

The theme of freedom
by Carlo Federico Teodoro,
in : *Tristan Cassamajor - Sculptures and painted drawings*, pp 37-49
2005

Ritornero con la stessa forma

Come un creatore persistente.

La mia esistenza é

Andare e ritornare sempre

Con la luce nella mano

I will come back with this form

Like a persistent creator

My reason for being is

To go and to return always

With the light in my hands

“Man dreams of being as free as a bird in flight”.

The theme of freedom is universal and one that is common to artist of all persuasions. In its loftiness, this recurrent affirmation announces and supports a truth that is very difficult to contest. Even taken to a ridiculous length, words cannot adequately convey this thought. They give the appearance of a little sophist game. If in fact art is the transposition into words, sounds or images of an emotion, a feeling or an immaterial intuition, it indeed has no true borders or limitations from any perspective authority. From the pueblos of Arizona to the monasteries of Tibet, from the savannah lands of the Masai to the frigid lands of the Inuit, the need to communicate and the tension to transmit are a constant that overturns the conventional concepts of closeness versus distance, joining distant cultures. While exalting some, this singular light grants others their identity, autonomy and independence. For yet others it is the form - the texture of the colored sands, harmoniously displayed on native soil, by the Navajo wind-talkers to the accompaniment of mantras - that orients their understanding of art. The sole and urgent goal of all such communication is to imbue with sensibility, that which is the essence of the human spirit.

Because the need for this communication is indispensable to humanity, the creative impulse is neither limited, nor tied to a particular craft. Its expression is guaranteed and defended to the fullest, from any suppression of its circulation and freedom. It is this freedom, therefore, to fly

high in the sky: a freedom that Tristan Cassamajor, refers to in a moving metaphor that bears witness and gives impetus to his artistic expression.

Born as he was to an island culture, as an adult, he came to perceive the similarities between his childhood island home and the western coast of Africa, where indeed his country's remote cultural roots lay. However, he came to recognize that those roots go even deeper, into a common human psyche.

His first formative years were spent at a religious school of French-Canadian origin. His next steps took him to North America, headed specifically for New York, so often referred to as the quintessential "melting pot". Taking a step backward from the scientific studies which he had begun to pursue, he was forced away from the technical background that his family expected him to follow, toward his artistic destiny. But the educational milieu for developing this part of himself did not satisfy him. Sculpture had begun to move him and he felt the need to explore other horizons, to go farther afield, but at the same time to establish points of reference for his artistic development. He was fascinated, as a young man by the sculpture of Calder, from the circus to the light iron sculptures that revolve in the wind.

Cassamajor nurtured his admiration for David Smith whose imposing masses of worked iron display a determined gravity; but marble and stone beckoned him, towards Europe and, therefore, obviously to Italy. The jump this time was enormous. It would change the course of his life – from Carrara, to the feet of the Apuane, where the air of Michelangelo could be inhaled. Bernini was not far away. Moore and Cardenas could be encountered over morning coffee.

Having already completed four years of college, Cassamajor now practically started over from the beginning, attending the Academy of Fine Arts in Carrara. He obtained his diploma and began his sculptural experience in earnest. Now living in Belgium, immersed within the Walloon culture of the Flemish, this is his new country, but he cannot forget Italy where he returns frequently.

In the meantime he has shown his work in Europe and the U.S.A and African influences begin to be apparent in his work as he expresses more of his innate abilities. Restless, curious, sensitive to the newer and varied stimuli, always ready to rediscover his game, Cassamajor now lives a reflective moment. He has come full circle – one of his signal experiences – embracing three continents, not only at the geographic level, but also achieving an assimilation of the aesthetics of disparate and different continents. Stylistically mature, he glances backward, traveling again over intense events, which have been formative to these twenty-five years of his career. He also looks at the present and how these experiences will shape his future. Issues such as the passing of time, experiences lived, the accumulation of job experience, the many faces that crowd his memory, have all contributed in decisive measure to making the fundamentals of the artist. He must be approached in order to be understood and eventually will explain the reasons, the shapes and the contents through his work.

This artist settles down when circumstances render it possible, he draws near to his work as in a human relationship, not a close professional one, and bypassing the formalisms of ritual and the positive expressions of appreciation, he creates. This artist is one sculptor who can be a silent witness in his approach to his subject - seeing with his hands, caressing the roughness, simply to take a more intimate knowledge of his medium, observing with gesture the various movements pertaining to a sensory order, which are inaccessible to the profane. It is here that he meets his work - where they meet and interact - energy and passion, quiet meditation and doubt, given and technical wisdom, certitude and uncertainties. They all participate, even

when at the periphery of his consciousness, in bridging that extraordinary and mysterious distance that exists between the intellectual intuition and the visible image.

His work means to express itself, with good reason, next to the true ganglion of the artistic invention: it creates itself, that is, it is destined to be. While it is becoming, it transforms itself from stage to stage, from being ignored and disappearing quickly, like something superfluous, to reaching the eyes and then the memory. Obviously I have had much occasion to be present with Cassamajor on the job and, more than once, to discuss art, above all. Even if his rhetorical question is always dangerously in ambush, I persist, trying to describe his work in one moving evocative sequence.

But Tristan is in front of the immovable, silent stone, concentrated as if in a speechless dialogue with that anonymous and indifferent mass that can be a forehead, seemingly oblivious to all else.

A flash of intuition that has to do with an argument of the renaissance, reminds him that, within that block, already exists, the entire work and it is time for him to extract it. Enough. Perhaps still some small sign, a last look, a gesture that seems a caress, and suddenly it is, as unexpectedly it all explodes. The energetic physical crash begins. Here it seems like violence; the climate begins to soar, the movements are made known to you, dust rises, fragments fly, the wounds to the body of the subject increase. Nevertheless... nevertheless form, from the outside! Nothing happens here that is not sensate. While Tristan grants a pause, I watch the stone that, just in that recovered moment of silence, reveals more value than an entire university course. Here, under my very eyes, is born the shapeless but obvious trace of the image that is emerging from the depths of his mind.

From this vantage point, from that matter of inert appearance, the hands of the man are modeling and disciplining - what will tomorrow be revealed. It is not a case or contents, in order to evoke poetry, in order to run after inspiration or beauty. When Tristan gloves the chisel, the chisel becomes an extension of his hand. At that moment many issues are dissolved, surmounted. That filiform space, and the light like Etruscan shadows, imposing like Polynesian totems, in iron or stone, rough or polished - the sculptures of Cassamajor, have one characteristic that links them, without exception: their sacred aura.

Since his formative years, the horizons of reference of this artist - he reminds us – have been in the West. It is therefore necessary to be aware of his idea of the sacred in art. Western culture, thanks to an unopposed Christian, catholic prevalence, conventionally espouses the concept of realistic iconic representation - loaded with symbolic meaning. Exactly opposed to this, are the rigidly non-iconic garnishments, observed by other (non-Christian) communities in the United States, in Europe and elsewhere, that categorically forbid any type of representation of the divine subject in particular, and all sacred objects generally. The language of Cassamajor juxtaposes these two seemingly incompatible conceptions, offering one perspective median deriving from the African cultural inheritance which this Sculptor has retained, not in an explicit way, but through an aesthetic code. The artist is aware that the primitive word is not a hypothesis of executive crudeness or a short concept for representing the figure or image, but an iconographic patrimony that reveals itself in the archetype. This archetype exists and has deep and universal meaning, independent of any figurative realism, recognized through comparison and the canons of elegance and classic beauty.

Filiform, or monumental, the figures of Cassamajor allude to an unnatural dimension, where the dynamic relationship between space and light come to assume a determinant value that contains, even surpasses, the immediate perceptive levels of the objects, taking the viewer to a

second level of perception, through its focal points and the angles of the system of lighting which are unique to each piece. Space and light: these two elements serve as guides to the invention, both real ones. Nevertheless when one is deprived of tangible physicality, the work becomes perfect, like a fascinating metaphor of one essential sacred object, purified from any decorative gaudiness, but carrier of an enormous potential energy to encompass human qualities. Light enters and exits the sculpture of Cassamajor. It designs shadows that simultaneously furnish definition and create uncertainty and restlessness. Here, is this the true one? To Cassamajor, in a sculptural object, it is not sufficient to modify the space presented to you, he also tries to go further, inside, to the invisible: removing the parts of the body from the form, alluding with that, probably, to the presence of a divine force that fascinates and controls all.

Or he places as full and impending evidence, his massive shapes that seem to know of distant, exotic worlds. These shapes are themselves still mysterious and disowned. Nevertheless his figures are without a doubt human, while possessing neither their history nor appearance. Are they symbols therefore? Are they at the same time ancient and modern? Perhaps they remind of the places and times in which mankind was born? Are they cult instruments? Do they belong to some magical ritual? Or is it something else? Perhaps they are poetry, servants to iron and stone, standing ready to sing an ode to mankind and to him?

First embracing the world, Tristan Cassamajor was born 18 November 1956, in Port au Prince. He passed the first thirteen years of his life growing in an extended family which included a grandmother, a mother, one younger sister, five uncles and two cousins. He has little memory of having seen his parents together, as they were divorced when he was still quite little. His father, a dentist, would have appreciated having his son follow in his footsteps. But that was not to be. Rather, Tristan owes a profound legacy to his grandfather. One of the early influences in his life, his grandfather was a well-educated person who held a prestigious position as a government employee at the time: he worked in the Ministry of Taxation. He was versed in Latin and French.

In his typical eclectic style, Tristan considers it noteworthy that his first education as having actually been provided by his mother. It is she who, above all, has indirectly contributed to the formation of his character as it is today as an adult; she, has influenced his choice of studies and his propensity for an artistic career. It was his father's intention to make him a professional in a technical domain.

In Port au Prince he attended the first six years of school in the St. Martial College which was managed by French-Canadians. After middle school, he emigrated to the USA. His mother had by then already emigrated to New York. In the United States, he attended Newtown High School in New York, following for four years, a course of scientific study and thus satisfying the explicit desires of the father. After graduation from high school, he enrolled in Queens College of the City University of New York. He then found himself enrolled for another four years in what was intended to be a continuing study of sciences in addition to foreign languages. However, he still nurtured a deep desire to study sculpture. So before he became fully immersed in his scientific studies he decided to change faculties and moved his major course of study to Art. At that time he discovered an interest in sculpture, as the technical aspect of handicraft. He saw it as a language of communication through the medium of shape inserted into space.

Since in the United States, it is first necessary to do preparatory work before entering into an artistic course of study, Tristan began to study design. Then followed practical training with color; as this is also a necessary pre-requirement in pursuing such studies. However, he began

to feel dissatisfied with the depth and breadth of that scholastic system. He felt that his teachers were distant from his world and that they operated in a dimension that was probably unattainable by him. He perceived the urgency to investigate various artistic relationships in an intellectually more rewarding manner. He decided to come to Italy and to enroll himself in the Academy of Fine Arts of Carrara.

There is a curious incident in his biography of which Tristan still has a vivid memory. It is set in a gallery in Soho, New York, which he had gone to visit. The exhibition there had been dedicated to fourteen sculptors of Pietra Santa. He was, at that point, "in the dark". He had never known an artist nor even attended an exhibition. The gallery owner told him that, if he wanted to introduce himself to the living world of sculpture, that it was imperative that he go to Italy and, in particular, he should find his way to Carrara, where real sculptors could be found on its streets. So in 1980 he made the big jump: Europe, Italy, Carrara, the Academy of Fine Arts and then, a diploma in 1984. For the first time he had succeeded in finding a place where he and his work would be at home, thanks to the sculptor friends (e.g. Bernacchi) who were his many neighbors.

Next, he succeeded in entering the laboratory of Nicoli where, in that same period, a number of other sculptors such as - Ipousteguy, Moore, and Cardenas - were working. What inspired good fortune! In the same year a chance request allowed him to participate in the Symposium of Carrara and the premier Symposium of Fanano. His work began to become known and appreciated, and to secure a place in the world of sculpture. In fact, later on, he was to receive one of the most important prizes for sculpture in Belgium, the "Van Bureen"; in the same period, he also fashioned what has become a monumental sculpture for the "University Cattolique de Louvain" in Brussels.

Two years after this, he decided to move to study SGF in the Torano locality in Italy. Here he became attracted to a vibrant group of young sculptors and secured apprenticeship to a blacksmith, becoming his disciple and learning from this skillful master the older techniques, important to iron-work. After six years of hard work at the side of the blacksmith of Torano, he moved to work with another blacksmith, called Lucifero, with whom he worked for four years in order to better learn the use of the material.

In Carrara he found the finest and most varied examples of sculpture, in terms of cultural contribution, taste and artistic expression. He could choose to do work similar to one of the examples he saw, or to take stock of their grandeur in order to form his own personality, refining his point of view and becoming richer. At the moment in which his sculpture begins the practical part of its formation... there is gesture, it is a crash-encounter with matter, it is the physical aspect. For four years he has insisted in pursuing modeling from life. He has learned the techniques of plaster, preparing his hands and brain to meet the marble, the iron, the stone... and very soon he succeeds in acquiring perfect competence in handicraft - the powder of the laboratory and hard work are essential aspects of his trade. "If you get confused with the proportions, if you make mistakes in the cut of a plan or badly calculate the incidence of the light then there is nothing more to be done; the work is compromised or, often, cannot be saved, one must therefore exercise a steely control. The technique must be - like in the use of the musical instruments - much practiced and manageable, so much so that it seems almost a superfluous accessory". And it is not easy to reach such levels of proficiency.

Tristan recognizes with total and admirable frankness that the opportunity to study in Carrara - one of the four centers which he had considered as possibilities - New York, together with Florence, Rome and Reggio Calabria - was optimal because it was just the place to be able to perfect his preparation and, at the same time, to allow him to become part of the living Italian

artistic world, which is so essentially European. As the gallery owner in Soho had predicted, Tristan's presence in the aesthetic culture should not have been underrated.

He now harked back to African primitivism, to those iconographic models that were between the fundamental references of accepted European vanguards in the beginning of the last century (Modigliani and Picasso, as an example). It emerged with clarity that Tristan's studies occurring - between the United States and Europe - are substantially of western print; however Paul Fraser was one of the American teachers who first discovered Tristan's aesthetic assonance with African sculpture. It was then that Tristan began to be interested in that area which for him, in spite of his Haitian origins, was completely new and in fact disowned. Today he reflects from a distance, surveying what he learned. He gives special attention to the distribution of the inner space of his work, which it is clear, differs totally from the space that encircles it externally.

In finding his way, he has also has studied deeply, sculptures of the Island of Passover, as well as those of the Maya and the Inca; as many fruits of those so-called primitive cultures are in truth the quintessential basis for a significant part of the modern and contemporary art of the West. He has shown his work in collective and personal exhibitions from New York, to Paris, to Germany and Belgium. His sculptures, of great dimension, are on display in France, Spain and Belgium. But it is in Carrara that Tristan realized the greater part of his work.