

## Matter

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As an extension of my works, I transcribe a series of reflections – some clear, others obscured, which reveal the themes of my sculpture. Far from wanting to delineate or over-define the discipline of sculpture, I present these writings as a phenomenological medium, based upon my experience in the company of this subject, matter: a field that I have not yet achieved a full understanding but into which, through my practice, I have been forging my own entryway.

I come from a background that will be common to any sculptor formed between the sixties and seventies.

The literary doorway into the realm of sculpture was closed to me due to Rodin and the best works of Constantin Brancusi from the turn of the century, when these artists created sculpture independent of artistic convention. Following this new lineage, and around the same period (between 1916 and 1918) Picasso, via his paintings, opened the doorway to *collage*. This **constructive** method of creating sculpture – neither carved nor modeled – was the act of joining various objects together in order to construct a new, plastic totality. This was the beginning point for me, and a challenge myself and all other sculptors of the century had to confront.

Construction was established as the new “cannon.” It was the great alternative to Rodin,

The influence of *collage* in our epoch has been tremendous; its stature in sculptural composition was founded by Brancusi in France, Epstein and Gil in England, and continued and popularized by the contemporaries of Henry Moore. In Chile, constructive art was developed by the generation of Lily Garafulic, Samuel Roman and Marta Colvin, having finally been exposed to the proponents of *collage* such as Picasso, Julio Gonzalez, David Smith and Anthony Caro. This undercurrent, known by the sculptural nomenclature as *the constructed*, prepared the sculptural scene in the 1960's, ultimately establishing the great sculptural circuits of the previous three decades.

There have been two overwhelming revolutions in sculpture over the past century: *la talla directa*, or direct intervention into matter and *construccion*, or constructive method: the latter being one of the great contributions of Picasso, who augmented our sculptural dictionary from two words - bronze and marble - to a million: all presented forms of matter in the universe. Any media can be combined in a *collage*. This change, which arose as an evolution in the field of technique, has had profound implications on the base of sculptural language.

The carving of Brancusi and Epstein changed the practical life of sculptors – no longer are we white-aproned modelers or simple craftsmen. The constructive method definitively changed our workshops and the way we lived. We added to our collections of carving and modeling tools all of the devices created for contemporary and traditional techniques. Our studios were no longer ivory towers, nor cloistered sanctuaries. In effect, this change slowly began hammering away at our mental

delineations until we began questioning the whole system of ideas under which we worked everyday.

The majority of these structured ideas were formed in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries through the creation of the first academies, those “bounded courts” upon which the specialized critique of a fixed, inalterable sculpture is based, and is still spoken of to this day. In my opinion, this discourse is valueless with regards to the game modern sculptors are playing.

Inundated by this change, elicited by the great elaboration of the sculptural dictionary, sculptors have lost themselves in an unfamiliar and deep ocean. From the sheltered port of the human figure, carved in marble or bronze, we set sail towards unknown waters: all possible matter with no conventional manner of forming it.

In 1982, as a professor at St. Martin’s School of Art in London, I gave the following writings to my students in the wood experimentation atelier:

Let's start this report talking about wood. For most of you, this is the first time you are dealing with this material, and for some second and third year students, it will be good to look again as if for the first time. Last year I wrote some propositions for this project (they are in the office and you are welcome to read them).

I want to invite you to look and think about everyday objects made out of wood. This is my list: charcoal, chairs, plywood, marquetry, walking sticks, handles, printing blocks, mathematical instruments, spindlers, rollers, guitars, pipes, sleepers, wine barrels, fences, baskets, boats, bridges, paper, mallets, pit props, pianos, firewood, cork, toys, houses, knitting needles, cellos, violins, spoons, coffins, sculptures, banisters, etc. Just relate two objects of this previous list and we realize that we will never make the belly of a cello with twigs from a weeping willow (*Salix Babilonica*) nor a basket out of Norway spruce (*Picea Abies*).

Anyway, a healthier suggestion is to go and see our material in action (I suggest a trip to Kew Gardens). Have a walk around, trying to understand those creatures that before your visit have been standing up there for 10, 200, 300 years. If you are still interested in the business of baskets and cellos, there are several tender weeping willows at the edge of the pond (on your right from the Victoria Gate entrance), and a number of spruce half way along "Boathouse Walk".

In my experience, after half an hour of walking around, looking, touching, smelling (you can even bite a twig – that will tell you something about hardness, elasticity, etc.), and shaking a tree, you start to understand its attitude to life. It is this attitude, this way of existing and operating of the tree you are using which must be in full use in your sculpture. (As Tim Scott says, you must think how it feels to be a spruce or a willow). And why, if you happened to be born a willow, it is natural to end up as a basket. Timber doesn't come from the timber yard (it does), but better from things called trees that are a lot more than a sort of brown upright round thing (the trunk) sometimes with some green stuff on top (the leaves). Anyway, go to Kew Gardens and use a few hours of your life getting soaked in wood, like a pickle in vinegar. (It is still spring).

If you happen to be working a piece of chestnut, the one at school belongs to the variety sativa. They grow very straight, not having heavy branches to support. That is perhaps the reason that it is not a very cohesive kind of wood. It splits very easily (like trees belonging to the conifer group, which present in their way similar configuration, consisting mainly in a central arrow o shaft with little weight to support). In the end they provide an easy-to-split wood, with the exception of Taxodium Dischitum o swamp cypress – see them at the edge of the pond in Kew Gardens.

The opposite happens, for instance, with the species known as pendulae, where the trunk becomes a sort of umbrella of hanging branches. Two years ago, we had some pendula variety (Betula Pendula) that gave us a very hard time trying to split it.

As with a model, the surface is consequence of what is inside, and a consequence of a precise activity. If you have seen your chestnut in action, you might be able to take advantage of your wood, using it in the same actions it was engaged in at Kew Gardens. (I know this sounds very difficult, but you will never be able to use in the opposite way to which it was working in the woods).

I think it will be useful to include here a list of the main families of trees found in this country. You will find an asterisk\* marking the ones available at the school.

Pine family: firs, hemlocks, spruces, larch, \*cedar, \*pines, \*swamp cypress, cypress, junipers, yew, araucariaceas.

Willow family: poplars and willows.

Walnut family: common walnut, black walnut, hickory.

Birch family: \*birch, alder.

Beech family: \*beech, \*chestnut, \*oaks, notofagus.

\*Elm family.

\*Plane family.

Rose family: pear, apple, rowan, \*cherries, plum, peach.

Maple family.

Elm family.

Myrtle family: eucalyptus.

Olive family: \*ash olive tree.

In the technical side of things, all of you in the studio are doing extraordinarily well this year, and there is a lot of collaboration and learning from each other in that area.

As you can take material for granted, you can also take subject matter (the model) for granted, in a light way, as a sort of naked person, vaguely standing up, squatting or whatever in the middle of the room, with two legs, two arms, and a head with a couple of ears on each side. I have nothing but admiration for most of you, seeing the excellent work developed in the last terms, getting away from the superficial, vague views of the human body. You have got a pose of your personal choice after weeks or months of work, and some basic information work (bones, muscles, connections, action, relations, etc.) fixed in paper or clay. All this work is just the beginning. The very simple fact of trying this information in a new material for two or three months is showing the problems to be tackled this term.

You all know the difficulties wood presents. It is heavy, hard; it splits easily; it is wet, and sometimes moves as it dries. You are fighting with the grain all the time. It is difficult to fix on top of your work bench, difficult to glue, etc. There must be some kind of strong motivation in you to start a trip on such a mule.

In the near past in the work of this department, we worked around the sculpture of others sculptors. A good example of this was the lecture on his sculpture by Peter Hide: two hours of talking and two hundred slides about hundred ways of being different or better or worse than other sculptors. We are basing our work on a kind of primitive, primeval relationship with the human body. The challenge presented by it has been slowly transforming the previous stabilised approach into a battle, into war with the material, where no weapons have been left aside. So from a "carving" way of treating wood, we are now working in the way this studio is doing, a splitting, sawing, carving, carpentry, etc. We are using a range of saws, wedges, sledge hammers, planes, etc. The paradox here is that we have discovered more techniques, more about wood, just by being loyal to form found in the model than that which could have been found by a material/technique based course.

In my view, we are living distended between two poles, a pile of materials and a model. If one of them is abandoned, our sculpture dies. And our teaching will not make any sense. After a couple of crits, to some of you it seems that the model is the missing factor in the room. I advise you to spend at least half of your time in Q studio with the model. We want to avoid imposing into wood some paper forms with any transformation, imposing some steel forms into wood, like pliers, sockets, pipes, etc., some of the work being taken for a walk by the charms of the wood, imposing cliché forms (pyramids or spheres, discovered by the application of a technique or the using of a tool, bandsaw or lathe, chisel, etc.).

On the other hand, a more frequent contact with the model helps keeping the piece in a manageable scale, growing organically from one part to another, seeing in the model the wholeness to be achieved in the end by relating the little parts, etc. the uniqueness of a form is not determined by techniques or materials, but by the uniqueness of your view. All these are points to be expanded in discussion.

The model is not a magic prescription that acts like the Holy Ghost. It can actually be the most boring thing in the world if you are not careful. In my experience, everyone working with the human body ought to build up a way of looking at the model. My first advice is, don't be dogmatic and use all the ways of observing and

fixing information already discovered in the department. They are available as presents, the result of hard work of other students. Use all the models. I recommend touching, looking, talking with you model. Some of you do pose better than any model. It is very good to feel in our own bodies the action we are seeing in the model.

When I look back on this text, I realize that in 1988 I had caught a glimpse of the fundamental problem that I am still struggling with to this day.

More than just forming an image, that which I sought was to discover the existing and operating form of matter - in that case, of wood. The aim was to put to work its intrinsic, existing form into a sculpture - for which a much deeper examination of the material was necessary.

Along the same lines, I wrote a text that follows:

“I position myself in reality three-dimensionally, focusing with my eyes, thinking, evaluating the hardness of objects, with my nose almost stuck to the ground, exploring the inside of things where it’s dark. When I split stone, I see light illuminating it for the very first time. It is matter that had been enclosed for millions of years - veins of marble are ancient strata, their extension dependent upon the countless snail shells that amassed to create it. “

I continue this series of transcriptions with an extract from a publication in *La Tercera*, a Chilean newspaper from July 1990:

“...they speak of the softness and tactility of sandy ground, they speak of the brutal weight of the hills, they speak of the total elasticity of *las quilas* (Chilean bamboo) from the south, they speak of the vigorous risings of the acacia against gravity, they speak of being on the ground with ants, of being below, sleeping with the cicadas in the underworld of matter, they speak with elegance of the sea bass, passing through, cutting and slipping between the water, its sliding has been working for sculptors not in the water, but wood and stone. The smoothness of the sandy ground is the same expression as the surface of a stone, polished to a shine.

The weight of the hills is the same as the weight of sculpture.”

From my exhibition “Sculptures from the Body” in 1989, I rescued the following fragment that relates the social and personal value of matter:

“Trying to explain this exhibition I realize that its assembly is an act of acceptance of matter: the subject “of the second order” to which I have consecrated my life.

My being instinctively balances towards the tangible, and I have found myself confronted by the rationalism that holds my beloved trade, sculpture, on the brink of a probable disappearance.

The earth is covered with a stratum of cement: our contact with the landscape is mediated by machines and ideas. Our composition, our bodies are the tripod upon which sits a head, to view the material world as if through a television screen.”

Sculptors dedicate their lives to a craft considered to be of “the second order” by our civilization. There is nothing as socially despised as working with one’s hands.

The body, that which feels and works with matter, is stuff punished by puritans, over-worshipped by bodybuilders, disheartened by pornography, battlefields for the overweight, immense problems for hypochondriacs, sources of sadness for the aging, fields to perforate for urban primitives, and material standardized by clothing factories.

I believe that the body is endowed with a rightful dignity. I know that it is charged with spirit to the lowest depths of its bones and not by a soul that tries to superimpose itself upon an ethical marionette.

One must pull matter out of Purgatory, where it has been relegated by rationalism, if we want sculpture to exist with legitimacy.

“It’s what is in a kiss and isn’t the lip,  
That which breaks the voice but is not the chest.”  
“Intima,” Desolation (Gabriela Mistral)

As in literature the good writer, upon speaking of one thing, always speaks of another, and as such the sculptor communicates through an obliqueness of matter. Good literature speaks of a subterranean world, and from it extracts deep realities of great strength - a world you cannot directly speak of because it becomes nothing upon trying to enunciate it.

The problem is that among sculptors, in addition to trying to express this sculptural content, stone arrives at our workshops charged with the same spiritual force as human beings. We could say with Gabriela Mistral that “it’s what is in the stone that isn’t the stone,” but that which charges the stone, the charge of its internal light, in its inherent crystals.

Opposing our transforming human strength, which comes out of our hands and tools, is another equally potent force - the self-assembling, ordering energy of stone, something not unlike blood that circulates inside of it, that swells from its interior.

I have felt, carving in my workshop, that creating sculpture generates an exchange similar to that of the undertow and the wave – where the same mass of water, in movement, struggles with an opposing current - moving it inside and out at the same time. Human strength against the open sea of matter, the strength of the shore against the rising tides.

I believe, therefore that we have something in common, hidden within me and hidden within matter.

Before I begin to work, any act of creation that comes from my spirituality must first make a pact upon the deepest law of matter in order to exist with legitimacy.

It was Matta, in a conversation in his Edwardes Road house in London, who told me: "In Chile there are two people who can help you with sculpture: Pablo Neruda and especially Gabriela Mistral for her special way of entering into materiality."

I feel that Mistral set within me a familiarity and recognition with that which exists - perhaps a Spanish-style realism and cosmological viewpoint that had been lost through centuries of official educational systems, but survived in South American culture. I believe that Chilean women were those who conserved this world through the centuries and passed it on to me with fresh and almost animal naturalness in my childhood. Forty years later, Gabriela Mistral once again passed it to me through her poetry.

If a great part of my life as a sculptor has been dedicated to connecting my work with the sculptors of the past, then the same has occurred with my life outside the workshop. What I read and what I think, the four years of philosophy I leave archived at the end of my adolescence - I have dedicated all of this time, to linking my sculpture to the cultural systems that the times have offered me. Structuralism was useless to me, as was dialectic materialism, socialist realism and magic realism, I took perhaps something of phenomenology and existentialism remained valuable.

With Mistral, I felt for the first time that I was connecting my life with a useful tradition in my sculpture, a material philosophy that wasn't a "peasant faith," but a poetic logic.

I didn't go into the past in order to find a non-existent perennial philosophy, but I tried to reconstitute something that stood poorly assembled in the culture machine of the past, something that persists, now a days in impeding sculptors from working in peace.

My sculpture had to find its way towards the future from a distant past where I found a solid ground to stand.

In the end, I found myself with the oldest traditions of the Mediterranean and I connected the bread with the olive tree and the poetry of Homer.

In the "The Pruning Sonnets" of Lagar, there exists a message directed personally at sculptors that work in wood. All that I wanted to say about how to make sculpture is there. If one should seek to make a credo for the carver, it would be unnecessary, as it is already written:

*The Pruning of the Almond Tree*  
I prune the slight almond tree  
Against the sky

With a pure and unblemished hand  
As the beloved cheek is felt

With a risen expression of yearning.

As I create the true verse  
In which I leave running my living blood  
I place my heart where it receives the immeasurable blood of spring

My chest gives the almond tree its beat  
And the trunk hears, in its hidden marrow  
My heart, like a deep chisel.

All who have loved me have lost me  
And it is my chest, in the almond tree sustained  
The only thing I give to the world

All matter was there before the arrival of human beings and it was, in its solitude, a dust seeking form, the “enamored dust” of Quevedo.

Soul, to whom only God a prison has been,  
Veins that humor such fire have given,  
Marrow gloriously burned within:  
His body shall it flee, but not his care;  
Ashes remain, though feeling preserved;  
Dust they will be, yet dust enamored still.

(From “Enduring love, beyond death” by Francisco de Quevedo.)

Reading this verse, I understood that sculptors, upon imprinting new forms into matter, were only adding themselves to its flow, the flow of its powerful consciousness. “The trunk hears, in its hidden marrow, my heart like a deep chisel.”

I am reminded of what I wrote in my agenda on Wednesday, the 31<sup>st</sup> of October in 1988, and although it isn’t directly connected to what I’ve previously written, I understand that in some way it flows along the same current.

“If one day I am able to achieve the union of the spiritual with the language of my hands, I will be on a new level, moving my hands, putting my fingers in matter, which is an act of contemplation. I will be touching and transforming the skin of God, my father.”

Seven years later, I wrote in the *Antartida*:

“I am over the water. In her floats the blue iceberg in which I am working. It is the support of my sculpture (the restless support of my sculpture,) but the ice is the support of my feet and the ice is the support of my sculptural image. This is what I continue carving, half of which stays in the sculpture while the other half returns to being its original water. This freshwater ice goes falling to the water of the ocean like the shavings of an iceberg. The snow and the hail, white water and hard water, are falling, always, over my face and my sculpture. When I leave, in the night, the ice that falls from the sky remakes my sculpture. The clouds as well are water, water that gives the landscape a tone of grey waters and waters moving themselves through the



sky. And here goes this sculpture of water, finally given back to the waters of Drake's ocean."

I conclude with Gabriela Mistral: "After so many years when I become a handful of silent dust, play with me, with the soil of my heart and my bones." (Motives of Clay.)