

Sculpture

20th Anniversary Year

July/August 2002 Vol. 21 No. 6

\$6 \$8CAN

INTERNATIONAL SCULPTURE CENTER www.sculpture.org



Stephen Talasnik

Eve Andrée Laramée

Joel Perlman

Sculpture Destination

Stephen Talasnik

Harnessing the *Majestic*

by Jonathan Goodman

What is the relationship of drawing to sculpture? Two-dimensional art, despite the achievements of Abstract Expressionism and the all-over image, remains a project of perspective, given as the category is to the illusion of depth. It is true that Cubism began the attack on drawing's capacity for the visual feint by clearly delineating shifting planes that corresponded to the different sides of a three-dimensional object; and it is also true that ever since then the notion of depth on canvas or paper has become problematic. It might well be argued that sculpture, given its volumetric nature, is a more direct, or even honest, presentation of reality; drawing and painting, by contrast, are inevitably given over to a trick of the eye. Flatness suggests the recognition of two-dimensional art's limited means in relation to the world that it takes as its cue; we can represent, to some extent, the visual complexities of what we see only if we agree to suspend our disbelief before the receding depths of what we have in front of us.

Sculpture, on the other hand, has no such need to beguile us into believing what we know does not in fact exist.

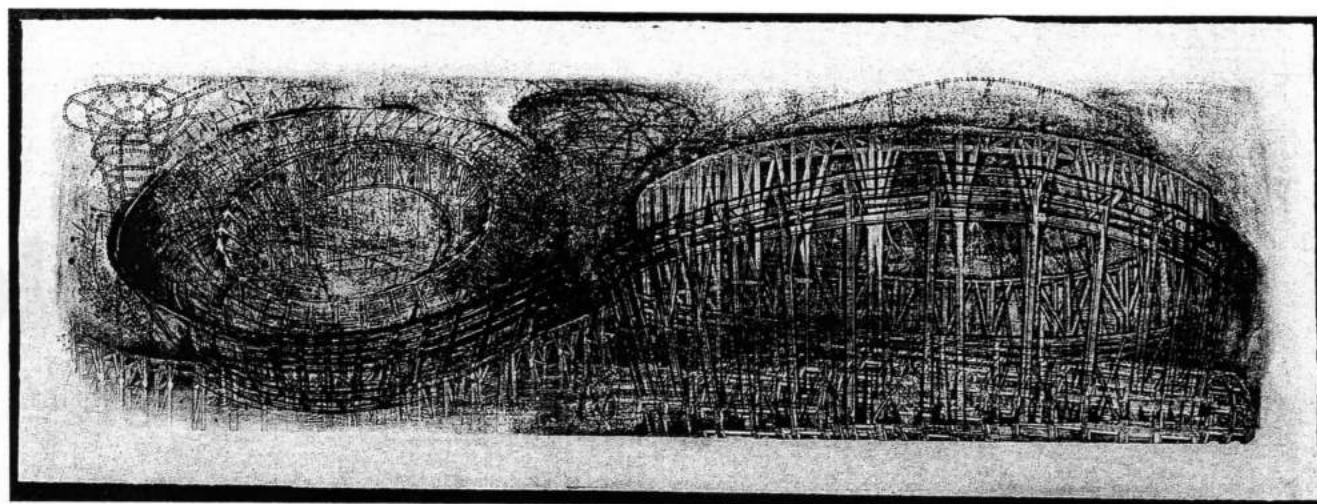
Dome, 2001. Wood, 38 x 38 x 36 in.

Its very actuality is a call to the reality we experience not only in the imagination but also in life. The physical weight of volumetric art promotes the notion that we, in our bodily element, are meant to interact with another object whose materiality argues against simulation in favor of actual existence. As a result, sculpture makes itself known as a category of being that engages us on our own terms, rather than suggesting a world that, however seemingly real it may be, is understood to be imagined. Sculpture is, by comparison with two-dimensional art, a relative late-comer to certain ways of contemporary expression. Because it never had to recognize its incompleteness, as painting and drawing did in the early 20th century, it never needed to develop an armamentarium intended to call attention to its physical constraints.

Partly in consequence of its boundaries, contemporary drawing may be seen to elevate the language of the two-dimensional, so that what began as fault emerges as a confident statement of value. I mean by this that it turns categorization on its head—the kind of reality it represents becomes transparently imaginative, no longer given to the mythology of illusion. Instead,

it clearly embraces its essentially visionary, or imagined, nature: the image is free to represent anything, because it fools no one about its responsibilities. As a result, the art of drawing, always capable of conjuring not only what is seen in the world but also what is seen in the mind, has the freedom to extravagantly suppose. The imagination, having been sidelined as a lesser function in drawing's long history as a representational art, now comes forth to cast an illuminated glow on the problem of perspective and the real. It is at liberty to be exactly what it is: a supple vehicle for thought. As for sculpture, it gives body to the essentially illusory nature of drawing; it puts forth, in actual terms, the imaginative compilation of drawn forms. It does what drawing cannot: it sees the form into physical reality.

Long-time draftsman and recent sculptor Stephen Talasnik understands the relationship between drawing and sculpture as close, two sides of a single coin: "The beauty of drawing to sculpture is that form adds a dimension that eludes two-dimensional visualization. Conversely, drawing is an abstract visual means to probe the infinite possibilities of form." As he comments



(in an interview), drawing becomes a mode of thought, while sculpture provides the evidence of form: "Drawing is a fundamental tool for invention. It is the thought process, while sculpture is the material realization. Sculpture is finite, and drawing is infinite." Talasnik, who has been making drawings of imagined and visionary structures since the early 1980s, began constructing sculptures in 2001. His three-dimensional work, built with thin pieces of basswood that are glued together, follows the general articulations of his drawings, which look to infinite possibilities of form—design elements that sculpture cannot follow. The imaginative implications of his drawings are supported by his constructions. As Talasnik comments, "Prior to my recent involvement in sculpture, my drawings invented the real—I was interested in designing fiction. Now, with the evolution of my sculpture, my drawings are liberated from exactitude and instead explore enigmatic structure."

The 47-year-old Talasnik has been at work for some time as a draftsman. He received his BFA from the Rhode Island School of Design and his MFA from the Tyler School of Art outside Philadelphia; the latter gave him the chance to spend a year in Rome. His stay in Italy profoundly affected his work. As he says, "I was afforded an opportunity to examine the importance of time and timelessness; I was living among antiquities, and my ongoing interests in archaeology and architecture were nurtured." Most likely, it was here that he became enamored of

the 18th-century etchings of Piranesi, whose grandiose visions of Rome can be seen as similar in their sublime effect to some of the rhetoric of Talasnik's own drawings.

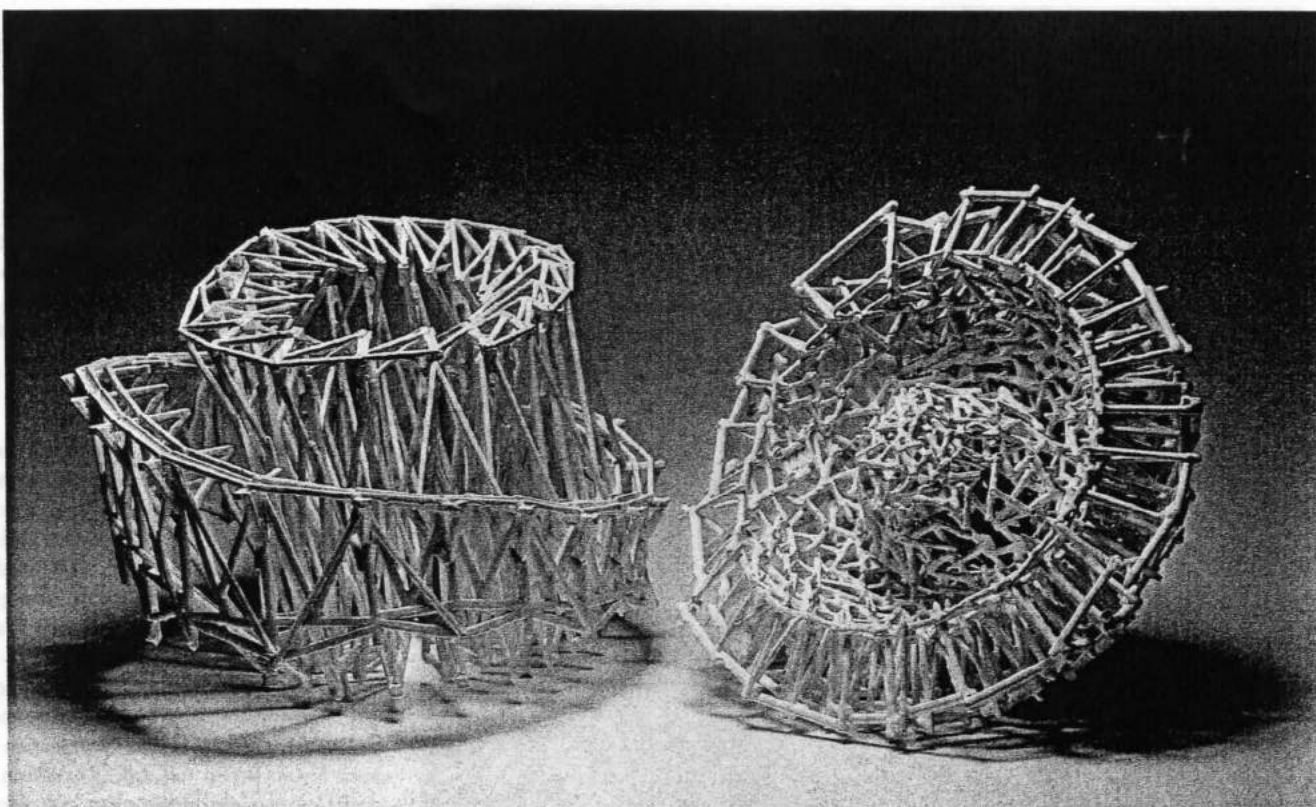
In addition to Rome, Talasnik lived in Tokyo from 1987 to 1990, working as a member of Temple University's branch campus. Interestingly, he claims that he has not been influenced in any direct way by his time in Asia. Indeed, he is fierce about his independence from such influence, saying that he is by no means "a Japanophile." What interested him most about Tokyo was the economic boom of the 1980s, a time when "the city was in the process of transforming its personality from a postwar urban center to a modern high-rise metropolis: Tokyo epitomized all that was great, innovative, and also ugly in design." As an archaeologist of culture, Talasnik also traveled throughout Thailand, the Philippines, and southern China, his objective being the study of native architecture and cultural artifacts.

The time Talasnik spent working outside the United States was a conscious decision on his part; he wanted to experience other places before settling into the New York art world. His stays in Rome and Tokyo contributed "to a personal encyclopedia of resources." He moved to New York in 1991, where he has stayed and pursued his career, at the same time continuing to travel to Europe and Asia on a regular basis. Talasnik's journeys have contributed substantially to his interests as an artist: "There is

Above: *Defensive Architecture*, 2001. Pencil, 22 x 72 in. Opposite: *Amusements #1-2*, 2000-2002. Wood and gesso, (left) 18 x 24 x 24 in.; (right) 18 x 18 x 14 in.

no greater experience in development than to surround oneself with the artifacts of cultural and ethnic diversity—to study and learn from civilizations." It is interesting to speculate how Talasnik has been affected by his travels; as has been pointed out, he is quick to disavow any formal continuities between his own work and Japanese visual expression. In fact, his drawings are far closer to Western drawings of invention and architecture; they clearly derive their inventiveness from the work of Piranesi and Leonardo da Vinci. It may be said that Talasnik is an artist who has cultivated a relationship with the past, whose orientation toward tradition has enabled him to move in a direction in which earlier versions of imagined cities and objects are there to be accessed without being copied.

Talasnik imagines a world that is not unknown to us. His affinities are various and complex; he grew up drawing futuristic cities, airplanes, and spaceships and meticulously copied the work of Frank Lloyd Wright. While a student at the Rhode Island School of Design, he attended lectures by photographer Aaron Siskind and became aware of the richness of the monochrome image. In graduate school he turned to the study of contemporary drawing; he looked at Jim Dine's renderings of tools, as well as the powerfully graphic art of Richard Serra. As



Talasnik puts it, "The manipulation of materials and investigation of surface attracted me." The charcoal drawings of Seurat, with their mysterious presence, also made an impression; additionally, Talasnik turned to the work of 19th- and 20th-century photographers such as Henry Fox Talbot and Karl Blossfeldt, whose sun negatives and nature studies, respectively, interested him, as did the landscapes of Eugene Atget and Albert Renger-Patzsch. The world of black-and-white photography enabled him to articulate his own pleasure in monochromatic art.

Like the drawings, the sculptures depend on open articulation of forms, airy shapes, transparency of structure.

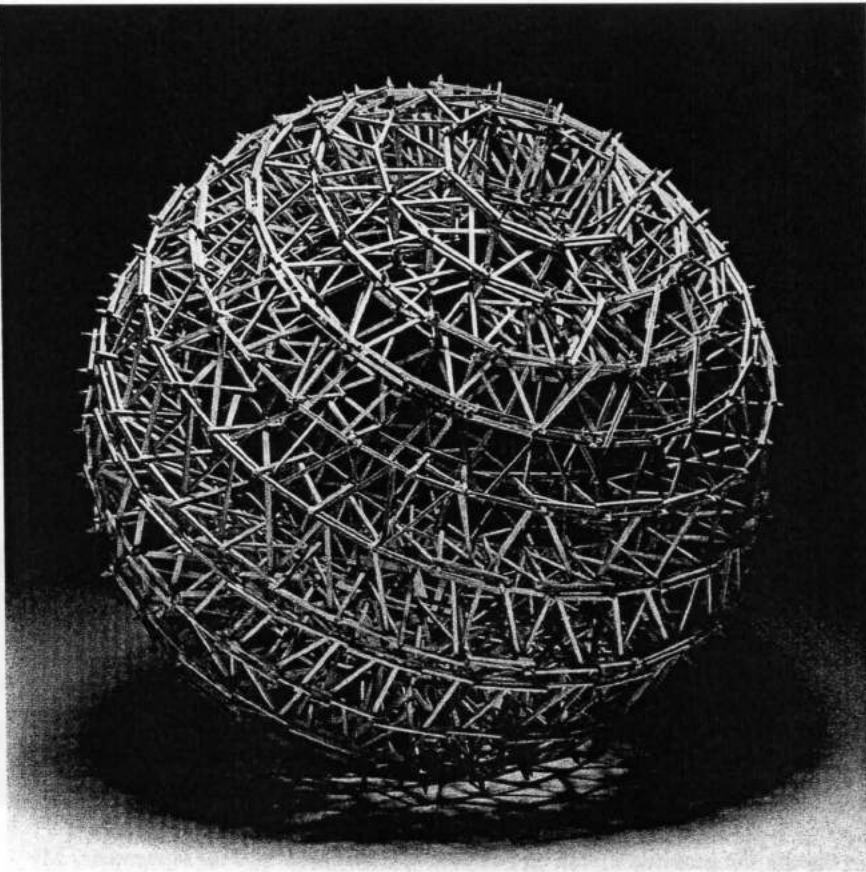
Talasnik's drawings are metaphysical constructions—visionary artifacts and structures inspired by imagined grand places and, more specifically, the intricate interstices of scaffolding around buildings. His process, though, is anything but ephemeral: "When it comes to the surface of the paper, anything goes." He prefers heavyweight papers intended for watercolor or printmaking, because papers made for drawing cannot stand up to his strongly physical treatment of the surface. By

erasing the graphite marks and abrading the paper with such tools as a power sander, an electric eraser, and steel-brush file cleaners—even wood-carving tools and distilled alcohol—Talasnik achieves a surface rich with the history of its making. The physicality of his process contrasts with the imagined structures that arc and echo across the paper. Given the architectonic nature of his imagination, which puts forth structures that have no obvious use beyond the enjoyment of their expression, perhaps it is inevitable that the drawings are objects in their own right. They embody a world that incorporates whimsy into a strong-minded application of materials, such that the structures feel nearly embedded into the depicted ground.

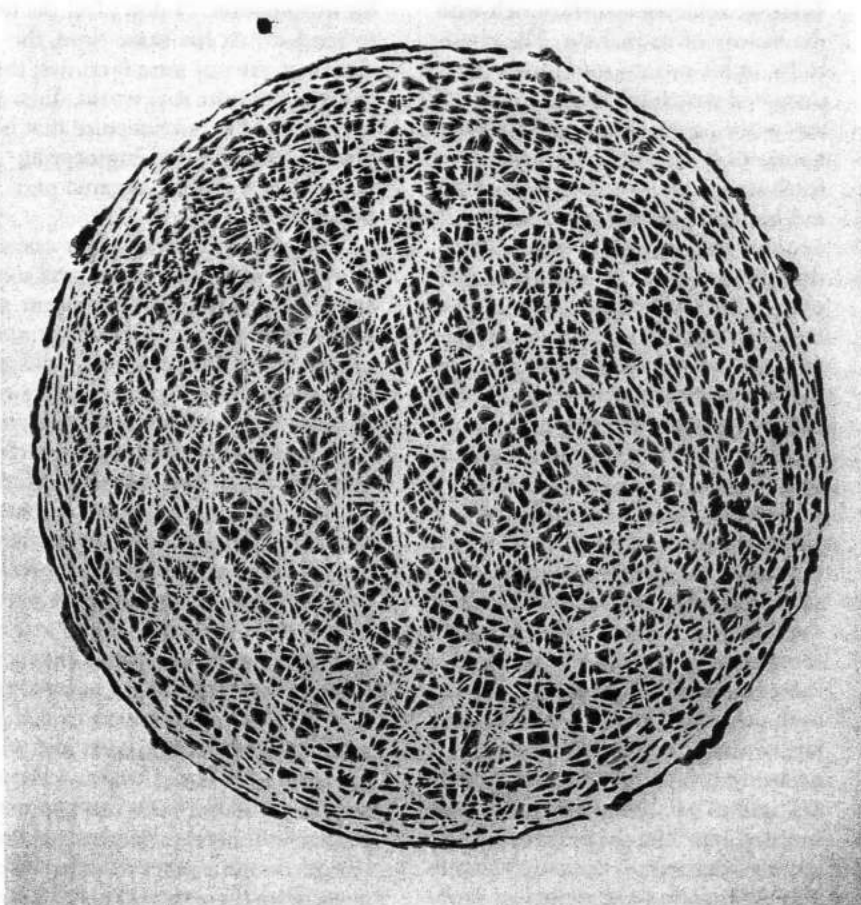
In the horizontal drawing *Harnessing the Majestic* (2002), which extends to a length of six feet, Talasnik offers a panoramic view of open, circular forms built in a kind of scaffolding; they might serve as blueprints for a stadium or the base of a roller coaster. Arrayed in three groups that file across the page, the constructions pivot and overlap each other as they present the particulars of their engineering. The artist is aware that he is in some debt to the disciplines of architecture and engineering, but "the subjects serve as a point of departure. Both architecture and engineering are rooted in problem-solving that demands universal

standards and measurement. My drawings and sculptures adhere to neither requirement." While making use of these disciplines, Talasnik remains an artist who creates out of his imagination: "I don't feel the need to render." At the same time, the drawings are not pure fantasies; they connect with the real world. Talasnik is "intrigued by architecture that is able to integrate the engineering process as a visible, organic part of design."

The abrasion of the paper surface allows an unusually varied and subtle range of tones, which can occur as hard-edged planes and soft, atmospheric blurs. These effects highlight the essentially imaginary nature of Talasnik's forms; they represent structures that are not to be built, partly because of their extravagance as forms. But it is not so much that his constructions are unable to be built, as they are figures of the imagination—visions that persuade by means of the particulars of their structure. Talasnik takes cues from architecture and engineering because they enable him to build plausible fantasies. There is an exchange between what he conceives and what he draws. He is not worried about congruencies between the two categories; indeed, the elements of his images do not square exactly, which gives them the sense that they have not been made for the purpose of construc-



Above: *Cenotaph*, 2002. Basswood, 36 in. diameter. Below: *Globe*, 1999–2000. Acrylic, 48 x 48 in.



tion. The light in the drawings is general and gentle; it does not appear to emanate from a single source, so that each component of the constructions is articulated with the same intensity. While a remarkable intricacy of shapes is achieved, there are no shadows to tell from which direction the light is coming.

The drawing *Defensive Architecture* (2001), also six feet long, presents three images: a stadium-like construction on the left; a smaller, funnel-like shape in the center; and another circular building on the right. The form on the right appears to be supported by struts that end in a horizontal railing that surrounds the building. In size and scale, the drawing is intended to convey the sublime; there is a grand composure to these blueprints for buildings, which exist only on the paper on which they are drawn. In the six small drawings for *Organic Engineering* 1–6 (2002),

The combination of the idealistic with physical presence enables art that seems reasonable even at its most extreme.

Talasnik portrays funnels, cones, and wings whose elegance stems from the fact that they are at once plausible and improbable, their shapes a language taken perhaps from real life but adapted to an imagined idiom. While the artist works mostly with graphite alone, taken as he is with the tonal strengths of black and white, he has also tried his hand at colored drawings: for example, *Globe* (1998), a marvelous red sphere drawn as a series of concentric latticings, and *Four Tower Studies* (2002), done in blue acrylic. The four studies relate closely to visionary architecture, recalling the work of Antoni Gaudí or the Watts Towers in California.

Although Talasnik spent 20 years working as a draftsman, he has now become as involved with sculpture. It is likely that he turned to sculpture as a way of realizing some of what he has imagined. He sees himself as a born-again sculptor, who at mid-career is just beginning to build objects again: "I approach the process with the same

Echo, 1998. Aluminum, 72 x 36 x .2 in.

enthusiasm I had for it as a child.” (One of his activities as a youth was the making of a roller coaster.) The analytical and intuitive intelligence that goes into the drawings is also evident in Talasnik’s sculpture. Like the drawings, the sculptures depend on open articulation of forms; the small pieces of wood, reinforced with glue, create airy shapes whose gracefulness stems in part from the transparency of structure. A good example of this method is *Wing* (2002), five and a half feet high and six inches deep. The gently curved work describes a form that is ephemerally beautiful, while the thin wooden pieces it is made of suggest vulnerability. The shadow thrown by the sculpture is as beautiful as the sculpture itself.

When the artist began building models, his efforts were designed as visionary structures intended for specific sites. He made a piece called *Observation Deck* (2000–02) and another entitled *Landing Pad* (2000–02); the former looks very much like a truncated version of Tatlin’s *Monument for the Third International*. It slowly rises at an angle that rotates upward, giving it a weight, even a monumentality, that belies its height of a foot and a half. *Landing Pad* resembles a mock-up of something from the American space program of the 1960s: a tower is built upward, protected by wood extending around it. Here, as elsewhere, the basswood used by Talasnik is mostly light tan in color; on rare occasions he will paint the wood white, as happens in *Amusements #1* and *#2*, whose spiraling structure and hemisphere, respectively, capture the eye with white wood. On one occasion, *Silver with Blueprint* (2001), the artist links a three-dimensional form with a prototype drawing. Here the thin sculpture rises resolutely as a narrow vertical, while the drawing echoes its volumetric space relative to its angular proportions.

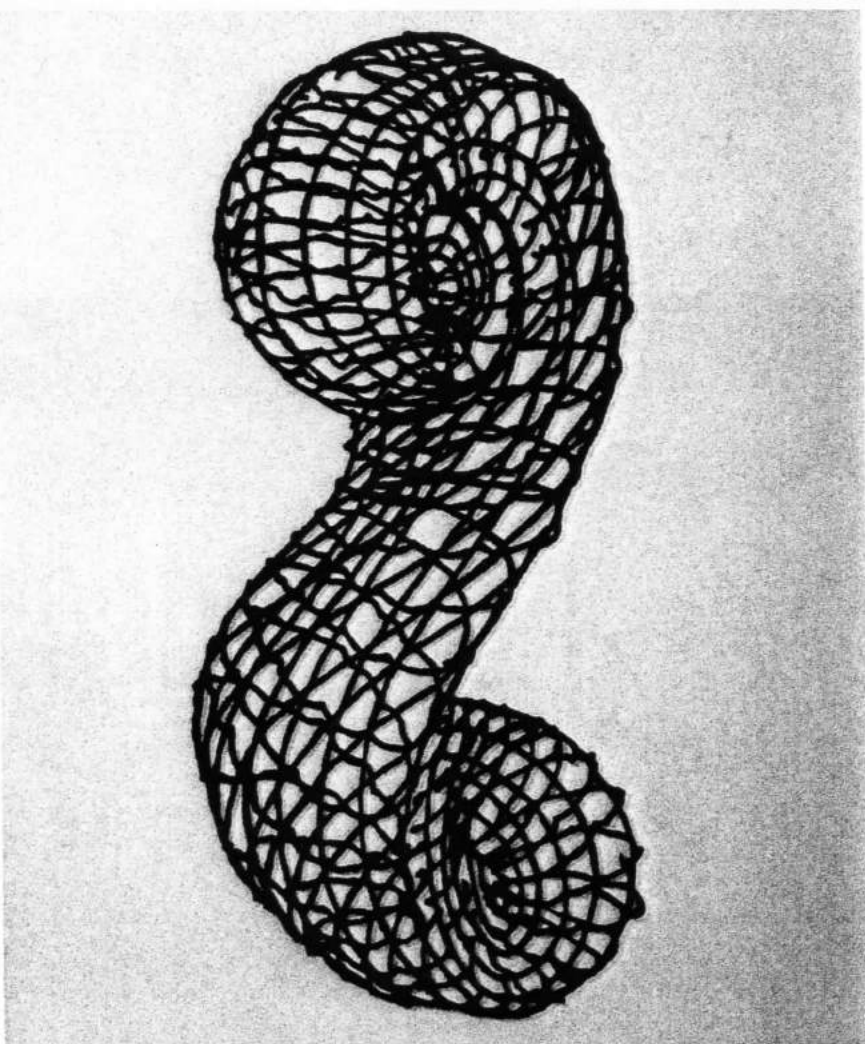
An idealism suffusing the sculptures carries them forward into the intelligent gaze and imagination of the viewer. Looking like models, the more recent pieces are, according to Talasnik, “sculptural forms unto themselves, suggesting various industrial infrastructures

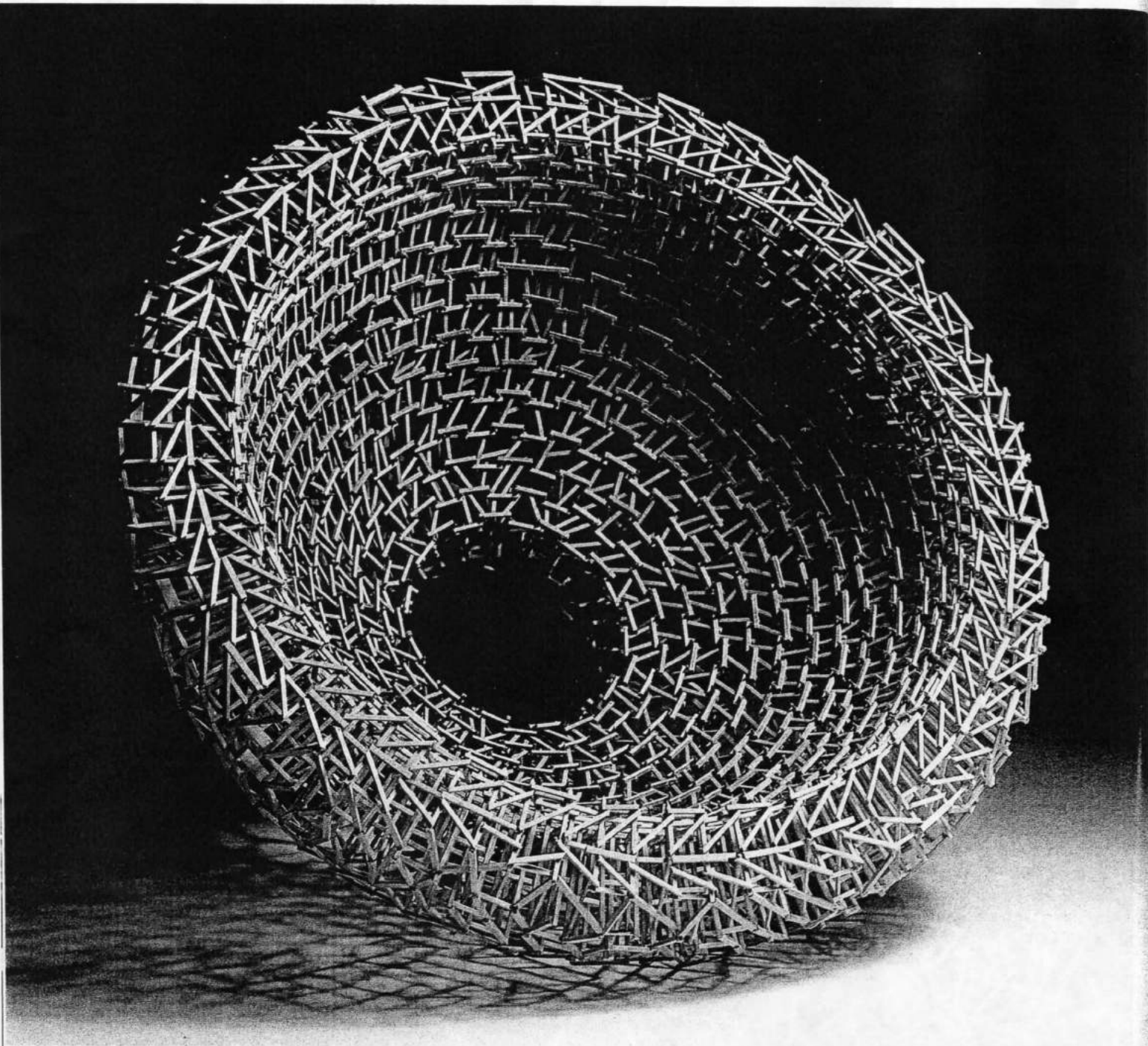
that relate to the pull of gravity.” Images of monolithic structures inspire most of the work. *Cenotaph* (2002), a perfect sphere, is divided into separate halves, echoing the acrylic drawing *Globe* created four years earlier. The meaning of the title, a monument devoted to a deceased person who has been buried somewhere else, is not necessarily illustrated by the form of the sculpture itself, although it aligns with some of the incredible forms drawn by Piranesi. *Cradle* (2001) is a moderate-sized work that undulates gently, held off the tabletop by two strut supports. It offers its interior up to the space around it, climbing a bit into the air on one side. The triangulated pieces of wood seem fragile, but in fact the model is quite sturdy.

Talasnik, for all his references to architecture and engineering, is equally involved with the sublime. He mediates his structures through the recognition of historical precedents that place him within a continuum of visionary artists whose imagination exceeded the ability of certain forms to be built. In that sense, there is little evident practicality

to his art, despite its partly rational methodology. The combination of the idealistic with a tough physical presence enables him to create art that seems reasonable even at its most extreme. This happens in both the drawings and the sculptures. In *Dome* (2001), for example, he creates a perfect domed form. It is an architectural work, but it also speaks to a sense of perfection that is part of the idealizing impulse in art. In the drawing *Summon A System* (1998), he constructs a missile-shaped form complete unto itself. There is no need for explanation, that is, for a cultural interpretation, as the work stands alone in the intricacies of its manufacture. As the title of his drawing *Harnessing the Majestic* indicates, Talasnik is interested in approaching, even capturing, the sublime through form. His impulse to create is moderated through his extremely regulated technique; the combination of the two makes for art that is, and is not, of this world.

Jonathan Goodman is a poet and art writer living in New York.





ARTIST'S NAME
TITLE OF THE WORK



D. JAMES DEE