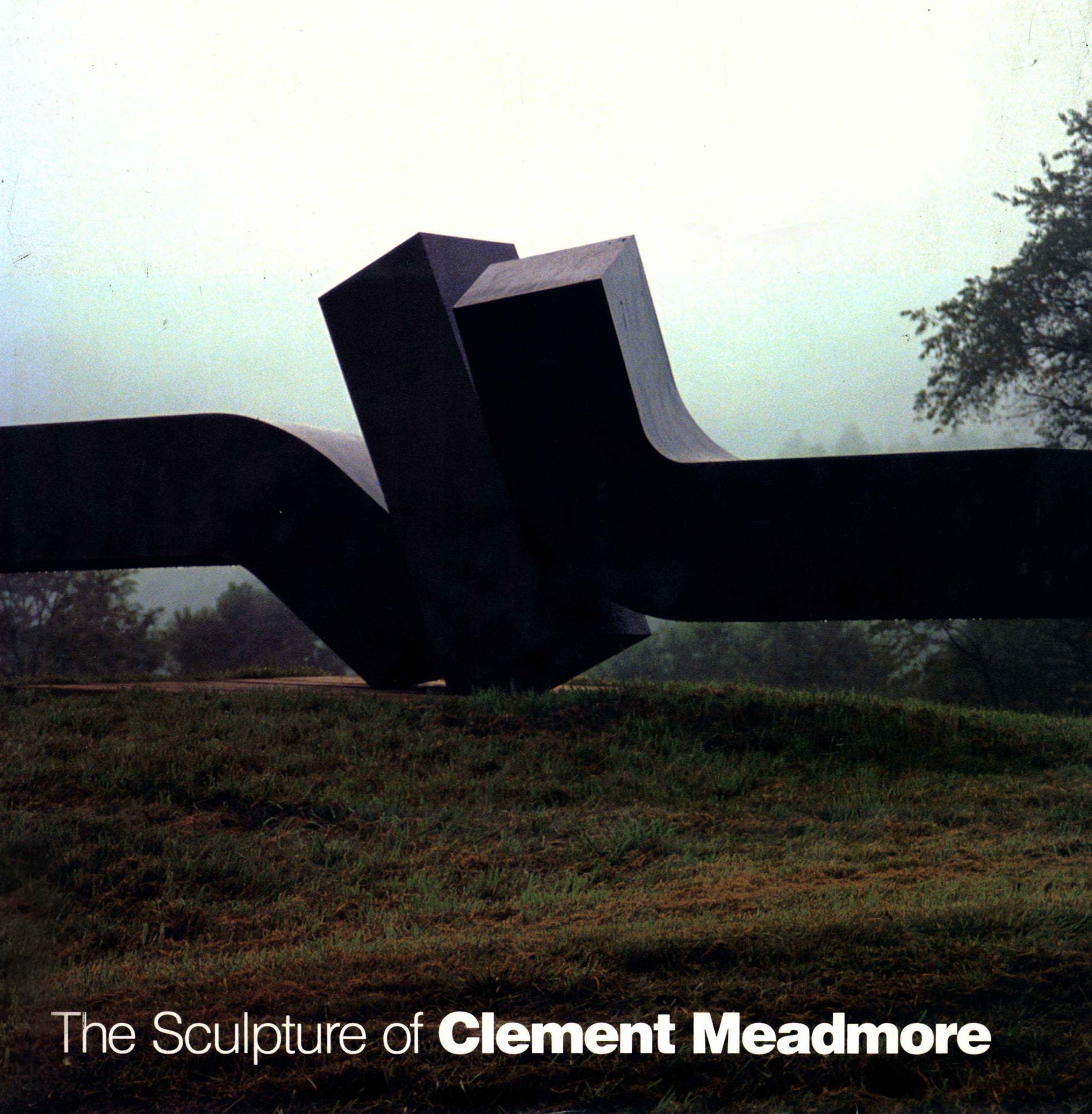

# The Sculpture of **Clement Meadmore**

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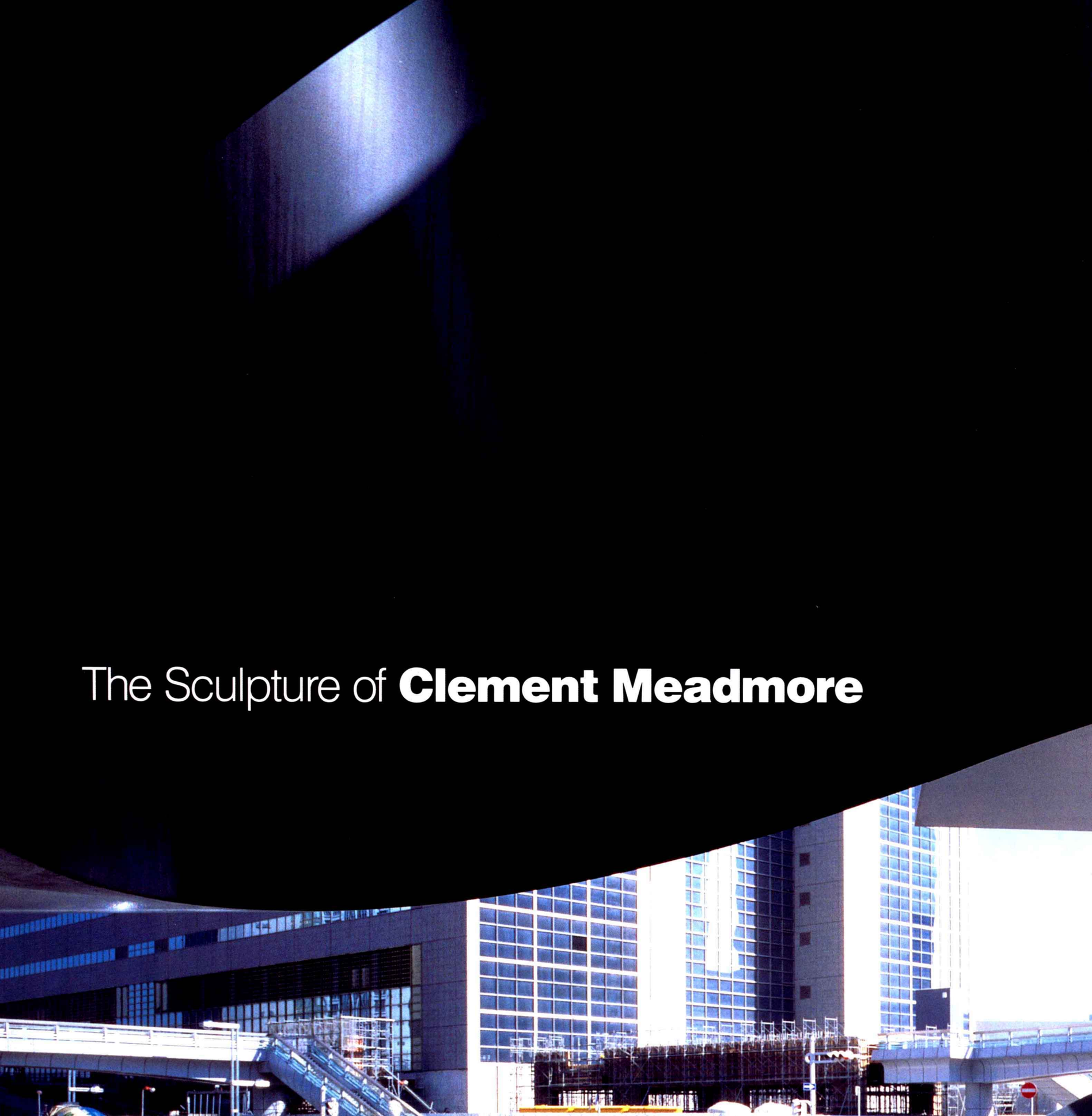

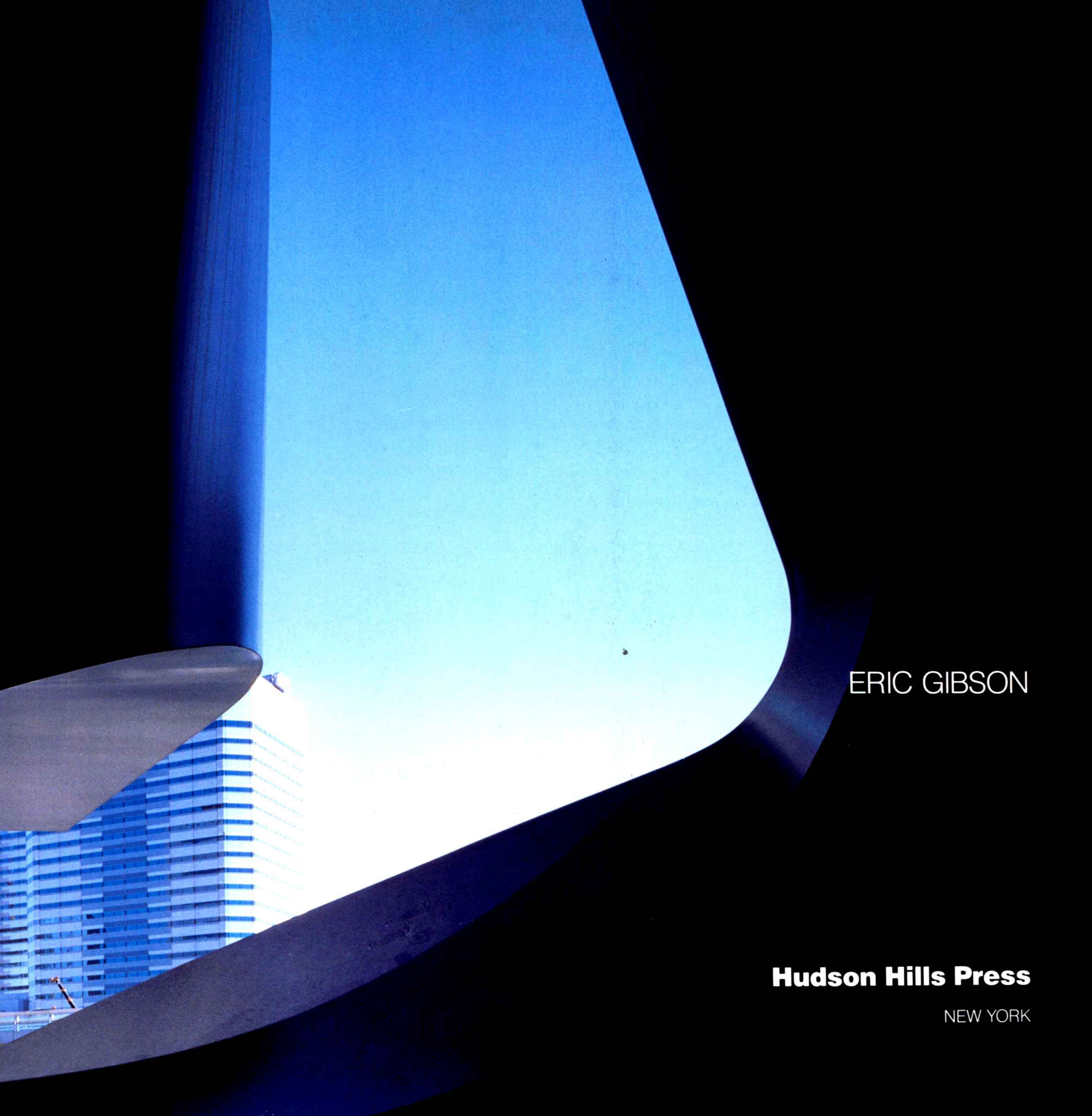

ERIC GIBSON

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# 1

In a typical sculpture by Clement Meadmore, a single, rectangular volume repeatedly twists and turns upon itself before lunging into space, as if in a mood of aspiration or exhilaration, or simply to release physical forces held in tension. The appearance of Meadmore's sculptures has been likened by one critic to "a cigarette butt or a nail puzzle," and by another to the Hellenistic Greek sculpture *Laocoön*.[1] Stylistically, Meadmore's works fuse elements of Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism. Their effect is one of fluid immediacy, as of a signature. Since Meadmore's sculptures are often very large (they are most commonly placed outdoors), this impression of effortless physical grace is simultaneously underscored and called into question.

What is less apparent—invisible, actually—but just as important, is the central paradox of their creation. Sculpture that appears spontaneously generated is instead the product of protracted labor. Meadmore makes his sculptures by combining and recombining two basic elements, a cube and a quarter circle, until a basic configuration emerges that satisfies him. He then tailors its proportions and makes any other adjustments he deems necessary.

Thus, what appears to have been brought forth in an instant gesture has in fact been arduously labored over. What is emotionally expansive is wrought from a number of starkly rigid, self-imposed constraints: the use of geometric modules; the insistence that in combination they "transcend geometry"[2] and express a larger feeling; finally, that they be true to their physical nature in being able to remain balanced of their own weight, without assistance from internal counterweights or bolts into the ground. Meadmore's is an approach that has, over a career of some forty years, yielded sculpture of uncommon force and feeling.

# 2

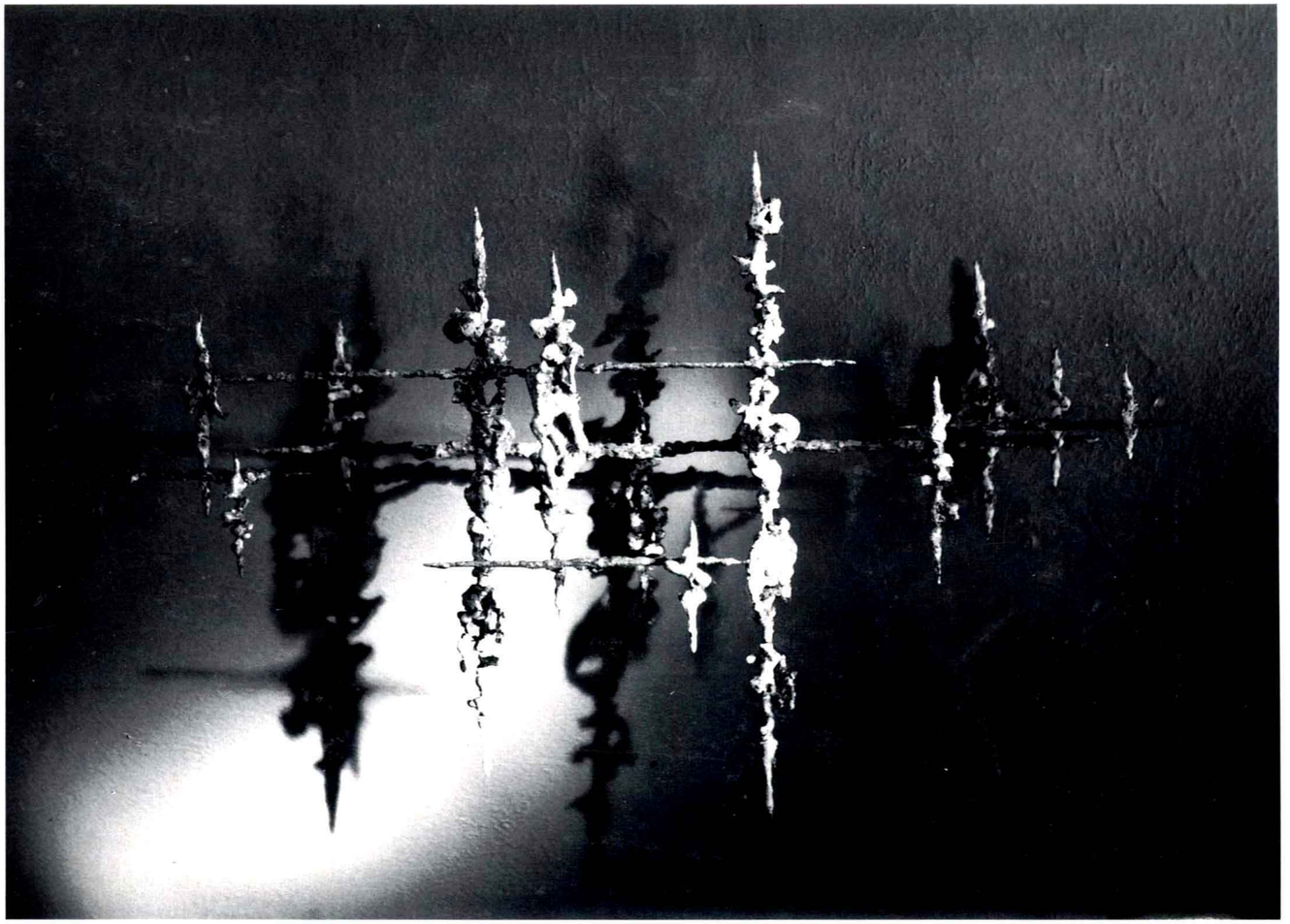
Clement Meadmore was born in Melbourne, Australia, in 1929.[3] The impulse toward art seems to have come from his mother, Mary Agnes Ludlow Meadmore, a Scotswoman who had lived in Australia from the time she was a small child. As a boy, Meadmore was strongly impressed by his mother's interest in the work of an uncle, Jesse Jewhurst Hilder (1881–1916), an Australian watercolorist in the style of Corot.[4] She also instilled an interest in ballet and, first among artists, Edgar Degas. It is tempting to see in this early exposure to Degas the seeds of Meadmore's mature work, which frequently suggests the stresses and strains of bodily motion.

Meadmore's first career choice, however, was not art but aircraft engineering. This may have come from his father, Clement Robert Webb Meadmore, who, after an early career as a vaudeville actor, had opened a shop specializing in model trains and engineering. After completing his early education, Meadmore enrolled in the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology to study engineering but soon changed to industrial design. A once-weekly class in sculpture was given as part of the program, but it focused on sculpture as three-dimensional design rather than as aesthetic expression.

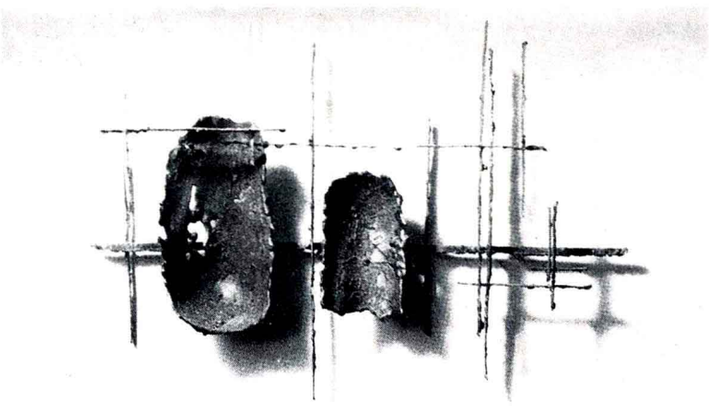
Meadmore was, in fact, already pursuing his own interest in sculpture independently. He made his first pieces—carved wooden V shapes tautly strung with wire—while completing his industrial-design studies. After graduation, he embarked on the beginner's familiar path, making sculpture in his spare time while engaged in more lucrative pursuits—in his case, those of an industrial designer—during the day. A turning point of sorts came in 1953 when, on a visit to Belgium, he saw an outdoor exhibition of modern sculpture at Middelheim Park, in Antwerp. The experience moved him to buy welding equipment on his return to Melbourne.

Prefiguring his later inclinations, Meadmore's first sculptures alternate between a rigorous geometry and a simmering expressionism. They are welded, the earliest of them conforming to the prevailing idiom of contemporary constructed sculpture. They are reliefs composed of interlocking vertical and horizontal rods of varying lengths. The rods are heavily encrusted and built up with matter. They resemble the open-work, linear sculptures of New York School sculptor Ibram Lassaw in the 1940s, but are more rigorously structured.

They give no inkling that Meadmore was an artist who would eventually favor a robust physicality in his work. All, particularly the gridded rods, are as nearly diaphanous and self-effacingly insubstantial as steel sculpture can be, as if Meadmore wished to suggest form not built up by accretion but eaten away by light. Meadmore then embarked on planar constructions in which he attempted to evoke the effect of Franz Kline's gestural, black-on-white abstract paintings using sheets of welded steel, an approach similar to that adopted a few years later by Mark di Suvero



**UNTITLED** 1956
Steel
Dimensions unknown
Private collection



**CONCLAVE** 1959
Steel
Dimensions unknown
Private collection

**UNTITLED** 1960 ▷
Steel
13½″×15″×14″
Virginia Spate, Sydney, Australia

in his large-scale sculptures of metal and timber.

Meadmore's earliest mature work follows soon after, in the mid- to late 1950s. It consists of sculptures composed of rectangular planes placed at right angles to each other. Rather than being thin sheets of steel, as the elements in such constructed sculpture historically were, each plane is thick and slablike, resembling a solid of cast bronze. In fact, each one is a hollow volume formed by welding six sheets of steel to produce a hybrid, a form that is both a volumetric plane and a planar volume. The sculpture produced by this approach departed somewhat from the established Constructivist tradition. Not only was Meadmore's new work composed of manufactured rather than found forms, but it had a greater mass and bulk than anything previously produced in this idiom. (In this it anticipates sculptures of a similar character that David Smith would begin making in 1962.)

In their details, the sculptures differ from the finely honed, pristine character of much geometric ab-