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ART & DESIGN

# Works Culled From Wanderlust Find a Home

By **DOROTHY SPEARS** AUG. 29, 2012

AS a child the sculptor Saint Clair Cemin spent two years living on a 5,000-acre property in rural Brazil, where his father, an engineer, tried and failed to grow wheat. This was in the late 1950s, when the area surrounding the small city of Cruz Alta was, he said, “still known as gaucho land, as primitive as the American West in the 19th century.” There was no running water or electricity on the vast spread, which belonged to his mother, so his family depended on gas lamps for light.

“It was beautiful time of my life,” Mr. Cemin, 60, said recently. “And I think all of my work has been inspired by it.”

An exhibition of seven of his sculptures opening on Thursday, in parks and pedestrian malls along Broadway between 57th and 157th Streets, reveals the extent to which this is true. Presented by the Broadway Mall Association in collaboration with the Paul Kasmin Gallery in Chelsea — which is mounting a concurrent show of Mr. Cemin’s work — “Saint Clair Cemin on Broadway” includes works like “In the Center” (2002), a seven-foot-tall semiabstract figure sporting a gaucho hat and holding a divining rod, to be placed on the Broadway median at 79th Street. On a recent visit to the site Mr. Cemin explained how the sculpture’s title is related to his mother’s property, where the family survived on well water. “Art is perception,” he said, “and in the center of perception is this strange faceless giant that looks for things — looks for water — and finds it.”

Not that the work can't adapt to different environments. The water diviner will soon be positioned directly over the subway. "Well, it flows," Mr. Cemin said with equanimity.

His work is arguably more focused on the juxtapositions of different worlds than on any single one. An itinerant artist who speaks five languages fluently, including Russian, he employs a dazzling variety of materials, subjects and sculpture traditions from around the world, often combining them to surprising and sometimes humorous effect. Another work in the Broadway exhibition, a hammered copper sculpture called "Aphrodite" (2006), refers to the Greek goddess of love and also calls to mind Zulu wood carvings. In the show at Paul Kasmin a new bronze piece called "And Then (I Close My Eyes)" features what may be "a distracted meditating person" from our own culture, Mr. Cemin said, or "an imperfect Buddha." (The works on Broadway will remain on view through November and the Kasmin show, "Saint Clair Cemin: Six," runs through Oct. 13 at 515 West 27th Street.)

"Saint Clair's work relates to the theories of the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss," said the painter Peter Halley, who has known Mr. Cemin since the early 1980s. "Around the world he finds hints of language that people from other cultures can relate to."

Born in 1951, Mr. Cemin moved with his family from Cruz Alta to São Paulo as a teenager, with the goal of becoming an engineer like his father. Instead he fell in with a group of Surrealists and eventually attended the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris, which may explain why, unlike so many contemporary sculptors, he embraces traditional techniques and handmade virtuosity. Feeling restless in Paris, he moved to New York in 1978, supporting himself as a printmaker until a Joseph Beuys retrospective at the Guggenheim a year later introduced him to a new range of artistic possibilities.

"That was really a turning point," he said.

In an East Village apartment that doubled as a studio he dabbled with a more

conceptual approach to art, “making drawings and doodles, simple things,” he said, until the summer of 1983. Inspired by a 1974 performance in which Beuys shut himself in a gallery with a live coyote, Mr. Cemin closed himself off in a room for a week.

Seated at a table with a few basic materials — paper, pencils, paints and a lump of clay, he confronted what he called “the essential condition of every human,” and gave himself permission to make whatever he wanted. “I was open to anything — to memory, to whims, to a phrase overheard in the street,” he recalled.

By the end of the week he had modeled some 50 objects, “mugs with faces in them; strange, decorative or erotic objects; little animals; all sorts of things,” he said. In the process he realized “that my conceptual framework was totally destroyed, because the objects themselves were so much more powerful than the concept.”

Determined to accept himself as a sculptor, Mr. Cemin followed the early-20th-century master Constantin Brancusi’s dictum that “sculpture is direct carving.” He brought stone — Belgian marble, limestone and a type of onyx — to his studio and “began to carve, immediately.”

Mr. Cemin was already part of the exploding East Village art scene of the ’80s, having befriended artists like Jeff Koons and Mr. Halley, and later becoming a regular visitor to of-the-moment galleries like International With Monument and Nature Morte. His work was selling in solo shows in New York, Los Angeles and Rome, and he was regularly included in exhibitions put on by Collins & Milazzo, a dynamic curatorial team at the time.

But he was soon restless again.

In 1992 he rented a large house by the Nile, in a Nubian village outside of Aswan, Egypt, where he made watercolors and iron sculptures with the help of a blacksmith. Two years later he enlisted wood carvers in Bali to help him produce pieces in teak and mahogany. And in 1999 he began making a good portion of his sculptures in Beijing, where he works for several weeks at a time with skilled

craftsman who are able, among other things, to hammer together multiple pieces of stainless steel by hand until their seams are invisible, a process requiring tremendous skill and patience.

“Beijing is just like New York in the ’80s,” said the Swiss sculptor Not Vital, another friend of Mr. Cemin’s from the ’80s, who in 2009 built a studio not far from the raw space that Mr. Cemin refinished in 2004, adding a small apartment for his stays there. “The energy is so great, especially between artists. And there is this amazing skilled labor. You get so much done so fast.”

The exhibitions on Broadway and at Kasmin are part of a kind of coming home for Mr. Cemin. In August, after six years of living mainly in Paris, the wayward artist signed a lease on a New York apartment. And during a recent visit to his studio in Red Hook, Brooklyn, which he’s kept since 1993, he seemed excited about his return.

“I’m going to be spending a lot more time here now,” he said.

A raw industrial space in a former suitcase factory, the studio has an Old World feel, with its metal gothic doors, high ceilings and soaring leaded-glass windows. A welding area was paved with bricks that Mr. Cemin brought from Hebei Province in China. Piles of raw marble appeared throughout, including a 3,000-pound stone he said was “just asking to be carved.”

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