

Simone Fattal, Ceramic Sculptor

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Looking one day, at the way Simone Fattal was holding in her hands eggplants that she had just bought, I felt that she had a special rapport to these objects—to which one pays no attention—and I thought that such a suitability between her hands and these eggplants could certainly suggest that she had an attraction to, an affinity with forms and therefore with sculpture .

She was then a painter, living in Lebanon. But a few years later, the civil war in Lebanon led her to leave for California. She had to leave her Beirut studio with great sorrow. Once settled in the outskirts of San Francisco, she heard about a college with a good sculpture department. She enrolled. We should remember here that the American way of teaching is particularly open. The teacher stimulates more than he dictates or imposes a particular style, or a method. Thus at the beginning of course, the teacher asked the students to choose a piece among many different materials. Simone chose a big alabaster stone, although he insisted on a smaller one for a first try. She liked this translucent rock very much. In a quick glance she assessed the stone's possibilities .She worked on it without forcing it, and the result was surprisingly right and beautiful. The pink alabaster , luminous, almost sensual, had become the bust of a statue one would have found on an archeological site, only this time the archeology was of a contemporary site. It was as if the war, which was still ravaging the Lebanon thousands of miles away, was fusing with this unique piece. It was an enchantment for the eye and the mind. Besides, the artist has said herself that when looking at the stone she had made that link.

The year after, Simone Fattal enrolled at the Art Institute of San Francisco. This institute is one of the three or four more prestigious art schools in the U.S. It's there that celebrities such as Jackson Pollock, Ansel Adams, Diego Riveira, Diebenkorn and others have taught during the golden years when American art dominated the art world.

She realized immediately that among all the disciplines taught at the Art Institute ceramics was the one which appealed to her the most. Clay is probably the first material that man privileged for his creations. It is not surprising that many ancient cultures believed that man had been made by a god or by God from clay. Clay is pure earth, albeit particular, varied and unique, soft and resistant, fragile and yet able to survive centuries, as good for the making of objects of everyday use as for the conceptual art works. Ceramics is the domain of infinite knowledge .In countries like Japan, China and Korea, ceramics reach prices that are given in the West only to great paintings. Now even in the West things are changing, and many ceramic pieces are more and more appreciated, on equal footing with works in bronze, iron, or steel.

For the amateurs, ceramics touch the sensibility because of the variety of colors which are natural to clay, and that no painting can equal. More over, the more one thinks about it, the more this material, once fired, represents an extraordinary dilemma. It's an art of fire and malleability which transforms these two elements

into objects that are cold, fixed in their form for an infinite time.

When Simone Fattal faced her first chunk of clay she did not hesitate. Her fingers, i.e. the deepest forces of her mind, made out of this muddy mass a person standing. It was an act of creation. She found her world immediately. She re-created in one stroke the first man of prehistoric times, and she created him standing. She created not an object, but a surge, a movement, an essential movement, the one which separates the human species from the animal world, that is, at the same time, akin to him.

She continued and still continues to make standing figures. They come as if naturally out of her hands. It is as if they are asking to be born out of their clay. It is as if they have always been there and that their creation is their liberation. They have the breath of life. They don't project rigidity but firmness. They are not anonymous. They are men or women, heroes of the past or mythic characters. We don't see them. We recognize them. They stand at the threshold of what makes the essential of their being. They are neither abstract nor realistic, but come from very far carrying in them the matter with which they were born. They haunt us, because we recognize them although we have never seen them before.

They have also this inexplicable power to be present while remaining mysterious; held in their silence, linked to instantaneous and still belonging at the same time to an unlimited (undefined?) time. In the philosophy of today, where a thinker like Heidegger speaks of the world as being the continuous apparition of being, these sculptures are what they are, but also "invented apparitions" that make us believe that they represent the marvel of life.

I should add that what is remarkable in the sculptures of Simone Fattal is their "tenderness", the seemingly natural side of their forms. By "natural" one should not understand "curvy" or "gracious", but rather "stable", necessary, adequate, not forced. I would also say distant. Sculpture is an art which can easily lean toward hardness, or brutality except when it is made by real artists. Thus, for instance, one would not say of the big sculptures of Dubuffet, like L'Hourloupe that they are hard. They are "light" because they come from the mind and address the mind. The same goes for Simone's sculptures, they are created with integrity, following an internal law.

The sculptures of Simone Fattal are not in competition with those of other artists. They are made in isolation and silence, in this state where the page is always white for the poet, in this state where one comes to the work having forgotten everything. It is as if while they were being made nothing else existed besides the irrepressible need to create these forms trusting that they will be naturally "inhabited." This process unknowingly gives a feeling that we are in front of archetypes.

She also makes animals, lions that are shut off in another world, their own world, but

yet ready to leap; heads of cows suggesting the animal in its entirety.

She digs out of the clay the possibilities of life. She gives to voiceless earth, a voice, a personality and a soul.

The secret of this impact comes from a knowledge that can only be instinctive (primordial). Simone does not fall into details, into what we call realism, and yet her characters are individualized and complete. It is a knowledge linked to instinct, generally lost if one gives precedence to technique to the detriment of spontaneity.

It is a knowledge which cuts through all we have learned to join the life which has informed the world. This possibility to join the world belongs to an ancient memory that most of us have totally lost. It is about finding a memory that numerous centuries have completely buried. To resuscitate this memory in privileged forms is a task that very few artists today have faced. Hers is an archaic world. And it is the one that true creators like Paul Klee or Brancusi have looked for, sometimes desperately.

Her world, archaic in appearance, is eminently contemporary. One can remember what Nietzsche has already said, that the one who belongs completely to his time, the real contemporary is the one who does not coincide perfectly with it, but defines himself as un-actual. This thought has been reworded more recently by Giorgio Agamben, who said: "The contemporary is inscribed intact in the present, signaling it foremost as archaic, and only the one who perceives in the most modern and more recent things the traces or signals of archaism can be called contemporary."

We should also say that Simone Fattal's figures are of medium height. They can be held in one's arms. Recently she was able to work with a master craftsman, Hans Spinner, who is certainly one of the best ceramist in Europe. Hans Spinner has worked only with the masters of contemporary sculpture, such as Chillida, Tapiès, Jim Dine, Caro, Alechinsky, Vos, Sean Scully and others. This collaboration with Hans Spinner allowed Fattal to create pieces which are big in size, characters who seem to come with their animals out of the mythology proper to our regions, from Mesopotamia, Syria, as well as from the ancient ages of our history. But they are at the same time of today. They find their place among works pregnant with meaning, the masterpieces of sculpture in contemporary art.