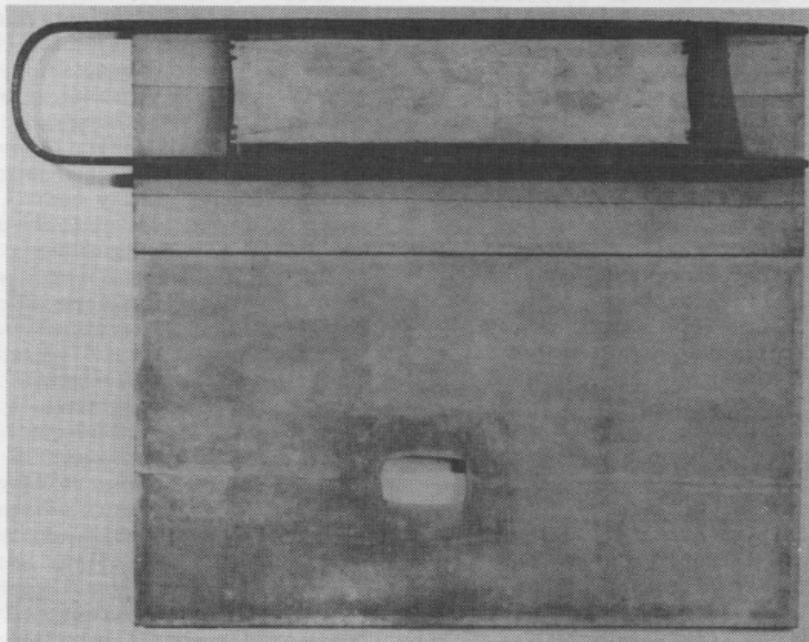


Dalton Sled, 1974



Salvatore Scarpitta's fascination with sleds began in 1974. The first appearance of these serene, primitivistic forms followed upon the period of years between 1964 and 1972 during which Scarpitta's art consisted largely of reconstructed racing cars. These vehicles were often fully operational and existed as much to be raced as to be exhibited as sculptural objects. Scarpitta's interest in automotive power reached its peak in 1974 with his creation of Lynx, a rebuilt Italian World War II armored desert reconnaissance vehicle. As if to counter its destructive implications, Scarpitta strapped the tank to the floor, sealed its 50mm cannon, and installed, on either side, Red Cross air identification awnings, each filled with a pool of water. Similarly, his first sleds, including Dalton Sled and Boom Sled, resulted from an attempt to pacify the inherent aggression and potential violence of his earlier work. The sleds' simple, archaic-looking forms are actually closely based on the steel frames of dirt track race cars; however, in their incorporation of organic materials and evidence of handicraft, they become the race cars of a castaway. Commenting on his work at the time, Scarpitta said, "I wanted a Robinson Crusoe adventure...within the four walls of my studio."<sup>1</sup>

Liberated from the repetitive circularity of the race track, the sleds open the way to a nomadic odyssey. They are distinctly northern, conveying the physical and spiritual trials of passage through an immense, empty, and silent landscape. While the viewer's journey begins

with the finished object, Scarpitta conceives of the entire process of fabrication in terms of an expedition. "In this sense," he said, "the craft is the result, not of the predetermined object but of the stalking, the tracking. I had to tail these things. Craft comes out of stalking the result."<sup>2</sup>

The sleds are made almost entirely from found materials: hockey sticks, skis, chair backs, rungs, and the stem of a discarded Christmas tree. Bound, laced, and tied together with cotton strips and thongs, then coated with resins, rubber, tar, coffee, and wax, these elements gently cede their identity to Scarpitta's new forms. In design, the sleds range from the relatively familiar form of Boom Sled to the abstract Starleara and Mirror Sled. Their peculiarities suggest finely gauged adaptations to long forgotten or, perhaps, vaguely anticipated survival needs. While clearly related to his sled sculptures of the 1970s, his newer works, such as Cot in Lock Step Sled (1988) and Mr. and Mrs. Hyde (1989), suggest the return from, rather than the outset of, a great adventure. Looking somewhat like rescue stretchers, these sleds suggest the care and recuperation needed after a long, arduous journey.

Several of the sleds are juxtaposed with, or as in Mirror Sled, actually comprised of, obstetrical robes with a hole sewn in the middle for the passage of a new-born child. Stretched like canvases and rubbed thick with pigment, the robes function simultaneously as mute testaments to human birth, as bold abstract

devices, and as landscape elements--suggesting the suffocating infinity of an arctic sky and, in their repetition, an optical hallucination of double suns. Scarpitta himself has suggested that they indicate a passage for the sleds to move through, thereby introducing a temporal dimension. Indeed, the absolute stillness of the sleds seems, strangely, to beget its opposite, absolute speed. As a metaphor for the human condition, these sculptures represent an existence that moves imperceptibly from birth to death and, perhaps, back again.

Scarpitta's sleds, both those from the 1970s and 1980s, are serving as inspiration for a younger generation of artists, including Robert Gober, Not Vital, and Saint Clair Cemin. These artists reassert the physical fact of the body and the psychological fact of intuition. Rather than seeking, as did much art of the late 1980s, to deconstruct and critique the alienating conditions of mass-media consciousness, they, like Scarpitta, have attempted to gesture towards phenomena which, though fleeting, remain irrefutably human.

Despite resonances with numerous artists' work, Scarpitta's constructions remain highly idiosyncratic. He finds the sources for much of his art not so much in the art historical matrix as in the events of his own childhood. Growing up in the 1920s in Los Angeles, Scarpitta frequented race car tracks, and his record-breaking childhood feat of sitting in a tree for 34 days can be seen as anticipating

the sense of individual endurance and isolation that was to become so much a part of the sleds. Although he studied at the Royal Academy in Rome and was briefly attracted to neo-futurist painting, the influence of traditional Italian art had a largely negative effect, compelling Scarpitta to rediscover the core of his own American experience. Both the race cars, in a Pop sensibility, and the sleds, in a spiritual vein, signify his desired return to a rugged, non-cosmopolitan, and individualistic life.

Salvatore Scarpitta was born in New York in 1919 and spent his childhood in Los Angeles. Between 1939 and 1959 he lived in Italy, attending the Royal Academy in Rome and serving as a sailor in the U.S. Navy and as interpreter for the American forces during World War II. He returned to America in 1959 after being taken on by the Leo Castelli Gallery. He currently lives and works in New York City and Baltimore, Maryland.

Lawrence Rinder

1 Quoted in Rose Slivka, "The Sleds of Scarpitta," in Craft Horizons, August 1975, p. 28.

2 Ibid., p. 26.

Works in MATRIX (all works  
Courtesy Leo Castelli  
Gallery, New York, unless  
otherwise indicated):

Dalton Sled, 1974,  
canvas, wood, resin, 6'2" x  
8'3-1/2". Collection Collins  
& Milazzo, New York.

Boom Sled, 1974, wood,  
canvas, resin, 2'1" x 8'  
(upper); canvas, resin,  
6' x 7'6" (lower).

Mirror Sled, 1976, hockey  
sticks, canvas, resin,  
pigment, 7'6" x 5'.

Starleara, 1977, oil, resin,  
coffee, wood, canvas, 5'5" x  
14'3" x 1'4".

Cot in Lock Step Sled, 1988,  
canvas, cot, wood, skis, 3'1-  
1/2" x 9'9" x 1'8-1/2".

Mr. and Mrs. Hyde, 1989,  
canvas, wood, skis, hockey  
shoe, 6'10" x 1'11" x 5"  
(left); 6'8-1/2" x 1'11-1/2"  
x 5" (right).

Selected one-person  
exhibitions:

Galleria Chiurazzi, Rome,  
Italy '49; Leo Castelli  
Gallery, NYC '59; Galerie  
Schmela, Dusseldorf, W.  
Germany '63; Galerie  
Aujourd'hui, Musee des Beaux  
Art, Brussels, Belgium '63;  
Contemporary Arts Museum,  
Houston, TX '77; Portland  
Center for the Visual Arts,  
Oregon '79; Leo Castelli  
Gallery, NYC, Twenty Year  
Cycle '82; Carpenter Center  
for the Visual Arts,  
Cambridge, MA '86.

Selected group exhibitions:

Museum of the Warsaw Ghetto,  
Tel Aviv, Israel '48; Venice  
Biennale, Italy '52; Corcoran  
Gallery of Art, Washington,  
DC, 28th Corcoran Biennial  
'63; Institute of Contem-  
porary Art, Philadelphia, PA,  
The Highway '70; Vassar  
College of Art, NY, Contem-  
porary Primitivism '76;  
Temporary Museum of Contem-  
porary Art, Los Angeles, CA,  
The Automobile & Culture  
'83; Smithsonian Institution/  
Hirshhorn Museum, Washington,  
DC, Content: A Contemporary  
Focus 1974-1984 '84; John  
Gibson Gallery, NYC, The New  
Poverty '87.

Selected bibliography about  
the artist:

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in Artnews, Feb. '59.  
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of Scarpitta," Craft Horizons  
Aug. '75.  
Kaplan, Patricia.  
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the Wild," Art in America,  
Sept./Oct. '75.  
Ratcliff, Carter. "On  
Contemporary Primitivism,"  
Artforum, Nov. '75.  
Schloss, Edith. Review  
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June 10 '75.  
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Post-Appropriation (New York:  
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