Black Sphere, 1976
Jene Highstein's sculptures have a generally spare and simple appearance, suggesting an assimilation of the Minimalist approach to sculpture that surfaced in the mid 60's and which resulted in highly reductive, immediately comprehensible configurations. Highstein's specific approach to form, however, differs significantly from that of his Minimalist contemporaries. He is not attracted to the geometric, generally rectangular and often factory-constructed forms which characterize Minimal sculpture. Rather, Highstein's propensity for simplification has resulted in irregular and essentially hand-formed mounds, spheres and semi-ovoids.

Black Sphere, 1976, currently on view in MATRIX, is one of a series of five large-scale sculptures executed by Highstein between 1976-77. Each of the works in this series is black, essentially round in form, constructed of cement supported by a wooden or metal armature and approximately six feet in height.

The shape of Black Sphere was attained by approximation, applying cement with a trowel to a spherical armature until a basically uniform surface was achieved. The result is nonetheless an extraordinarily close approximation of a sphere. One of the sustaining characteristics of this configuration is its subtle ambiguity, in that one's perception of the work's specific shape changes slightly from different positions. Highstein remarks, 'The square is an ideal form...and I don't work with ideal forms. When you look at a cube and recognize it as such, you're already aware of what the other side will be like. When you look at a curved form you're not certain of what the other side will be like...I deal with a spatial reality that can't be grasped in its totality..." (Jene Highstein, France: Musée d'art et d'industrie, 1978.)

As a result of this indeterminacy of shape, relationships external to Black Sphere tend to be drawn towards it as our curiosity moves us around the work inspecting and affirming its shape in relation to its physical context. The work's scale, therefore, appears considerably greater than its size as it does not simply draw attention towards itself but towards a heightened awareness of the architecture and space around it as well.

A salient feature of Highstein's sculpture is its blackness. The density and implied weightiness of black reinforces the physical presence of the shape and establishes a sense of compact mass that generates an awareness of one's own physical weight and mass in relation to the sculpture. Comprehending the work is an intuitive rather than deductive process—one of body empathy and movement through the space in response to the object.

Highstein is as interested in the power of the image which his works create in the viewer's mind as he is in the work's physical presence. The negation of color in his works allows little distraction from contemplating the essential nature of the form, which is so emphatically elementary it activates an image in the mind's eye that reverberates long after confrontation with the object.

Highstein's working method is evidence of his interest in the imagistic character of his work. His sculptures are essentially three-dimensional translations of finished two-dimensional drawings. The drawings take the form of dense black shapes which activate large white fields of paper. As he has done in the past, the drawing for Black Sphere accompanies the presentation of the sculpture. This sparse installation isolates the viewer's attention on a specific yet fundamental image which becomes the constant in a dialectic between two-dimensional and three-dimensional form.

The image which Highstein's work evokes is strongly totemic, tapping basic emotions within the viewer. The bold primordial character of Black Sphere reflects an element of "primitivism"—perhaps distilled and abstracted through Brancusi—and a striving for an absolute or archetypal configuration. Remarkably on various formal issues he is addressing in his works, Highstein interjects flatly, "I want to make it clear that my work addresses itself to the sphere of primitive emotions."

Born in Baltimore, Maryland in 1942, Highstein attended the University of Maryland, receiving an undergraduate degree in Aesthetic Philosophy in 1963. He subsequently attended the University of Chicago, the New York Studio School and the Royal Academy Schools London, where he received a post-graduate degree in Art. He has since taught sculpture at the School of Visual Arts in New York and has been a Visiting Lecturer at Yale University and the University of Illinois. He received grants from the National Endowment for the Arts in 1976, 1977 and 1978. Highstein is represented by the Droll-Kolbert Gallery, New York.

Selected one-person exhibitions:
Lisson Gallery, London '70;
City College Graduate Center, NYC '73; 112 Greene Street, NYC '74; Galleria Ala, Milan, Italy '74; Galerie Rencontres, Paris '75; Holly Solomon Gallery, NYC '76; Galleria Ala, Milan, Italy '76; Galleria Marilena Bonomo, Bari, Italy '77; Musee d'Art et d'industrie, Saint-Etienne, France '78; Ugo Ferranti Galleria, Rome '78; Michele Lachowsky Gallery, Brussels, Belgium '78; Millet-Vieville/Najar, Paris '78.

Selected group exhibitions:
Blackheath Park, Camden Square, London, Pavilions in the Parks '68-'69; Kunsthalle, Dusseldorf, West Germany, Between II '70; Midland Group Galleries, Nottingham, England, Visions, Projections, Proposals '70; Camden Arts Center, London, The Human Presence '70; NYC, Brooklyn Bridge Show '71; 112 Greene Street, NYC '72; Sarah Lawrence College, Bronxville, NY, In Spaces '73; Storm King Art Center, Mountainville, NY, Sculpture in the Fields '73; University of Rhode Island, Kingston, RI, Jene Highstein, Richard Nonas: Outdoor Sculpture '73; Artpark, Lewiston, NY '74; The Clocktower, NYC, Discussions/Works '74; James Yu Gallery, NYC, Sculptor's Drawings '75; Holly Solomon Gallery, NYC '75; Gallery Rencontre, Paris '75; The Fine Arts Building, NYC, Sculptor's Drawings '76; P.S. 1 (Institute for Art and Urban Resources), Long Island City, NY, Rooms '76; Hal Bromm Gallery, NYC '76; Moore College of Art, Philadelphia, PA '77; The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, NYC, Recent Acquisitions '77; Galerie J. P. Najar/G. Mollet-Vieville, Paris '77; Customs House, NYC '77; Hal Bromm Gallery, NYC, Moving '77; John Weber Gallery, NYC, Drawings for Outdoor Sculpture '77; P.S. 1, Long Island City, NY, Indoor/Outdoor Sculpture '78; Hal Bromm Gallery, NYC, Sculpture '78; Muhlenberg College, Allentown, PA '78; The Aspen Center for the Visual Arts, Aspen, CO, Drawings for Outdoor Sculpture '78; Centre Cultural du Marais, Paris, Focus '78; P.S. 1, Long Island City, NY, A Great Big Drawing Show '79.

Selected bibliography about Highstein:

9th Biennale of Paris, Musee de l'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, '76.
"Collection in Progress," Moore College of Art, Philadelphia, PA '77.
"Rooms," P.S. 1, Long Island City, NY '77.
Jene Highstein, Musee d'Art et d'Industrie, Saint-Etienne, France '77.

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