

About Francisco Gazitua

Pirque, Chile

Those who immerse themselves in the world of Francisco Gazitua's sculptures feel like they are entering a different universe. For viewers and explorers alike, the Chilean sculptor has created a lifework that takes your breath away! The monumental steel sculptures are, for now, the final stage of his lifelong search for a "Language of Sculptures"; a search that can be described as research on the path to the identity and expressiveness of materials. With his work in steel, stone, and wood, Francisco Gazitua intends to let the material speak in its primal form according to the way he works with it: "My wood comes from the forests around my granite quarry, where I live and work and recover rocks never before touched by human hands. Every piece of steel for my sculptures was modeled in the hot, red fire of the forge. I interpret the material."

Francisco Gazitua, who was born on September 29, 1944, defines his creative process as "functional design". With this term, he describes the expressiveness and style of his sculptures. When he is working with wood or metal, Gazitua follows the tradition of classic sculpture. However, he considers metal sculpture to be a very recent form of fine art which he also helped take to a new level through his work at the start of the 21st century.

The master finds themes and motives in his home country. Without, as he says, "being proverbially figurative, my sculptures tell stories about familiar things," about his home country of Chile, the history of the American continent, the beauty of Tierra del Fuego and Patagonia, the Andes, the Cordilleras. With professional enthusiasm and a childlike enjoyment of form and function, design and pictorial language, he is able to artistically exaggerate trees, horses, and ships – and, in the past, also the human form – and to develop them for his sculptures. His selections also include objects that are not readily apparent as themes for a sculpture, such as approximately 40 preserved water wheels from an irrigation system in the Larmahue region, a Chilean cultural heritage site from the pre-industrial 17th century.

Francisco Gazitua is more than just a performer; he also considers himself a facilitator. For 35 years, his life was filled by teaching. First, in 1968, he taught sculpture at the Catholic University of Chile in Santiago. He himself had studied philosophy there, in addition to his course of studies in sculpture at the faculty of arts at the University of Chile, where he also taught for four years ending in 1973. And then he took the leap to Europe. From 1978 to 1985, he was a professor at Saint Martin's School of Arts in England; from 1983 to 1985, he also taught at the City Lit School of Arts in London, and in 1984, Gazitua was a guest professor at the Royal College of Art in London. During this time, he also worked in the studios of the British metal sculptors Tim Scott, Phillip King, and Sir Anthony Caro. Gazitua founded three sculpture schools; the first, in 1980, was in Kornaria, Istria, in Croatia. There he taught stone sculpture in marble until 2003. He founded the faculty of sculpture at the Finis Terrae University in Santiago de Chile, and a workshop school also located in the Chilean capital.

Meanwhile, Gazitua has scaled back his international teaching activities – now he merely invites graduates from art academies to regular workshops at his studio. However, as an academic, he continues to seek constant contact with others in his trade – from native carvers on Easter Island to stonemasons and blacksmiths. The artist makes all his own tools. For him, interacting with other craftsmen is both natural and essential. In 2006, the organizers of the American blacksmith association ABANA were able to engage Francisco Gazitua as a demonstrator and lecturer for their conference in Seattle. In an interview Gazitua later had with the renowned Chilean art critic Jose Zalaquett after his 2006 exhibition "Tierra del Fuego – Trees Without Shade" in Santiago, the steel sculptor discussed the

details of his experiences in Seattle: “This is when I realized that craftsmen repeat a process and make a product for everyday use, while artists use the same techniques for a purpose that is not yet clear to them,” Gazitua says in retrospect.

In his presentation, he apologized to all craftsmen and tried to explain to them that “I do not have the same origins, I have different roots. I showed them my tools, and there was a Japanese craftsman – a blacksmith – who made carving tools that were fantastic compared to mine. But both types of tools will cut, both fulfill their purpose. For the blacksmiths, it was very difficult to understand that a person who has reached my level – and who is making all these pieces that require very complicated technical processes – did not come from their world with all the technical terms for various techniques and tools. The truth is that while I come from this world of blacksmiths in a certain sense, I never truly belonged there. I am not a trained craftsman.”

In 2007, the 63-year-old was a guest of the British blacksmith association BABA at their convention at the Ironbridge world cultural heritage site. Here, Francisco Gazitua was invited to contribute a piece to the Column of Friendship, a joint sculpture. To the great disappointment of blacksmiths who would have liked to create his piece with him, side-by-side at the anvil during a workshop, he had already completed his work at home due to a misunderstanding. Nevertheless, it was cause for amazement. During his presentation, Gazitua took the work of art apart into its individual pieces, spread them on the floor, and – with a mischievous grin – asked his audience to try their luck with the forged puzzle. The elite of the British blacksmith trade was unable to figure out the engineering secret until Gazitua knelt on the floor and assembled the parts quickly and easily – accompanied by understandable amazement and increasing comprehension of the Chilean master’s elaborate design. By the way, the metal relief was the only item that did not have to be welded into the 80 x 80 centimeter corten steel frame. It had an elaborate gripping mechanism: Just two strokes of the hammer, and the “functional design” was firmly seated in the column.

While it seems difficult to believe, Francisco Gazitua's metal sculptures hardly ever involve welding. Every piece is forged, has made its way through the fire, and was consummated underneath the hammer. The components of both his monumental and his smaller sculptures are connected using traditional techniques such as punching or riveting, and with elaborate plug connections that would do any engineer or designer proud.

The “Barca Volante”, a ship sculpture that was hoisted into the canyons between the skyscrapers of a new district in Toronto, Canada, in 2006, is an example of this style. A half-hour documentary film accompanies the sculpture on its journey: From its origins as a collection of glowing components under the huge air hammer in Gazitua’s workshop in Pique at the foot of the Andes; as a heavy load on the back of an aging truck (missing a rear axle) across the muddy roads through the Chilean jungle to the container terminal of Santiago de Chile; and finally, as a rising monument in Toronto, where two huge cranes (directed by Gazitua on a walkie-talkie) brought the huge 20-meter-high structure into balance between the facades of the buildings.

Francisco Gazitua is a sculptor. He works with steel, stone, and wood. Once he even climbed an iceberg in the Chilean territory in Antarctica in order to create a sculpture from the white material, the frozen water. His works have been presented in countless solo and group exhibitions in Great Britain, the Netherlands, Sweden, Canada, Mexico, and Lebanon, accompanied by numerous interviews and editorial contributions from friends, contemporaries, and peers. His modesty and affability form an impressive contrast to the opulence of his oeuvre.

For those who want to explore his entire universe, we can recommend the illustrated volume “Francisco Gazitua – Esculturas” published by Artespacio in 2003, which is now unfortunately out of print. However, the publisher has followed the sculptor to this day and a

new edition is being developed. Artespacio is also credited with the English transcript of the interview between Gazitua and Jose Zalaquett mentioned above, which can be found at www.franciscogazitua.com – definitely worth reading. The chapter in our book is almost exclusively dedicated to works in steel. We would like to thank the artist and Artespacio for their help and friendly support, which allowed us to honor the outstanding life work of Francisco Gazitua in a German publication – an honor that was long overdue.

Quote: “I come from this world of blacksmiths in a certain sense. But I never truly belonged there.”