



Works Culled From Wanderlust Find a Home



Brian Harkin for The New York Times

The Brazilian artist Saint Clair Cemin in his Brooklyn studio. [More Photos »](#)

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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

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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.



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