

Introduction

Tim Scott, sculptor, London June 1995

The word “sculpture” has become one of the most abused in the language. Its simple Latin origin, “cutting,” with the direct connotations of “making” and “building” that it historically acquired, has become obscured in a morass of superficial and mindless misappropriation. Any phenomenon, any object, any activity, be it the elementary fumbblings of school children or the theatrical cavortings of “performance art” can now be dignified with the word “sculpture.”

This is not the place to give an historical account of the semantic confusion. Suffice it to say that when Minimalism posed the idea that the “experience” of an object was of greater import than the object itself (an idea of Duchampian origin) and that the object could thereby be demoted to the category of a pre-designed piece of manufacture, could be conceived of as a diagram, an illustration of the all important “idea” or philosophical “concept,” the cat was out of the bag.

The battle for the establishment of an authentic, integral, modern sculptural object free of literary dominance and pictorial illusionism, that has been our history since Rodin, was inseminated with the total confusion at one stroke. We are constantly told that the avant-garde’s appropriation of “sculpture” as descriptive of the types of experience it propagates has made redundant and old fashioned the task of investing a simple conglomeration of inert material with sufficient power and understanding to transform it into an “object” of expressive uniqueness, that such effort is historically out-date and out of touch with our times.

It is refreshing and an act of re-confirmation when one encounters those brave souls, who, despite the critical clamour around them, doggedly hold to the idea that not only can we in our time further and extend the traditions of thousands of years of sculpture making, but that it is indeed a necessity if we are not to lose sight of the values and dare I say it, the morality of plastic art.

Francisco Gazitua is one such. He has sculpture in his blood. From his Iberian ancestry he no doubt has inherited the gene of making, of crafting, of building and constructing. From his Andean birthright he has learned to view plastic art as something more than the mere representation of natural form; he has inherited that deep feeling for material and its working that only cultures who live with nature and the land, rather than from them, possess.

I have spoken before of that particular problem of “colonial” culture such as are relevant to Chile, and it is a measure of the depth of Gazitua’s attempts to uncover the inner layers of what constitutes real plastic understanding in relation to place that his “Chileanness” is a major and integral part of his sensibility.

Chance or perhaps destiny, brought Gazitua together with a group of sculptors in London, including myself, who were all in one way or another searching for ways forward from the sense of "impasse" that frequently occurs along the line of artistic development, occasionally to be unblocked by a surge of clarity, often from totally unexpected sources and by unforeseen means. In the late Seventies, at St. Martin's School of Art in London, an immobilized tradition of abstract constructed sculpture, dominated by the work of Anthony Caro, and having roots in the Spanish/American lineage of Picasso, Gonzalez and Smith, was forcing on some of its participants the necessity to question and rethink of the foundations of their art. Gazitua immediately became an integral part of this effort as he too was at a crossroads in his career.

From the many arguments, discussion and teaching programs that evolved at the time in an attempt to further thinking in Sculpture's future path, some main concerns were: That of sources for sculpture, That of sculptural form consisting of a "language" which must be learned in terms of construction, grammar, syntax, etc. That of the sculptural object as being non-finite, capable of indefinite change and improvement. That of sculpture as an area of human sensibility allied to but nonetheless unique from other areas; the ways in which there is so justifying its existence. That of the role of tradition, what it means to sculptural development now and in the future.

From these and other "issues" developed attempts to rethink the nature of a sculptural structure, what it consists of, what distinguishes it from other structures in the physical world and their makeup. Gazitua's particular contribution to the research, coming as he did from outside the Caro-centered orbit, was a fresher view of body centred sculpture traditions than existed at that time in the St. Martin's fold, and also a renewed interest in other materials as a working base than the all dominant steel. Internal structural analysis of the body as a source, "investigation" as Gazitua would call it; renewed links with historical sculpture from all cultures (the body as subject); working directly from observation instead of a "one sculpture systematically generating the next" syndrome; the change from reliance on the "givenness" of a material, particularly steel with its manufactured forms; all this became dominant passions amongst the group of sculptors and students with whom Gazitua collaborated. On his return to Chile, he has retained the hard core of these concerns as central to his thinking and development.

If there is anything worse than photographs of sculpture as a means of understanding and visualizing its nature, it must be verbal descriptions of it, so I do not intend to attempt a descriptive analysis of the developments and moves that have taken place in Gazitua's work of the last ten years, developments which, in any case, are fully visible to the visitor in this exhibition. Suffice it to say that his return to his native land has stimulated and encouraged a sculptural effort that I for one would scarcely have believed possible in London days. From the large public sculptures of the mid-eighties in *Parque Forestal* (steel) and the *Puerta Del Congreso* at Valparaiso (steel and stone,) to the small scale recent variations on figure and wind instrument

themes (wood/stone/steel,) Gazitua has shown himself to be consistently challenging his own thinking and precepts with fresh insights and perceptions.

In particular, his use of laminated wood (inspired by observations of musical instrument making_ is an intensely original uncovering of the possibilities of a material, its characteristics and strengths, in the grip of a sufficiently felt sculptural motif. In fact, Gazitua's use of wood in these sculptures is not only structurally developed, but has the seeds of what all great sculpture seeks for itself, the opening up of a completely new vision of physicality through the freshly understood development of the innate properties of a material in the grasp of a highly tuned imaginative idea. So that just as, for example, the shapes of the wood parts that are assembled into the form of a violin or a cello are the consequence of their source – acoustic function combined with aesthetic refinement - so too do the parts of Gazitua's wood sculptures come together in conclusions which arise both from the demands of an intensely observed and understood visual source and from aesthetic satisfaction as a product of the particularities of the material and its working. Here the twists and turns, thickenings and planing down, changes in direction and angle, thrusts and tensions of the various boned and trued woods, acting in conjunction, stand in for physicality as sensation strained through the actual physicality of the materials and the working. I would go so far as to say (though I would be the last person to wish to impose on him any restraint in his use of stone and steel for example_ that recent developments in his work in wood are some of the most original and authentically new sculptures today.

Chilean sculpture has gained for itself, in the return of a prodigal son, a visionary of the power, strength and capacity of the sculptor's art. Francisco Gazitua is that rare individual, a man who is sure of the foundations of his thinking, and convinced of the nature of the path he must follow to realize it. The Andes have mothered much sculptural sensibility in the historic past; it is an exciting prospect that this can again become an option for the future.