

Peter Gourfain

American, b. 1934

Roundabout, 1974–1981

Yellow pine, terracotta

Gift of the artist, 2002.57

Born in 1934 in Chicago, Illinois, Peter Gourfain attended the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, receiving his BFA in 1956. He first emerged on the New York art scene in the 1960s. Early in his career his work was primarily minimalist in nature. Since the 1980s his work has become figurative, expressionist, personal, and socially engaged, created in a dramatic, often humorous, figurative style. Many of Gourfain's terracotta reliefs, large-scale urns, cast bronzes, woodcarvings, prints, and paintings deliver specific messages about political and social issues, often of universal importance. Considered a storyteller and chronicler of our times, Gourfain portrays the basics of the human struggle and his world contains a vivid commentary on social injustice in contemporary America.

The structure of *Roundabout* is made of yellow pine floor joists salvaged from an old factory in Philadelphia. Twenty-two feet in diameter and nine feet high, *Roundabout* is decorated with ninety-eight individual narrative reliefs. The nine ribs feature carved wooden panels alternating with clay panels inserted into hollowed out areas of the ribs. When he began the work, Gourfain intended to carve all of the figural reliefs from the wood structure. As he worked, the artist developed an allergy to wood dust that forced him to abandon his original plan and create the remaining reliefs in terracotta.

These ninety-eight reliefs feature fantastic images of figures, faces, flora, and fauna, all carved into the wood and brought to life in the terracotta reliefs. The narratives weave in both religious and art-historical subject matter. Gourfain is inspired by the narrative emphasis of Romanesque art and its expressive and symbolic qualities. *Roundabout's* varied decoration depicts friends and family, a segment of the Last Supper, portraits of artists Vincent van Gogh and Bill Traylor, author James Joyce, several Irish hunger strikers, as well as Nicaraguans celebrating their revolution and several panels dealing with the violence in El Salvador. *Roundabout*, notes art critic Lucy Lippard is “Gourfain’s masterpiece to date, a fully successful hybrid between the abstract and the figurative. It weaves form, content, social optimism and pessimism, art of the past and present into a fabric that can be ‘read’ for hours.”

The installation of Peter Gourfain’s *Roundabout* and *Fate of the Earth Doors* is supported by a grant from Dane County Cultural Affairs Commission with additional funds from the Endres Mfg. Company Foundation and the Overture Foundation; and Wisconsin Arts Board with funds from the State of Wisconsin.

Peter Gourfain
American, b. 1934
Fate of the Earth Doors, 1984–1997
Bronze, cherry wood
Carolyn T. Anderson, Frank and Roa Birch,
Eugenie Mayer Bolz, Brittingham, Madeleine Doran,
Elvehjem Museum of Art General, Alice Drews
Gladfelter Memorial, Harry and Margaret P. Glicksman,
John S. Lord, Jean McKenzie, Cyril W. Nave, F. J.
Sensenbrenner, Richard E. Stockwell, Earl O. Vits, Ruth
C. Wallerstein, and Malcolm K. and Bertha Whyte
Endowment Funds, and Art Collections Fund purchase,
2002.2a–z

For *Fate of the Earth Doors*, Gourfain began making the panels in clay in 1984, with the intention to make “a door about the earth.” Upon a suggestion from a visitor to his work space, Gourfain decided to cast the work's twenty-four panels in bronze, a medium he had not worked with much prior to that point. This piece has been cast in seven bronze editions; one edition is installed at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York. The museum's piece was completed in 1997.

The theme of the doors is man's destructive relationship with the environment, an issue of great importance to Gourfain. Various panels depict historical to contemporary ecological scenes created in the artist's distinctive style. The panels include scenes such as the demise of herds of buffalo on the western plains during the 19th century; Miniconjou Chief Big Foot at Wounded Knee; crowded Los Angeles freeways, and suburban housing developments. Critic Lucy Lippard saw this work both as an “ecological statement that marvelously intertwines a vocabulary of animals, birds, shells, fish, trees, plants” and an example of Gourfain's eclectic art-historical sources, blending Romanesque rhythms with “Ethiopian Coptic frontality and Celtic entrelac.”

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