

VITAL MATTER: THE SCULPTURE OF DOUCET SAITO

Louise Doucet Saito and Satoshi Saito were eminent Canadian potters when in the early 1980s their persistent efforts to extend the range of their expression led them from working in clay to working with stone and metal. Their first large-scale granite sculpture was commissioned in 1984 by Pat and Norman Webster. In 1992 they returned to Japan, where 16 years earlier they had exhibited as potters – but this time with an exhibit devoted exclusively to works in granite. The exhibition was a success, and over the next decade commissions in Japan and in Canada would establish Doucet Saito as celebrated and distinguished sculptors.

Bridge Ascending is considered a most unusual piece. Also commissioned by the Websters, the work was created by Doucet Saito in 2003 from the bent and twisted girders of a local covered bridge that had burned down. It hangs on 12-foot posts like a raft of steel floating in the air, an unexpected monument on the slope beside the driveway to the Webster house.

Alba, located on the site of the 1998 Nagano Winter Olympics, is probably the most publicised sculpture produced by the artists. *Allure*, commissioned by a Japanese firm for a plaza in Osaka, was distinguished in 2000 by the city's 'Award for Best Urban Environmental Amenity.'

Doucet Saito's art is neither figurative nor a celebration of pure geometry. Their work is dynamic and expressive – partly due to its formal interplay of volumes, textures, lines – but largely because of its constant allusion to shapes and forces in the natural world.

On their return to Canada from Japan in the early 1960s, Doucet and Saito settled on a farm overlooking the village of Way's Mills in the Eastern Townships of Québec. A region of lakes, fields, forests, rivers and rolling hills – it is located just north of Vermont's Green Mountains and close to the edge of New Hampshire's White Mountains. Their house is wooded on one side and has a wide open field on the other, where their neighbours' cattle graze and from which one overlooks the nearby village, far hills and a great expanse of sky. A small river tumbles down the rocks across from their entry and continues through the village. They plant their own vegetable garden in the spring, harvest apples in the fall, keep chickens for fresh eggs, and of course shovel snow all winter. Birds, deer and foxes pass through with the seasons and, hopefully, leave the hens alone. It is on their farm that they have their workshops, raised three children and now entertain their grandchildren. This is the environment which constantly feeds their art. And so, we may see in their work a familiar shape or gesture, a force that works the stone or bronze to suggest tension or relaxation, restraint or freedom, violence or calm – the lightness of a bird, the weight of the snow that breaks branches or brings down electrical power lines, the quiet intimacy of a greeting.

As a result, the viewer may be surprised by the way two heavy slabs of granite bend like sails in the wind, explaining their piece *Stone Wind* – a relatively abstract sculpture that might suggest the opening of a flower or a hand offering a cup is pushed toward the latter reading by its title, *Ganymède*. In either case, shape and gesture are familiar. In the same way, the cuts and curved surfaces of *Allure* make a pair of 12 foot blocks of granite appear to move through the plaza like stately fashion models.

Haru, which had its grand opening in the Nihonbashi Mitsui Tower in central Tokyo just last year, consists of two granite figures that surge 14 feet into the air like two giant wings. The sculptural effects and symbolic motifs that Saito worked to realize in the piece – for example, his sense of a continuous *élan vital* running through the strongly traditional Japanese culture from Edo to present-day Tokyo – would require a mini-essay. Though seemingly simple, it is a complex work. The way it towers above the viewer may well suggest a powerful *élan*. From certain angles, however, the same pair of granite figures may suggest an intimate human encounter. Basically, the forms are tall slightly truncated triangles, but given the way they bulge two thirds of the way up, it suggests shoulders, arms or breasts. The sides and edges are rounded, the main surfaces are not straight or flat and, as they stand in the atrium, curve inward toward one another to suggest a mutual awareness, perhaps an intimate exchange.

The sense of presence the viewer may feel in *Haru* is also on offer with their recent piece *Marebito*, installed by the New Art Centre opposite the main house at Roche Court in Wiltshire last fall. It is basically a large slab of granite. By being slit two thirds of the way up the middle, very delicately for such mass, and obliquely from front to back, it suddenly appears to be a standing or striding figure, with one 'leg' slightly in advance of the other. Again, the whole broad surface is slightly rounded, swelling or sinking or, at the top of the slit on one side, protruding provocatively in a smooth flared curve. Altogether, one may see why Saito, in looking for a title, thought of the wandering divinities of Japanese folklore which would occasionally appear to examine humanity. If well received they might bestow gifts on their hosts.

Of course, many sculptures do not betray even such minimal human likeness, and may sometimes be quite enigmatic. Once I asked Saito what motivated the relationship between two stones – one just resting on another and partly extending well beyond it in the air. He replied by asking me to think of how a bird brakes or tuffs its wings as it lands. He may have also mentioned a falling leaf just about to touch the earth. I think the piece is called *Entre la pierre et l'air*. But, a leaf, a bird, and maybe half a ton of granite?

The juxtapositions, the gentle modulations or rude breaking-up of surfaces suggest energies at work within the stone or bronze, effects that seem informed as much by tactile as by visual memories – the thrust of a gale force wind, the gravity of a peony on its stem, the force of someone's rage. We may recognize a certain stance, a certain gesture or mood, perhaps hinted at in a title. *La Brunante*, a thin or diminishing stone on top, a larger stone underneath: the darkening of evening; *Alba*, the inexorable welling up of the light, dawn; *Stone Wind*; or *Winter Lays the Egg of Spring!* Everything that stirs suggests a presence.

Some of these effects may be less noticeable in the works exhibited at Canada House, since these are relatively small pieces, often being explorations of forms to be cut or cast later on a grander scale. *The Boat of Re*, for example, is a small version of a projected figure intended to stand in a pool. Here the water is replaced by a polished slab of black stone (interestingly, in one photograph of the piece the flash of the photographer's camera caused the black to be reflected dramatically in the highly polished bronze, integrating, as it were, the 'boat' and the 'water'. That gratuitous extra dimension will probably have vanished in the exhibit).

Pieces like *Marodo*, *Souï-le-vent* and *Swish* bear a family resemblance to works such as *Allure*. On a smaller scale, however, they retain an effective combination of relatively simple overall form and the capacity to evoke powerful and graceful movement. *L'Oiseau de nuit*, striking for its elegantly simple overall shape by virtue of a few curves and deft incisions, evokes the opposite of movement: it is a witty, perhaps endearing, image of contained energy at rest. Some works are more complicated, or roughly cut up, as evidenced by *Thunderbird Speaks* and *Sweet Fusion*. Neither is exactly serene – both suggest powerful energies, whether martial and aggressive or sensuous and constrained.

In sum, the Canada House exhibit should serve to convey to viewers something of the range of the sculpture of Doucet Saito and also, I hope, the idea that it appeals to us not only as being aesthetically satisfying but in some sense 'alive.'

Inspired by their recent visits to Stonehenge and some of England's cathedrals, as well as to the ruins of the ancient Khmer in Cambodia, the sculptors may well explore quite new directions in the future. The result should be only more clearly a vital matter.

D G Jones, 2006