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Stone Mystery or Malaise?

by **Claire Lieberman**



Louise Bourgeois, "Nature Study", 1986. Marble, 33 x 28 x 21.5 in. Janet Fleisher Gallery, Philadelphia

Stone is both a burden and a source of inspiration for sculptors because it carries with it associations of permanence, purity, monumentality, beauty, and decoration. These elective affinities collectively suggest both the possibilities and the problems inherent in forming a critical framework for considering this traditional material. Adrian Stokes wrote that, "The great virtue of stone is that unlike other hard materials it seems to have a luminous life, light or soul."¹ But in an era in which the absence of material in art is of equal or greater importance to physical presence, how then is it possible to use stone persuasively, to pry it away from conventional associations, and to evolve compelling engagement that transcends the obvious? Are artists today using stone in a way that circumvents a hackneyed approach, or is stone a material so well-known and connected to previous sources that it simply locates the sculptor in a realm of comfort?

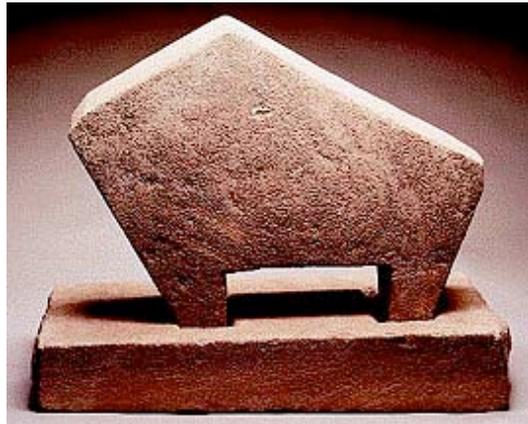
As a sculptor who works with stone, I am acutely aware of both the pleasures and pitfalls of this august material. In my work, the use of stone bridges a gap between tradition and technology, between that which is physical and that which is intangible, and between relative permanence and ephemerality. Carving stone or subtracting matter counters recent tendencies in contemporary sculpture toward assembling and gathering. The somewhat romantic concern of my own earlier work, which related to the subjectivity of a massive object, has given way to diverse practices (in a shift from discrete object to narrative event, with the addition of video monitors and the seemingly casual arrangement of various components). In the process,

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an ambiguous aura emerges around the hard material, stone. Extricated from its hallowed associations, stone produces a sustaining tension in which a viewer can be absorbed by the presence of solid objects, but can also become aware of an array of shifting and perhaps more consequential meanings.

Contemporary art, favoring an assembly of ideas over the manufacture of objects, uses what might be termed an approach/avoidance relationship with respect to materials. The use of stone is often viewed as a reactionary mode of production, yet it surfaces in such unexpected quarters as the work of Jenny Holzer, Richard Artschwager, Robert Morris, Suzanne Lacy, Mel Bochner, Jimmie Durham, Alice Aycock, and Joseph Kosuth. For these artists, stone is only one of many materials worthy of investigation. Yet this involvement with the most traditional of sculptural materials demonstrates an active interest in continuing the dialogue over the probity of stone, an "argument" that raises many questions. Should sculptors avoid the familiar aspects of the material, or is its very distinctiveness and the tension that arises from all of the attendant references what creates an enduring force? Do the pre-assigned correlations to stone, such as permanence, continue to be inherent in the use of the material, or is the notion of permanence untenable now?

Adrian Stokes maintained that: "into the solidity of stone, a solidity yet capable of suffused light, the fantasies of bodily vigor, of energy in every form, can be projected, set out and made permanent."² This view of permanence is contested by Lewis Mumford: "Stone gives a false sense of continuity, and a deceptive assurance of life: the shell seems to pledge continuity by the fact that it continues to exist, outwardly unaffected by the passage of events. But the fact is that exterior form can only confirm an inner life: it is not a substitute."³ Out of the discord between classical and postmodern approaches to art-making arises a tension in which the polarities of physical presence and the suspension of visual expectation are maintained in a balance like opposite poles of a magnet. Perhaps a critical framework for stone sculpture may emerge most clearly by looking at artists whose experiments with the material have in various ways interrogated the possibilities for stone sculpture today.

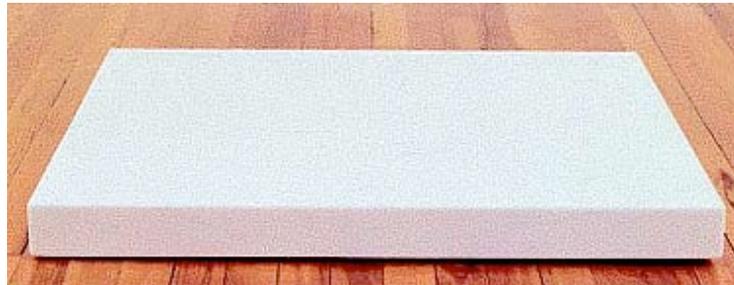


William Edmondson, "Critter", c. 1940. Limestone, 21 x 15 x 6 in. Robert Miller Gallery, New York/Allan Finkelman

If the use of stone creates a union of the tangible and the empyreal, nowhere is this more apparent than in William Edmondson's sculpture. A self-taught artist who began carving in his 50s, Edmondson created poignant, stirring works in limestone. The first African-American artist to have a solo exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art (in 1937), Edmondson was impelled to create sculpture that grew out of his religious experience. In the '30s and '40s, he shaped numerous tombstones (there are 120 known works) from reclaimed limestone, a

lower-cost material than marble. His witty images of birds, people, and Biblical themes have been compared to Brancusi. This is not surprising, as his works, though quite solid, are disengaged from the formal practice of penetrating a block. Long unnoticed, his works have recently been the focus of several exhibitions. The freshness of Edmondson's work is maintained through a combination of his imagination, conviction, and directness of approach. The intensity of his involvement creates an aperture for reviewing the dialectic of meaning and method in contemporary sculpture.

Conventional imagery is shattered in the sexually charged pieces of Louise Bourgeois. Her works were perhaps presaged by André Breton when he wrote "Beauty will be convulsive or will not be at all." Frequently made in luscious pink or luminous white marble, Bourgeois's sculpture is characterized by an erotic sensibility enhanced by the crisp definition and solidity possible in the richness of pure marble. Her works are containers for early memories as well as provocative images of corporeal and erotic suggestion. At once sumptuous and resistant, stone, with all of its historical associations, emerges as a material forceful enough to withstand the bombardment of psychological and visceral elements that are essential to Bourgeois's work.



Wolfgang Laib, "Milkstone", 1988. Marble and milk, 2.5 x 23.5 x 30.5 in. Sperone Westwater, New York

Contrasted with the chaotic world of Bourgeois's sculptures is the cool and subtly discomfiting "Milkstone" (1988) by Wolfgang Laib. Shown in the Museum of Modern Art's "Objects of Desire: the Modern Still Life" exhibition, "Milkstone" consists of a thin slab of immaculate, finely honed white marble placed on the floor. In it, Laib compares the flawlessness of white Carrara marble to the wholesomeness of milk. A shallow recess has been incised in the stone and fresh milk (that must be changed every few hours) is poured into the void. The milk forms a tranquil, opalescent pool in which the separation of liquid and solid becomes almost imperceptible. A study in the relationship of fragility and immutability, Laib's work counterposes two symbolically laden entities. Laib, fully aware of contemporary art discourse, links his work to a pre-Modern realm, in which the material and spiritual merge. The symbolic identity of the materials, in this case marble and milk, holds its meaning through the viewer's awareness of its alternation between conventional ties and reconfigured purpose.



Cristina Iglesias, "Untitled (Alabaster Room)", 1993. Iron and alabaster, (5 units) dimensions variable. Donald Young Gallery, Seattle

The synthesis of fragile forms and industrial illusions marks the work of Cristina Iglesias with similar mystery and renegotiations of convention. The translucency of alabaster is an essential ingredient in several works by this Spanish artist, who was recently the focus of a solo show at the Guggenheim. Her sculptures are poetic architectural constructions that conflate interior and exterior, translucence and impenetrability, weight and suspension. In "Untitled (Alabaster Room)" (1993) Iglesias creates a dreamy enclave activated by ambient light and the movement of the viewer. Thin, veined slices of pale, white alabaster are set in a gently sloping grid of rough iron, a structural necessity. The delicate rectangular tiles become a membrane through which muted light itself becomes a physical presence that realigns the viewer's perception of space. While drawing from architectural references of the past, Iglesias has disengaged stone from its traditional role in architecture, that which uses mass and solidity for support, and reinserted it as a decorative and metaphoric allusion.

The containment of space as a sculptural element is also enacted in the sculpture of Anish Kapoor. An enigmatic void occupies both the physical and psychological bearing of his work. Formed of human-scale quarry blocks of sandstone and limestone that have been hollowed out, some of his pieces are large enough to enter. The interiors are coated with a radiant layer of powdered pigment used to erase all traces of gesture. Drawing from sources in his native India and from his studies in England, Kapoor's work operates in the realm in which the sexual and the spiritual intersect. To him, the void represents "fear, a loss of self, a transfiguration, suggesting the idea of the sky contained within the earth."⁴ Simultaneously contemplative and sensuous, Kapoor invents a probing, symbolic language in the attempt to "leave form behind and deal with non-form."⁵



Dove Bradshaw, "Indeterminacy I", 1995. Pyrite and Vermont marble, 17 x 54 x 38 in. Sandra Gering Gallery, New York/John Bessler

The slow, intentional disintegration of form is the focus of a series of stone pieces, titled "Indeterminacy" (1995-present), by Dove Bradshaw. In these works, the primacy of static form is contravened through the pairing of chemically unstable elements: marble and pyrite (fool's gold). When exposed to forces of nature, this unlikely dyad creates works of art that are in a continual state of execution. When pyrite is removed from the earth, it transforms into limonite and loses its constancy. Placed on marble, it decomposes gradually and bleeds onto the stone, producing a record of the interaction. While the activity is unpredictable, it is not entirely random, as some choice (of the blocks, location of the work, knowledge of chemical reaction) has been predetermined. Artistic control is relinquished (albeit deliberately) once the action has been initiated. Bradshaw allows nature to direct the artistic process, by "starting an action where the human element is minimal."⁶

In striking contrast, Saint Clair Cemin's newest works in white statuario marble embrace the act of direct carving. His earlier sculptures have been described as ironic, "a mixture of heroic and cartoonish,"⁶ or as "hovering between the celebratory and mock."⁷ Cemin "lets the work go where it wants to go."⁸ Imbued with references to literature, the new pieces revere the great tradition of stone sculpture, while balancing various complementary aspects. Cemin contends that "Art is basically the exercise of perception, the heightened perception of the ordinary...The beauty of stone is that you already start with a thing that is unique, but by carving it you transform it into something even more unique."⁹



Saint Clair Cemin, "Player", 1995. Statuario marble, 26.25 x 16 x 13 in. Robert Miller Gallery, New York

Labor and intellect are often seen as dichotomous, and a sculptor who takes on stone faces a singular set of issues related to the physical process. Stone, despite its beauty, tactility, and uniqueness, cannot deliver the heightened perception that Cemin refers to on the basis of its physical potency alone. A malaise, a simultaneous yearning (for the physical) and antipathy (for its implicit limitations), may, however, be transmuted into mystery through the associative properties of stone and its qualities of resonance, poetic capacity, timelessness, and sensuality. As is evident in the work of the artists discussed here, the logic of stone today lies less in its capacity to impress (massiveness, ostensible stability, authority) and more in its potential to evoke collective recall, primal and universal associations. Stone is also a repository of the historical and cultural experience with which it has been invested. Whether a work of art aspires to the irreverent or to the sublime, stone retains a continuing capacity to intrigue both the sculptor and the audience, and thereby to bridge the dichotomies of tradition versus

innovation, the concrete versus the ethereal, and Stokes's solidified energy versus Mumford's false continuity.

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Notes

- 1 Adrian Stokes, *Stones of Rimini* (New York: Schocken, 1969), p.111.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Lewis Mumford, *The Culture of Cities* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1938).
- 4 Anish Kapoor, "A Conversation with Homi Bhabha," Tel Aviv Museum of Art, 1993.
- 5 Anish Kapoor, interview with Marjorie Allthorpe-Guyton, catalogue for British Pavilion, Venice Biennale, 1990.
- 6 Author's phone conversation with Dove Bradshaw, July 1997.
- 7 Janet Koplos, "St. Clair Cemin at Robert Miller," *Art in America*, March 1996.
- 8 Charles Merewether, "Esculturade Saint Clair Cemin 1984-1993," (catalogue essay) MARCO, Monterey, Mexico, 1994.
- 9 Author's interview with Saint Clair Cemin, August 1997.

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