

Becoming Familiar with Stones

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Most of us are not intimidated if someone presents us with a cup, for example. It feels good in the hand, or it doesn't; it pleases the eye and flatters the lip, or it gets left on the shelf. But if someone presents us with several tons of stone, unfamiliar in shape, we may panic. What am I supposed to make of that?

Introductions may not answer such questions, but they may help us relax.

Ideally, one might sit for an hour with Louise and Satoshi Saito in the spare, well-lit interior of their house overlooking the village of Way's Mills in the Eastern Townships of Québec, nibbling *hors d'œuvres* that look like something between a fish and a flower and sipping a little white wine, even sake. And then one might take a stroll round the garden to watch the sun go down over the Appalachian hills—becoming casually acquainted with the various stone figures that have taken up residence there, seemingly without effort. These are the accomplished moments of civilized life, when it is hard to remember the labour, the moments of panic, the crises that even the sculptor must deal with—especially the permanent crisis of art.

To transform a fleeting impression into sempiternal, three dimensional form. To deal with flawed stone. To make earth articulate.

And then to explain.

We do not feel compelled to ask of the tea cup what it means. But when someone feels compelled to go and chip stone in a cold winter's dawn, to ask workmen to cut granite into delicate unconventional shapes that try all their skills and that then require a piano-mover to put in a room or an industrial crane to park on the grass, we feel compelled to say what do you mean—or what does that mean?

And what can I say in reply, I who have had to move from handling a cup to trying to get a handle on Olympic installations, blocks of the Canadian Shield or the Appalachian Mountains transported across the Pacific to Nagano?

Clearly, Satoshi Saito works with a freedom from the obviously representational that we associate with Abstract Art. Yet his is a kind of classic sculpture in the round. Classic in its extraordinary feel for stone, and in the continual surprise offered by the interplay of line and volume, of solid mass and hollow space, of thrust and repose, changing from angle to angle. Within themselves and in relation to each other the weights and balances of the figures shift as we walk around. They stir or stretch, rest or levitate or depend. Yet these do not appear to be purely geo-

metrical or analytical transformations, so-called "abstract" harmonies and dissonances, but to be somehow related to things—to hands, tools, the movement of bodies in space—and to become assemblies and figurations of granite that might surprise the mountains themselves.

Which reminds me of Satoshi's own remarks.

During the official ceremony dedicating his "Alba" to the Olympic site, he spoke of the possibility that the sculpture might speak to the moment of concentrated attention in the athlete poised to begin a race. But, invoking a rather larger time-frame, he expressed the hope that the sculpture, if good, would begin to grow, developing an accord with the surrounding mountains over the next thousand years.

This is earth-time.

I have heard Satoshi talk of the quarries, in Québec or Nova Scotia, where he has gone to look for clay, and of others in the region where he has gone to look for granite—even a number of small, abandoned quarries—they are beautiful! Oh, if he should surprise us all and become rich, he would buy one of those. There you can see the movements of the earth, the formation of minerals, the strata of sand or clay, of schist or granite—the lattices and galleries of the earth's crust—exposed. And the strangely lively debris abandoned in the short career of some quarryman.

Of course, whatever his fascination with stone, its grain, its colour, its heft, what Satoshi sent to Nagano was not just rocks, but a sculpture. "Art," as he remarks, "is not something nature, even mountains, can normally do."

Researching "Alba" as a possible title for his piece, Satoshi was fascinated to discover a Greek word, *agalma*, that could mean, simultaneously a kind of splendour or glory, a sculpture, a gift or offering to delight the gods. Here, I think, is a key.

Art, I assume, is in good part Eros sublimed. Why else does it seduce us? But if, like the lyre of Orpheus, it can make the very stones dance and the gods pause in their wars and amours, that is, integrate "nature" and "spirit," how expansive that eros may be! To approach such an integral delight might well lead a normally sensible and thrifty person to the strange economy of art.

Of course, you may argue, such expansive ideas don't always help explain the particulars, the individual creations of this *agalmatopoi*s, Mr. Saito.

Myself, I have no trouble with two large slabs of granite, side by side, one slightly convex on one side, the other slightly con-

cave on both sides, both however bending like two sails in the wind. It's been titled "Stone Wind." And it is striking for both its slightly "off" symmetry and for the fact it makes this heavy pair seem fluid as the wind.

Or, consider the couple, entitled "Allure." Is it not sensuous and also uplifting? As if two solid square columns began to open up and walk around. There is something of the appeal of arches in European cathedrals, and something of the appeal of contemporary models in a fashion parade, except this montage of limbs—of legs and trunk and groin—is slightly less bony, slightly more *bombé*. Perhaps one might see it as a three-dimensional, and heroic, analogue of Marcel Duchamp's "Nude Descending a Staircase." *C'est spirituel*.

Other pieces are less obvious. I've said, "Satoshi, why is this piece on top of that piece, on top of something else?" And he spoke of the shape of a leaf as it falls to the ground. The dynamic lightness of a leaf, in the gravity of granite!

So too he has spoken of the way a tree bends in the wind and, momentarily, registers that heavy, almost invisible, passing caress.

The gait, the manner of walking, of moving, quick or languorous, massive or febrile, nonchalant or superb, that is what the word "allure" points to centrally, and it is often precisely this cast, this signature of an event, of a branch swaying, a woman walking, a whole landscape turning in seasonal change, that registers in the imagination of the sculptor asking to be made articulate in stone. Even more subtly, it is the pivotal moment when the bird hangs between landing and continuing its flight, when the fish is suspended over the stone in a stream and the impulse to leap. Saito would render these tensions of the mind in time in their bodily form.

The desire to incorporate time into a presumably static, spatial expression, may be similar to the Cubist's desire to organize different spatial views within a single perspective. But there seems a further concern to evoke in these figures the pathos of time—simultaneously a kind of splendour, as bodies assert and transform themselves, and a kind of desolation, as they recognize the abiding principle of entropy. The sculpture, when accomplished, manifests the serenity of some masterful equipoise between the two. It reassures—and is always amazing. However contemporary Saito's work, its forms would seem to intuit something perennial, something immemorial.

I think of an enigmatic piece called "*Au bord du printemps*." It

puzzled me when I saw it in his garden. A horizontal piece of pink granite, shaped, one might suggest, like the case for an elongated lute, sits on a similarly pink, but smaller wedge-shaped piece, which then sits on a darker, smaller and roughly cut, circular piece. Lately, I've been looking at photos of two versions of the sculpture: one where it sits on a grassy rise, standing out against the shadow of a mass of foliage that rises behind it, the other where it sits in a sandy rectangle in front of the glass of an office building, some bamboos in the foreground and also in the background, inside, behind the glass. And in both cases it looks compelling and familiar. Why? I rummage through my images—the Inuit figure of a man, made of flat stones; something to do with Kyoto temple gardens or pictures of *torii*; even the stone figures of Easter Island? And I give up. I don't know why it should look so good, both in a pastoral and in an urban setting, why it should be so obviously modern and yet call up such primitive associations. It may have something to do with spring in winter. But does that really help?

As with the cup, my body has apparently come to an understanding: this is not something to be relegated to the shelf. My body has decided, and in something less than a thousand years, this is a quiet delight.

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