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## **Marc Blane at Paula Allen Gallery**

by Patricia Phillips

Early American cities were often arranged around the common—a central green space that was the nucleus of community. For contemporary urban neighborhoods the playground functions almost as a traditional common; although it offers no green space or sense of respite, it does serve as a locus for information, conversation, and released aggression. Marc Blane has an unusual sensitivity to the nature of this space, with its stripped, skeletal, spartan system of organization, as well as its landscape both of personal power and requisite camaraderie. Blane's work fills a narrow space and small scope; the issues and questions that concern him are circumscribed, but the work is trenchant and timely. In this group of sculptures, Blane took a uniquely urban site and condition, the decaying playground, and extracted from it certain elements and symbols.

He also took basketball as an inspiration for some of these sculptures. This quintessential urban sport does not require the grassy, open expanses of soccer, football, or baseball. Basketball is all about the unyielding, constricted nature of the court, the percussion of the ball on a hard manmade surface, the continuous movement of bodies through an extremely confined volume of space.



Playground / Landscape H – 1988 - 6' x 12' x 22' – iron

Blane's most ambitious sculpture, *Playground/Landscape H*, 1988, consists of an open welded-iron armature; in plan it looks like an H with uneven sides. At the crossbar, two rusted steel basketball backboards with hoops are attached to each side, directly opposite each other. The piece captures with spare precision the tough edges and contours of the new urban landscape. But there is irony here as well. The backboards are placed about 4 feet high, undercutting the drama of the slam-dunk. The premise, function, and inspiration of the high-jumping game is upended by this dimensional diminishment.

In Revival of the Jacob H. Schiff Fountain, 1984, an installation done on the Lower East Side of New York, depicted here through before-and-after photographs, Blane placed a steel backboard, a flag on one side, a hoop on the other on a 10-foot steel post. The fountain in which it stood, originally installed in 1895, once included an ornamental element atop a column. With that element long gone, Blane's inserted object provided a strong critique of the relationship between street life and high art, between civil necessities and civic pride. Playgrounds and public parks are the location of recreation, but they are also powerful landscapes even when empty. Blane understands the power of these spaces and their iconography to transmit either vitality or abandonment. The ruin has enjoyed a long tradition as the conduit of the sublime - it can represent the fearsome, violent, and undividable forces of nature. With these pieces, Blane expands upon that concept of sublimity. He transposes the idea of the ruin into the late 20th century, when decay and disuse represent, not consciously composed counterpoints to pastoralism, but entire vistas and substantial sections of the landscape. The fact that Blane reinterprets this landscape so thoughtfully - that he does not simply declare himself the "author" of urban ruins - gives his work an intelligence that nostalgia or sentimentality alone can never evoke.