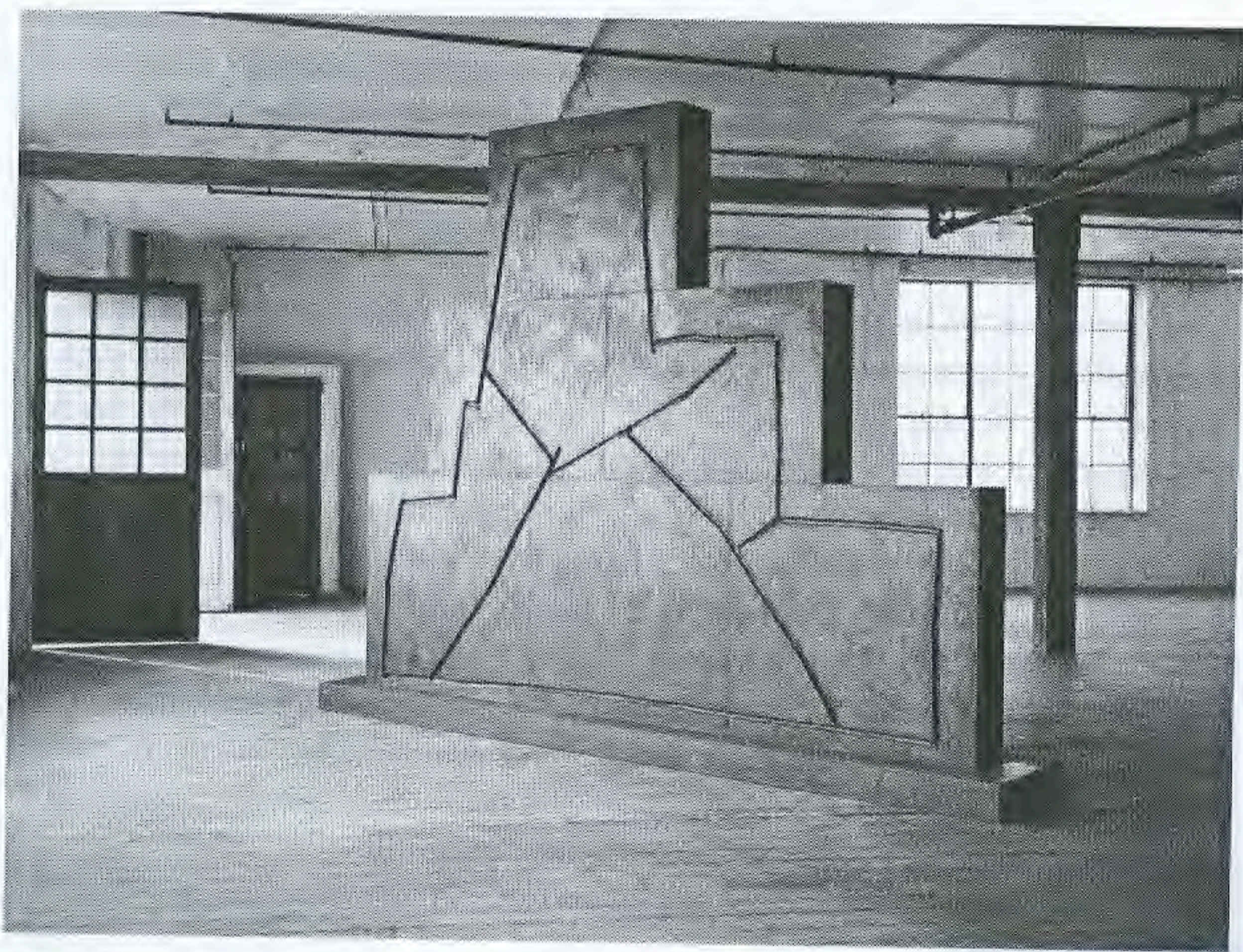
'Orange Blue and Cage (Enclosure Act)', 2010, (powder-coated steel), 156x190x102cm

the maquettes and their larger steel equivalents create, divide and reapportion space. Joins or the lack of joins in their formation confirm or deny relationships between parts of the whole. There are imaginary doorways into the spaces which invite mental negotiation of the interiors, and in turn of the surrounding exteriors. Pleasure is derived from contemplating the objects in space and the ways in which they create space within themselves and alter the areas they have displaced. One might think of Giacometti stripping away as much of his figures as he could in order to leave the essential object – sculpting, in his words, ‘the shadow that is cast’ by a figure more so than the figure itself – to present it in its relationship to its surroundings (or lack of surroundings). Lowe’s steel sculptures are busy yet specific, complicated yet precise. They have an internal logic which affects their external space both metaphorically and literally.

Lowe’s panels, drawings and steel structures were shown from 3rd-8th May of this year at The Gallery in Cork Street, London, alongside a series which marks a new step in his continuing project and which comes to bear on earlier work still, exploring different ways of making similar representations. Each subtitled as an ‘Enclosure Act’, combinations of large, coloured steel blocks and cages bring together, develop and reinterpret the dominant themes of Lowe’s corpus.

Loose symmetries between the conjunctions of cage and block create units, the interrelationship of whose parts is in question. The 'Enclosure Acts' are made, and work within sculpture, asking about the possibilities of its materials and their connections. Visually one can enter into the large spaces within the objects, and indeed, visual contemplation of the texture and dimensions of the pieces is of primary importance. The relationships and symmetries between units in the sculptures, or the lack of these, continue in spaces which are almost hidden, suggesting self-sufficient artworks which come to function without our agency, to be looked at without the unnecessary imposition of meaning.

Entitled 'Building Space', the exhibition negotiates a line between the interconnected network of the physical environment and the restrictions which this paradoxically implies. One reaction, that these works might be larger, forgets that their boundaries are dictated by an internal logic, whereby the overall size is less important than the relative internal dimensions. Lowe builds space, but within his cages and between his blocks, he constricts his own creations. Similarly, within



'Taking Shape', 2006, (wood, graphite and resin), 318x396x63.5cm

his pieces there is plenty of space – building space – which goes unused but which, in its cage, is unreachable. As with his paper grid-lines, Lowe's cages expand and contract space, framing a significant image, to put it forward, whilst keeping it within parameters. This effect is not dissimilar to that of Francis Bacon's space-frames. Lowe's sculptures are notably modern in this way, forming their own related spatial networks but coming to realise the limits of possibility. It would be more realistic still to say that such imposed meanings or implications are strictly subjective: the effect of the sculptures is entirely held within their physical forms. A self-contained image contains the artwork's full implication, which is, most effectively, no implication other than the artwork itself. These works are not just about what pleases the eye, however. Rather, their reason for being is their construction: instead of being explicitly about anything, each is the thing itself.

For a year from October 2005, Lowe challenged himself to complete twelve large-scale sculptures in twelve months, in the vast, ten thousand square foot industrial warehouse in South Bermondsey which he still rents. The sculptures were specifically designed for exhibition in the place of their own creation, meaning that Lowe's project was one of both constriction (twelve sculptures in twelve months) and expansion (large, industrial works in a large, industrial studio). The questioning of the borders of space and lack of space is also presented by the resulting works themselves. Constructed mainly in wood and plaster, then cast in iron and aluminium, with their grids, their hard-edged or symmetrical outlines and their linear relief or intaglio designs, with just a thin real depth of field the structures strike the eye as consisting of many dimensions. They are like designs for unbuildable houses in a style at once tribal and futuristic. With titles such as *Point of View*, *Taking Shape* and *Building a Picture*, these pieces blur the line between what is seen and what is imagined, without being explicitly abstract, and without resorting to visual puns. Lowe's imagery, as Richard Aldington said of the imagist poet H. D., is 'a kind of accurate mystery'.

Lowe's work is sophisticated, both traditional and modern, and committed. In conversation, Lowe is equally knowledgeable and enthusiastic about art with which he does and does not feel resonance, whilst maintaining that a sculpture must be made. Although his work differs greatly from that of Richard Long, he recalls Long complimenting one of his pieces shown at the Royal Academy. Lowe is very much a hands-on maker and is amused to think that Willem de Kooning sculpted wearing two pairs of oversized workman's gloves. Admiring of Carl Andre, Lowe feels Andre could have produced less with equal effect. Andre famously said that, 'Every time you work, you have to do it all over again, to rid yourself of this dross'.

Lowe, however, is keen not to produce 'Jeff Lowe sculptures', despite having a recognisable style. As Beattie, Ivon Hitchens and Sean Scully did before they fell into this trap, Lowe wishes to develop his ongoing project. He feels that if there is still something left to learn, through repetition one will find the unfamiliar close to the familiar. Whilst his exhibition on Cork Street was opening, he was already planning his next moves, both physically to a potential new studio, and artistically. Taking risks and considering accident as a positive ingredient, his next work will be as new to him as it will be to everyone else.