

## Francisco Gazitua: From Chile with Love

### Sculptural Integrations about Time, Space & Memory

**John K. Grande Published in “Dialogues in Diversity”. Pari Publishing Sas ,Italy, 2005**

Born in Santiago, Chile in 1944, Francisco Gazitua is considered one of Chile's most senior and accomplished sculptors. With a succession of commissions and individual exhibitions, Francisco Gazitua has been a major voice in establishing a particularly Chilean branch of contemporary sculpture. During his 35 year teaching career Gazitua taught sculpture at the Pontifical Catholic University of Chile, the University of Chile and at St. Martin's School of Art in London, England. He was likewise a visiting professor at the Royal College of Art. He helped found a school of marble sculpture in Kornaria-Istria (then Yugoslavia) and has taught marble sculpture in Portugal as well. At present he works in Pirque near Santiago, and continues to participate in symposia and workshops worldwide. During this interview John Grande gains some insight into Chilean sculpture in general, Gazitua's sculptural influences and some recent commissions and initiatives.

**JG:** Your most recent commission for the Harbourfront area in downtown Toronto *Hamilton & Scourge* is quite unusual for the era we live in. The sculpture merges a historical theme with some quite intricate spatial and linear abstract form.

**FG:** *Hamilton & Scourge* is a big commission. The official commemoration will be this fall in Toronto. The sculpture is 17 metres long and 22 metres high. This is one commission that I actually won and it rarely happens like that. I have been working with the theme of transport and boats in particular for a while with my sculptures. Some examples include *El Barco de la Vida* (1999), *Berganton Endurance* (2000), *Jaimes Caird's Boat* (2000) and in Santiago *Esmeralda II* (2000) located in a large open plaza called the Centro Commercial Mega Center. The Toronto proposal was to work with a theme often touched on in American literature, namely river navigation. Not just one, but all aspects of navigation. So I went to Canada and studied the canoes and am now making this big flying canoe. It is like a schooner. In 19th century North America, they were designed like a canoe for shallow water. Such boats were used in the War of 1812 between the United States and Canada in Lake Ontario. This commemorative work is for a ship that actually went down near Hamilton Ontario. The project is part of a planning effort to shift the focus of downtown Toronto towards Lake Ontario, rather like the city of Chicago has done in the past. Concord Adex, the people who commissioned the piece asked for a second adjunct to the *Hamilton & Scourge* commission that will echo the first. This second work will be located on Spadina St., adjacent to Toronto's Skydome baseball stadium. The project snowballed and I was asked to also add architectural features, notably the staircase design which is all on rollers. The inner section of this staircase, interestingly, relies on balance.

**JG** And this is actually like a turn-around for a railroad line with rails?

**FG:** Yes. There will be a canopy as well. So I will ultimately be working in three or four different areas to be developed in the Front St. and Spadina Avenue parts of Toronto.

**JG:** Your Toronto project then, is amazingly big, one of the largest you have ever worked on.

**FG:** Yes. The actual stone for the project will be cut direct right here near Santiago in Chile and shipped to Canada and the steel elements are also cut forged and welded in Chile.

**JG:** So your Toronto project brings back the idea of mapping, exploration and territory. It integrates a part of North American history into a very contemporary urban context whose own history is rapidly being transformed.

**FG:** Yes. But history interpreted and realized with an imagination that is of a South American sculptor.

**JG:** South American and North American histories do have their similarities. Colonization by European explorers, whether Spanish, English, French or otherwise. The histories of exploration and colonization are similar. The explorers came, made native contacts, colonized, got sick, struggled and eventually took over the new territories. How long have had a studio up here on the mountainside overlooking the Maipu River?

**FG:** Around 15 years now. My home is located close to stone quarries. They recently discovered the mummified body of a Peruvian boy with royal blood in the mountains at Cerro El Plomo 5600 metres up in the middle of the largest glacier in the Andes mountains near here. IU was riding my horse up there. He was brought by the Incas from Peru and this is very important to us Chileans. The prince was brought from Cuzco, Peru and is proof of a religious alliance between the ancient powers in Peru and Chile. He was eventually put in a museum.

**JG:** Your sculptures maintain a cultural and geo-specific context is that you are introducing a sense of context but they do it without descending into caricature or nostalgia. Contemporary, a fusion of abstraction, history and actual sensitivity to the environmental setting. Often contemporary outdoor sculpture avoids any actual context and is reduced to a series of sudden syllables or caricatures, even references media culture and imagery. Imagery and hybridity have replaced any reference to origins and place...

**FG:** Context is very very important to Chilean sculpture and the musicians are very important. They played flutes called the Flauta rasgada, a flute with sections. Musicians were the top thinkers in Chilean society. They created very harmonious sounds.

**JG:** And you have made some large scale stone refabrications of the Chilean flute image. Will they go to a museum?

**FG:** No. They will go to the campus at the Universidad del Maule in the south of Chile.

**JG:** Some of your public stone carving commissions reminds one of ancient Inca sculptures and architectural features, even of Macchu Picchu. There are those fine linear joins in the stone. They are contemporary, for sometimes the cuts are incomplete, only reference the aesthetics of stone cut architecture without necessarily completing them. You manage to keep a balance between the stone and the carved elements, even make it sectional.

**FG:** It is again the idea that the sculptor is working with nature as an equal partner. something I learned while living for long periods in Macchu Picchu, Peru. This contrasts with the European way of going against nature. I have even done this on my property with the outdoor stone tables I have been adding to, made from the best stone in the nearby quarry.

**JG:** One gets this sense that time stood still. Do you feel you are an indigenous Chilean artist or are the international influences more important in your work?

**FG:** The influences originally was very much European, and French in particular. If you wanted to become a sculptor in Chile one place you could go to train was in Britain, so I went to England at eventually taught at St. Martin's School of Art in London.

**JG:** Yes and I believe Anthony Caro and you became good friends. Caro has written he sees poetry in your work... Working his poetry (Gazitua) may help all of us, which is the point of art.<sup>2</sup> Do you like Caro's more recent allegorical abstract, even religious work?

**FG:** Anthony and I were very much were close friends. I cut with him twenty years ago and have been sculpting in Chile ever since. Though I never forgot that I trained in London, I wanted to be South American and indigenous. There was no question... So I have to be referential in my sculpture. But cultural and natural context I am referring to is not that brief historic or cultural phase, but the whole ancient landscape. It has been cultivated and evolved in a very different way from elsewhere in the world. The channels and waterways in Chile were set in place by the Incas. And the Spanish and Arab explorers were here 8000 years ago. Arab and Inca... at its roots you will find Inca and Arab in Chilean history. So it is very difficult when people ask who you are. If you don't let yourself be influenced by the short term history of art and turn it the other way around you can study the geologically ancient landscape and the monuments here. These monuments stem from an ancient cultures some 30,000 years old. It has its own cultural and artistic history.

**JG:** So you are in a conversation with time.

**FG:** Absolutely. I will tell you something. I once discovered something about image and materiality, that if you put a silhouette next to an actual object, the image is the same. With two objects the message becomes the same. The image always changes. My experiments in wood called the *Serie Lanzadera* (1992-2002) when I apprenticed with a luthier. I made wood sculptures that were like making a cello. The sculptural

problem was the same, but the message was essentially experiential, to do with perception and form.

**JG:** These works are complex material transitions. The way some of your sculptures hold together remind one of the elemental character we find in original forms in nature. You are making sculptures that are neo-figurative but never entirely literal. Could one call this a permacultural conversation?

**FG:** Between 1985 and 1987, I worked with ideas derived from the sculpture of primitive peoples, particularly from Brazil who work with a machete. I came to discover that a particular material's character can express a form. I made sculptures where the grain went with the form.

**JG:** In our modernist tradition, we generally go against a natural form or try to contain or dominate it.

**FG:** Yes... What I discovered was that by applying any elastic or living form to sculpture, the material could play the same role that memory does, or as the message I wanted to express.

**JG:** So the idea that contemporary art can reference permanent cultural elements - the nature inherent to matter itself - rather than the ephemeral or fashionable, even potato chip - is really interesting. It links us to history - both natural and human, and it reflects some aspect of infinity, what John Ruskin would call the <sup>3</sup>wear of time<sup>2</sup>. I presume most humans are looking for some link to history, at some level in their life. I talk about recognizing this last thing - stone. I started to write about the use of horses in the South American Andes. We are completely colonized by horses. Then around the year 2,000, I started to make the *Steel Horses*. They alternated with the others.

**JG:** And you drew on various materials from heavy cable, to cut steel, to tie rods in making these large *in situ* sculptures.

**FG:** I even wanted to make one of the horses in the Inca way. So I actually installed this one in the mountains, in the upper Andes. The subject matter of this equestrian sculpture was the figure of a horse. I designed it so it could likewise function and make sounds as a wind instrument. The deepest referent for Chilean culture is a horse, a cultural horse. It is that impossible horse that all we old Chileans carry inside of us and which we will never own, regardless of how many real horses we may own or have owned. It is a horse that could only possibly be created in sculptural form. The Andes are the main referent for this horse... Beyond this, though, the deepest referent is the enigma of the Andes. The Andes mountains are an enigma <sup>3</sup>such that we may die from its absence<sup>2</sup> I believe the Chilean poet and writer Gabriel Mistral once wrote. I must say I agree with Anthony Caro that <sup>3</sup>A sculptor must be obsessive with sculpture, live sculpture.<sup>2</sup> God knows I have been obsessive and I have done that.

**JG:** At the Plaza Pedro de Valdivia in Santiago, you completed one of your largest commissions in stone with waterways and walkways. It is a central focal point in Santiago. The stone is once again cut very precisely, to interlock and fit, much like

ancient Inca architecture. The stones fit together like a natural jigsaw. The effect is very calming and reassuring. As compared to Caro, who obviously takes everything out of context, abstracts only to reinvent allegorical meaning(s), you have removed the pretense from your sculptures. After all - the public does matter.

**FG:** That was actually Caro's main point - the removal of representation and context. He would say to me: <sup>3</sup>We have to make a revolution to free sculpture up.<sup>2</sup> We started with abstract and clinical way of working and over time it became more and more figurative. That happened in Chile as well.

**JG:** ...and that was 1950s modernism - sculpture breaking through - a rejection of figuration

**FG:** When Caro would write letters to me, he would say things like, <sup>3</sup>Do you know how much I am fighting to liberate culture from figuration.<sup>2</sup> So I believe he achieved his goal. And I am grateful. In spite of doing his job, the effect is aseptic, a nothingness, academic to the worst degree. It became too clinical, a sculptural cul-de-sac so to speak and my generation came back to reality in order to survive. Some sculptors claim Caro's move to abstraction was orchestrated, even designed to remove sculpture from a social context...

**JG:** So you agree then, there has to be some connection to a public in sculpture. Your plaza Pedro de Valdivia (1999) in Santiago is like a playground in the surrounding cityscape. It reflects the landforms, the geology and the ancient architecture one finds in the Andes. At the same time you leave some of your sculptural elements open. You don't always try to sculpt everything. Not everything is modeled. The stones are allowed a voice in the overall project and speak for themselves.

**FG:** One problem with that project was the architects put a lot of concrete there. Sometimes, architects feel compelled to leave their mark. If I had my way I would remove all the concrete and leave my stones. There is also this aspect of water, effectively geometricized, channeled as ancient Inca drainage systems were.

**JG:** In a sense, you are a memory filter. You are filtering experience and recalling the effects of time and memory in your own idiosyncratic, yet accessible way. You are reconfiguring memory for the public sphere. Often there is no dialogue with a public in public commissions. They seem to have been built and conceived for the city planner, or the committee who commissioned them. The artist is often afraid of referencing their own experience because it exposes their vulnerability.

**FG:** I agree. Pablo Neruda - the great poet from Chile always referenced his own experience. He became a voice who supported his culture through words. His art has a poetic memory and I made an homage to Pablo Neruda in Holland for a recent symposium with living tree and plant elements called *La Barca de Neruda*.

**JG:** This markedly contrasts your early sculptures which were so referential.

**FG:** Yes. In the early days I would even use a model. I once made this arrangement of a woman pushing this piece of clay... The effect was abstract but completely based on

the structure of the human form. All the energy was coming from the simple fact of cause and effect. We started with abstract and clinical way of working and over time it became more and more figurative. A woman making a pot.

**JG:** But again this is a Chilean - not a European characteristic, the way the forms are interlocated, both visible and invisible.

**FG:** I haven't mentioned that I invented a school in what was then Yugoslavia for making marble sculpture at the Kornarija quarry fifteen miles from the Adriatic Sea. In 1980 the International Sculpture School "Kornarija" was founded in Marušiči. The idea arose from Toni Biloslav, The director of Obalne Galerije Piran. The school was realised in collaboration with the Local Community of Marušiči and its cultural organization "Bratstvo". In July and August 1980, I brought the first students from St. Martin's School of Art of London there and for the next five years, stayed there working with other students coming from Italy, Spain and former Yugoslavia. The school is still going on there.

**JG:** And you even made an ephemeral ice piece in Antarctica in the 1990s ...

**FG:** It is easy for us Chileans to go and work in Antarctica due to proximity. Anyways, Antarctica has a very changeable climate. It was during a particular brief period when there was no tempest that I went out to make a piece. It was mostly simply about being there and leaving a trace. So I found this snow capped thing floating along. It came to the iceberg I was on. So I left there with a transmitter and a radio. The temperature and climate changed so quick sometimes you had to work quite quickly. So what I did was to make a big sphere with a hole. It had to be re-made every day I was working on it because the weather was so fierce. The completed piece took me 11 days, and it moved around a lot. The last day when I completed it, it was taken away by the sea....