

# ARTES MAGAZINE

**A Fine Art Magazine: Passionate for Fine Art, Architecture & Design**

## **An Interview with Sculptor, Boaz Vaadia**

What the earth can teach us: in search of a universal symbol for modern man

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Boaz Vaadia, Shaul,  
Bluestone, 115"x70"x65"  
(1986)

*"I work with nature as an equal partner. . . That's still the strongest thing I deal with today, that primal connection of man to earth. It's in the materials I use, the environments I make and the way I work."* - Boaz Vaadia

I weave my way through the narrow, tree-lined streets of Brooklyn on a warm autumn afternoon in search of internationally-known sculptor, Boaz Vaadia's studio. Anyone who knows New York, knows that the boroughs surrounding Manhattan extend out in almost every direction, forming a nearly endless matrix of small neighborhoods, many with a distinctive look and feel all their own. The Williamsburg section of Brooklyn is no exception. Small shops offering used clothing and hats, hand-crafted decorative accessories and freshly-brewed coffee line the streets. Colorful ethnic restaurants extend their seating out to the sidewalk. I am tempted by the many aromas of food being prepared and served to the 'locals', while family dogs, tethered to nearby signposts, sit patiently, but expectantly nearby. My objective, however, is now in sight—a narrow metal door on a residential block, with the artist's name written inconspicuously, in small type, on the mailbox beside the step up to the entrance. [fine arts magazine](#)



Vaadia in his studio

My interview with Boaz Vaadia begins the minute he opens the door. He greets me with a warm smile and a gesturing hand, inviting me to walk through a narrow and crowded hallway that opens into a cavernous, high-ceilinged studio. Larger-than-life examples of his now-famous figurative work stand like silent sentinels at the periphery of what was once an industrial warehouse. After a few polite exchanges about people and places we know in common, he dives into an explanation of his work and his motivation for working in stone to produce his iconic figures. Boaz is engaging and exuberant, and I am barely able to put my bag down before we are talking about sculpture and the genesis of an idea that, quite literally, rose up from the earth to meet him one day, 30 years ago.

*I spotted one of your sculptures years ago, at the entrance to a home near Boston and it stopped me dead in my tracks. It struck me as both primal and futuristic at the same time. How did you decide to work with stone in this way?*

“The inspiration for my work is the sedimentary rock that you see here. They were ripping up the old sidewalks around SoHo and putting in new ones. The workmen were literally throwing these pieces of stone away. I asked if I could take some with me. That is when I started working with the old materials, layering the rock to do the figurative work I’m doing today. I use the bluestone in varying thicknesses and colors as it comes to me. Each layer is individually hand-hewn, chiseled, and chipped in the manner of ancient arrowheads, using just a hammer and chisel. I then stack these gradated pieces into a stratified human form that echoes the way in which sediment is naturally layered in rock. I work with gravity, not against it. Have you noticed that as sculpture ‘evolved’ to more complex forms, the artist demanded more from his material, in defiance of the natural order of things? That is why, today, so many beautiful sculptures from centuries past are missing arms, legs and heads. My work emanates from a respect for gravity, reflecting a density-of-form inherent to the earth.”

*But, in spite of your reliance on primitive materials and the basic laws of physics, you seem to be working to achieve something quite complex. What do you want the viewer to take away from the experience?*



Adam, Slate, 17.5"x6"x4.5"  
(1985)

"I view my work as a portrayal of the energies present in nature and my figures are representations of that energy, embodied in modern man. By using the natural forces of rock, I attempt to awaken those ancient earth senses that we slowly abandoned over the course of civilization's evolution through time. I believe I am tapping into the primeval and symbolic resonance of stone. I am re-appropriating the bone structure of the earth to bring home a message about our fundamental nature. I create a figure with no particular 'message' in mind—a blank slate, both literally and figuratively—and ask the viewer to read his or her own meaning into the piece. Each piece simply occupies a defined space, leaving the rest up to you. I believe the work becomes more powerful for that reason."

*Yes, I agree that these figures project a deliberate non-message because they appear serenely anonymous and elemental. But, the boulders incorporated into each piece add a sense of contemplation and speak to the spiritual potential inherent in the stone. Isn't there a bigger agenda here?*

"Yes, you're right. Each figure is both self-contained and yet, part of the surrounding environment. Some of that has to do with the origins of this project. Years ago, when I first occupied this studio, they were doing work in the street outside. The crew was pulling up huge boulders from the holes they were digging. I was amazed at the size and number of them. Once again, I asked if I could have them. Tons of rocks were moved into this space. One day, I asked the workers to come in out of the rain to have their lunch here and each took up a position on, or beside, a stone in a way that represented a unique expression of their personality...some leaning, some sitting, some reclining. I decided right then that my work should incorporate these stones as an extension of the sculptural elements of the piece."

*Extending the narrative in that way must have opened all kinds of creative doors?*

"When you think about it, the bluestone I work with is a remnant of an ancient ocean floor—layers of sediment, compressed by thousands of pounds of pressure for millions of years—only to find its way into my studio. We sit in a spot that once represented the leading edge of the glacier that covered this area during the last Ice Age. When it finally withdrew, it left those boulders behind that the guys in the street were digging up. As a guy who was raised on a farm in Israel, the primeval feel of both materials absolutely speaks to me."

*Is the use of Hebrew names for your works an extension of that desire to embrace your native roots, or is it more universal than that?*



Vaadia beside, Naomi with Family,  
Bluestone, Boulder, 80"x105"x105"  
(2008)

“No, not really. At least I didn’t have profound objectives, initially. Years ago, I would finish a piece and name it after someone I knew, like a workman or a relative. Because I am Israeli, I just had a lot of relatives and friends with Hebrew names! For example, I named the first sculpture I did, Adam (see right, 1985). After a while—once someone pointed out the trend—I decided it was a good direction to go, so I now give Hebrew names to all my pieces. It works for me at many levels.”

*As we walk around the studio, I notice that some pieces are in bronze. Do you find that your metal sculptures communicate the same message of timelessness and eternal connection to the earth that you achieving with stone?*

“Creating a stone sculpture is a very long process. It will take me five to six months of full-time work to carve each layer individually. I may only do 5 or 6 pieces a year. Remember, bronze is a very old metal, appearing on the scene some 5,000 years ago. I use a lost-wax technique, completing the figure in several parts. And, there is a lot of hand finishing done on the wax version before it is finally cast in metal at the foundry. My way to get exposure and show the piece is that I make a bronze edition from the stone. The life-sized pieces are usually editions of five and the small pieces that I do from slate roof shingles are editions of seven. After the bronze is cast, I combine these with stone, which serves as a base, usually the glacial boulders or bluestone.”

“I keep one bronze from each edition to loan to municipalities and museums for shows. For example, several bronze pieces of mine are on loan to museums around the world. Some are put on display in public settings, like the parks in New York. At least one piece from each edition is not for sale. There is no commercial side in that case. It allows me to share my work with the public. My main work is in stone, however. Notice the color variations in the layers of the stone pieces. I love that effect and you can’t get that with bronze”

*I see a line of small portraits on pedestals against the wall. Have you been experimenting with recognizable*

figures?



TAI, Bluestone, 53"x42" (2003)

“Yes. I discovered that the individual characteristics that make someone recognizable can be based on something as subtle as body posture or the attitude of the head. I wanted to experiment with this, using my stone layering technique. Some of these are family members, like my daughters. But, others are people from the neighborhood. This is the UPS delivery man. I liked his distinctive look and I even included his sunglasses in this piece, because they were so much a part of him. I discovered that a personality will be recognizable on the basis of just a few, general characteristics. The mind has a way of making those connections and the personality comes through those physical traits that I capture.”

*You mentioned your observations of artists from the past and the ways in which they pushed the limits of their material beyond the ‘breaking point’. Do you find yourself admiring the range and flexibility that some of your favorite artists may have had, that limit or confine you, given your choice of mediums?*

“No. I can say that I was tremendously influenced from ancient and primitive art. During the years I studied in Israel, Michelangelo and Rodin influenced me. Henry Moore definitely influenced my work. The way Noguchi worked with stone makes me think that he had the same deep understanding about stone that I feel. I love Giacometti’s work. He absolutely understood the boundaries that he worked within and his work is very much what it is because of his understanding of those boundaries. I use the word ‘boundary’ with him because, for me, that is a term of respect. You use the word ‘limit’ when asking about my work and you’re right: I do recognize that those boundaries are in some ways limiting. But finding ways to work within those parameters are what eventually shapes each individual artist’s work. So you can call them ‘boundaries’ or you can call them ‘limitations.’ But that is the scope within which we work.”

*Any advice to collectors?*

“First of all, I only work through galleries and so I am removed from the selection process and the motivation behind many of the purchases that occur. But, even though I’ve been in the business a long time and I have a lot of very successful galleries representing my work, I feel I am still a very young artist. I’m definitely a sculptor to my bones. I have found that the people who buy sculptures actually buy because they have a love and a major commitment to sculpture. They are not exactly the same type of collectors who buy paintings just for the investment. I spend all of my time producing art and that is exactly where I want to

be.”

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Boaz Vaadia was born in Israel in 1951. He was raised on a farm by parents who traveled widely and encouraged his artistic interests. As a dyslexic child, he struggled with routine academic material, but found the physical and visual challenge of three-dimensional sculpture satisfying. He began his career at age 14, having first studied art in Tel Aviv and then later at Brooklyn’s Pratt Institute and the Brooklyn Museum Art School, creating abstract sculptures in stone, wood and leather that were inspired by tribal art and his fascination with sacred artifacts. But it wasn’t until 1984, after several critically acclaimed New York gallery exhibitions of his abstract work, that he began to view stone differently. With the move to his Williamsburg-area, Brooklyn studio, his sculptural exploration expanded in earnest. Since then, his work has achieved international acclaim, with sculpture placed in innumerable museums and public settings as well as in some of the most important private collections in the world.

Interview conducted October, 2010

*by Richard Friswell, Executive Editor*

In conjunction with the *Art of Leadership Lecture Series*, presenting Boaz Vaadia, November 22, 2010, at the Ukrainian Institute of America, New York City. To make your reservation for this free event, go to: [www.artleadership.com](http://www.artleadership.com)

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