

“Sculpture-Making: The Facets” and “Land, space, form”

from “Michel Basbous, an essay in ten parts”, co-written by Arie Amaya Akkermans and Gregory Buchakjian

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Sculpture-Making: The Facets

Nature

In his account of the history of sculpture, Basbous praises Egyptian sculpture as in “complete osmosis with nature and the environment in which it took shape.” “These sculptures were completed as part of a religious task and duty, rendering the artist at work moved by love and adoration, and an aesthetic of purpose and spiritual finality. Those artists didn’t have to worry over society’s opinion, as their work would never be exhibited in the modern sense, but transported directly into a pyramid or a temple.”¹

Texture

“Man has sculpted and painted since prehistoric times, before having invented writing. This increases the value and importance of this form and medium of expression,” Basbous writes². On the piazza besides the artist’s home, sculptures deploy their shapes, volumes and textures. Here is a list (to be completed) of materials out of which he produced poignant artworks.

Stone: Marble, Granite, Limestone, Basalt

Wood: Terebinth (*pistacia palaestina*) wood, Cedar (*cedrus libani*) wood, Olive wood

Building material: Plaster, Fibre cement (Eternit), Concrete, Reinforced concrete

Metal: Iron, Bronze, Oxidized bronze, Copper, Enameled copper, Aluminum, Aluminum sheet, Steel tube

Synthetic

Polyester

Glass

¹ Basbous, n.d., p. 3.

² Ibid., p. 1.

In addition to these, wax should be added. Indeed, in his autobiography, the artist recalls how his father, who was a priest, painter and calligrapher, “used to produce candles (...) pouring melted wax into hollowed-out canes. That was how [I] learned from him how to make molds, and, experimenting with this technique I thus began to develop my taste and sensibility for art.”³

Wistfully recollecting, the artist writes: “At nine years old, I used to shape wooden sticks or stones that had a vague resemblance to people, animals and trees. I was doing abstract art without knowing it. Everybody used to mock and say: “What does this look like? It’s awful!””⁴

Playing with figures and abstract shapes, slender erections and massive constructions, he produced an impressive body of works. The protean diversity of these works, though, preclude the viewer from recognizing a holed and systematic Basbous style – as against the case, say, of a Guiragossian or a Saliba Douaihy. That polymorphous-ness noted, Basbous did have a certain subtle and dimly recognizable touch. And this touch is based on and by a journey through textures. Experts on the subject are always eager to explain the change that occurred after Basbous mastered the use of mechanized tools. (On site, they will show the difference between the various techniques and media with which he so prodigally experimented.) The experimentation is hailed as a veritable tipping point. Indeed, looking-on, it is evident that Michel Basbous and his artistic generation played a pivotal role in the founding and incitement of the betimes internecine tongs or harrowing harmonies of modernity in sculpture – avers Maroun Hakim⁵.

The artist, then:

“I saw myself in the early fifties, climbing this hill, between the Madfoun bridge and Rachana, and I said to myself: little Rachana would be a big Rachana; I wanted this small place to withhold and encompass the universe, as with any lover towards his beloved; I saw myself with her, Rachana, Rachana...”

And more pressingly to his art, Basbous again:

“I think that abstract art has never ceased to exist in ourselves, much like the way our abstract ideas cohabit with our concrete ideas. Traditionally, the artist has been prisoner of two criteria imposed by themselves or by the public: first, empathic resemblance with what is real and alive, and then: the memory of ancient masterpieces we are always tempted to assimilate.”

Shape

The journey starts from rough material. Let it be stone, wood, metal or cement. It can be plain; it can be dotted, traversed by veins or other accidents.

³ Basbous, 1986, p. 10.

⁴ Sabbagh, c. 1961, pp. 50-53.

⁵ Zgheib, 1981, pp. 48-51.

The artist writes, “Verticality is a very ancient symbol to me. My father is a priest and I was so sad seeing the chandeliers getting consumed. It was unconsciously for me the start of the notion of verticality.”⁶

And a critic describes how: “A ladder stands up against a monument. Astride a step, Michel polishes geometric patterns. Each element is considered as an entity before being placed into its context. This latter, in turn, is remodeled to integrate the shapes that form the whole in the most harmonious way. The hammer knock becomes more precise from week to week, the scissor more expert. It’s a new world for Michel and his large scale research is leading to an almost accomplished art.”⁷

Then come the sculptor’s tools, hitting, digging into the surface. It goes from smooth to striated, and vice versa: “smooth space is constantly being translated, traversed into a striated space; striated space is constantly being reversed, returned to a smooth space.”⁸

Basbous continues, detailing an archetype of his working process:

“One of these drawings serves often as a base from which commence one or many sculpted works. It is not one single sketch, but dozens that precedes modeling. Meanwhile, the piece evolves by itself, as we work to reach something very different from what was initially expected. Veins of wood or stone guide and inspire the equilibrium of the sculpted mass.”⁹

To boot, Basbous drew prolifically during his artistic career, but he never exhibited his drawings. He used to look at his drawings and say “These are cute things... Aren’t they?”¹⁰

Betimes elsewhere: “I do neither drawings nor models. I work directly the wax and send it to the foundry.”

Texture

Each action, repetitive or unique, violent or delicate, not only transforms the original material into an artwork, it injects energy and symbolism:

“Whereas the striated forms organize a matter, the smooth materials signal forces and serve as symptoms for them. It is an intensive rather than extensive space, one of distances, not of measures and properties. Intense *Spatium* instead of *Extensio*. A Body without Organs instead of an organism and organization. Perception in it is based on symptoms and evaluations rather than measures and properties. That is why smooth space is occupied by intensities, wind and noise, forces, and sonorous and tactile qualities, as in the desert, steppe, or ice. The

⁶ Arbid, 1979.

⁷ Vigny, 1967, pp. 53-55.

⁸ Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p. 474.

⁹ Sabbagh, op. cit., pp. 50-53.

¹⁰ Abi Daher, 1983.

creaking of ice and the song of the sands. Striated space, on the contrary, is canopied by the sky as measure and by the measurable visual qualities deriving from it.”¹¹

¹¹ Deleuze and Guattari, *op. cit.*, p. 479.

Land, space, form

The photographic archive in Rachana contains one specific picture showing Michel Basbous holding something that resembles a geometric bas-relief. It is actually a scheme for the Rachana master plan. The artist applied his ideas of ideal city to his own village, at a lower, more humane scale. The model is an imbrication of organic constructions that merge within and with the landscape. The complete project was never completed, while the artist managed to build the home of his brother Alfred as well as his experimental inhabitable sculpture. Initially called “La fonderie” (the foundry), the inhabitable structure is a construction without any vertical or horizontal lines, or right angles that rule over building practice and theory since antiquity.

“La fonderie” includes also waste material including a car window. Perhaps the most surprising part is the chimney: it is made out the fuel tank of an Israeli Phantom fighter that fell to the sea. This relatively unknown intervention raises the question of Basbous’s relation with politics and history, while his art developed into an anti-narrative poetic discourse. The only other example we could find that related Basbous to war or history was a set of pictures shot at Beirut International Airport. These pictures depict the remains of a De Haviland Comet airliner belonging to Middle East Airlines. This was one out of the 13 civilian airplanes destroyed during a raid executed by the Israeli army against Beirut Airport on December 28, 1968. The presence of this set in the hands of Basbous may be due to their potential in terms of aesthetic quality. The artist may have considered bringing some calcined fragments and making sculptures out of these. It is nonetheless hard to imagine that the man couldn’t have been emotionally sensitive to the dramatic event that plagued his country.

“La fonderie” looks as if it emerged from a fairy tale. That may well be. But it didn’t arrive from or by accident. This architecture came after a road trip that led Michel Basbous to Northern Syria. There, in the outskirts of Aleppo, lay villages composed of corbelled domed earth houses. These vernacular architectures are in continuity with construction methods that go back to the Neolithic¹². Two contact sheets in the Rachana archive show the following sequence: Michel Basbous in his workshop, Michel Basbous holding a sculpture, views of rural domed houses in Syria, photos of the construction of “La fonderie”. The link is not arbitrary: it is underlined by the artist. What makes “La fonderie” a piece of modern sculpture and / or architecture is notably its links to the land and to a living tradition.

Throughout his life, Michel Basbous traveled the world, and wherever he went, accumulated images of sights and sites. Some of these seem to acquire a particular importance in his eyes: The American immensity, the minaret of the Samarra mosque, the Iwan of the palace at Ctesiphon. The art of Basbous is anchored. Anchored in the past and the present, anchored in history and modernity, anchored in nature and in human civilization. He is sensitive to the

¹² Mecca and Dipasquale, 2009, p. 34.

art of China, where he seems to recognize himself. He is impressed in Russia, by “cathedrals and icons crafted with all mastery one can imagine. I was also stroke little houses made of wood. These things marked a harmony in their relation to the Russian natural landscape.”¹³

The sensitivity of Michel Basbous towards these natural and cultural references place him in a rich history of modern art. A history of practitioners who withdrew themselves from the bustling city – the evident core of modernity – in search for roots, shapes and light. It is not in Paris, but in Provence, facing the Montagne Sainte Victoire, that Cezanne painted his most remarkable paintings. It is not in New York but in Marfa, a remote village of Texas, that lies the legacy of Donald Judd and Minimalism. This relation to land is also what explains the success and the popularity of Michel Basbous and the Rachana project. Bringing – not imposing – modernity from the countryside to the city.

“Michel Basbous. A man of the earth and of the roving seasons. A man of sun and wind, and of storms, betimes. Yes, a man of the earth, with all that that implies about spontaneous impulse. And what is impulse? Nothing but an irresistible ascent towards the heights. Verticality, as the only way of (be)holding oneself; to counteract the white-waters of loud and vain and cloying, hedgehopping people.”¹⁴

¹³ MB cited in “Hadîth Michel Basbous an al fan” (Michel Basbous in conversation on art), *Al Telegraph*, 1957 (precise date unknown).

¹⁴ Arbid, 1979.

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