



“When you build a railroad in the mountains, you impose steel and the machine on the natural environment—and the environment imposes itself upon the railroad. There’s a Yin and a Yang.”

These are the words of Eric Steele, whose welded steel sculptures suggest totems, skyscrapers, mountains, and more. Steele says that he’s “concerned with how life relates to the built environment,” and with the way that “emotion butts up against hard-edged structure.” He calls steel the “quintessential material of the engineered built environment, but also the most malleable and forgiving.” We see this in his work, which is both muscular and vulnerable.

Scaling his sculptures to his body, the artist welds lengths of square steel tube into vertical clusters, then attaches the construction to a flat steel base and jaggedly cuts the top of each length of tube. With a welding torch, he makes irregular openings in every face of the sculpture and never removes drips and lumps of molten metal. The result is rough-edged work that seems somehow transparent.

*Totem* (2006) is a 60-inch-high piece that suggests Northwest Coast sculpture, but also Chicago’s Sears Tower. According to Steele, the bundled steel tubes in *Totem* recall Fazlur Khan’s framed tube structural innovations that made possible the Sears Tower and other modern high rise buildings.

Tall, slim, and constructed from square tubes of differing diameter, *Totem* has a sturdy central element that joins its bottom and top. The light changes both inside and outside when a viewer walks around the sculpture. Its surface is an unfinished satiny gray, which makes the piece seem softer than it really is. In this way, the artist humanizes a hard structure.

*Huangshan Peaks* (2006) recalls the mountains in Chinese scroll paintings, also the real thing, which Steele saw on his travels. This 23-inch-high work is five separate vertical clusters of steel tube, with the smallest and slimmest at the front—and the tallest and heaviest in the rear. Each cluster has a base whose irregular outlines suggest bodies of water. Flat shapes welded to the tops of the clusters echo the bases and look like clouds.

Steele has taken great care with spacing the five units of *Huangshan Peaks* so it becomes a spacious landscape. As with *Totem*, the light changes inside and outside the steel tubes as one walks around this sculpture—and the finish softens it.

EXHIBITION: *Totem*, 2006. Welded steel tube, 60 x 21 x 14 in. 400 x 14 x 8 in. without base.