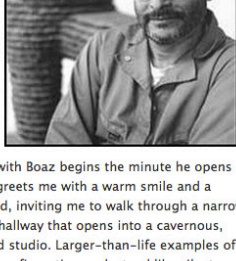




Contemporary Sculptor Boaz Vaadia: Figures Keep Silent Vigil in Complex World

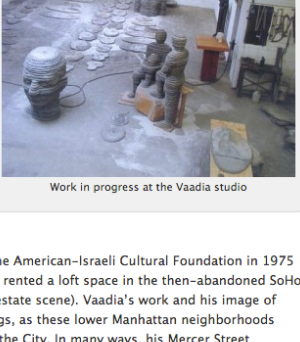
Ancient Medium and Methods, Timeless Images, Universal Message

Posted on 12 July 2013 | By Richard Friswell



My interview with Boaz 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.

The narrow metal door is just a step up from the narrow street, one of many in the matrix that is the Williamsburg neighborhood, a quiet section of New York City's Brooklyn borough. A small hand-lettered name appears above the mailbox beside the entrance—Vaadia—alerting me to the fact that I've reached my destination, the studio of well-known sculptor, Boaz Vaadia (left).



Work in progress at the Vaadia studio

Boaz Vaadia—a native of Israel—received a grant from the American-Israeli Cultural Foundation in 1975 and decided to pursue his artistic career in New York. He rented a loft space in the then-abandoned SoHo area of the city (now a stylish and vibrant neighborhood). Vaadia's work and his image of himself as a sculptor emerged along with his surroundings, as these lower Manhattan neighborhoods became more-and-more, a part of the artistic culture of the City. In many ways, his Mercer Street residency during those years became a defining feature of his artistic future and destiny.



"When I got to the city," he recalls, "I was actually shocked. It was so big! After growing up on a small farm and developing an incredible love of Mother Earth, I found myself struggling to maintain that primal connection to nature. So, I went in search of what there was within the urban environment that touched me in the same way that love of the earth had affected me back home in Israel. Slowly, I understood that an urban environment is not unnatural. When I was young, I remember seeing pictures of trees and islands so dense with birds, there wasn't enough room for a pin to drop, and also bees and ants living in dense communities. In an urban environment like New York, we're a lot like these birds, ants and bees, living close together in similar ways. Realizing this helped me make the transition to the city, but stay connected to the earth."

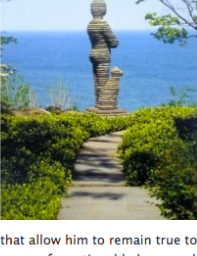
Left: Adam, slate, 17.5"×6"×4.5" (1985), Private Collection, London.

Among the lessons the city had to teach Boaz was to find creative ways to utilize found material in his neighborhood. The inspiration for the layered figurative sculpture that he is so well known for arose from an urban renovation project in SoHo in the '70s. Workmen were tearing up the old sidewalks to replace them with concrete. Slabs of slate, or sedimentary stone, were earmarked to be hauled away. Vaadia asked if he could take them back to his studio. He began to fashion this reclaimed material, layering it into the form seen in his studio and in innumerable private, municipal and museum collections around the world, today.



Right: Lea and Dina (1987), bluestone, 81 x 41 x 29" Private collection, New York.

"I use the pieces of bluestone in varying thicknesses and colors just as it comes off the pile. Each layer is individually hand-hewn, chiseled and chipped in the manner of ancient arrowheads, using my only tools—a hammer and chisel. I then layer these stack these graduated 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 artists of old demanded more from his materials, 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."



Left: Benjamin and Dog, bluestone, 78 x 35 x 27" Private collection, Illinois.

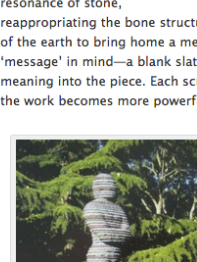
Many of Vaadia's pieces take on meditative poses—forms and postures that allow him to remain true to his sense of gravity. Reflecting Buddhist iconography—with their inherent sense of emotional balance and spirituality—his finished figures reflect that same sense of contemplative symmetry. "If you look at my pieces, because of their lack of realistic features, they become universal forms. They are sexless in some ways, and portray no particular race. They come to represent something bigger than one particular person. But my primary goal remains to respect the materials that inspire me."

The layered property of sedimentary stone, and the way it is formed over millennia deep in the earth serves as a key to understanding how Boaz approached the task of sculpting. Taking his lessons from sculpture from the past that has not withstood the ravages of time very well, he surrenders to the material, allowing it to become a 'partner' in the creative process. As an artist, he appears to have layered on strata of patience, knowledge and understanding—much like his beloved Mother Earth—letting those layers define who he is as an artist.

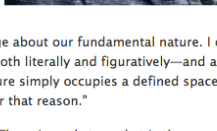


Far right: Zamir, bluestone, 50 x 49 x 29" Collection, the artist; below right: Pancake Rocks, Punakaki, New Zealand. Photo, Tihana Mirkovic.

"I view my work as a portrayal of the energies present in nature and my fingers 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 primal and symbolic resonance of stone, reappropriating 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 sculpture simply occupies a defined space, leaving the rest up to you. I think the work becomes more powerful for that reason."



David (2009), bluestone, 99 x 30 x 30" Private collection, New York.

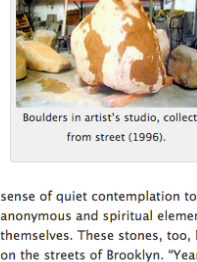


where his Pointillist figures appear to stand, immobile and apart from their surroundings—each serving as a reminder of a newly-modernized world; where the shaping of private ambition and public persona can easily trump individual authenticity. In his version of the modern world, Vaadia's sculpture silently emits a wake-up call to keep our priorities straight.

The primeval stone that is the source material for Vaadia's work dates back to the birth of the universe and the very creation of Earth. Through its very solidity, it serves as a reminder of the temporal nature of our lives, evoking in a barely audible whisper, the Old Testament phrase, "From earth you came and to earth you will return." This message seems to resonate through all of Boaz's pieces—anonymous and without bodily tension or facial expression, yet 'present' in comfortable way that communicates emotional stability and tranquility. Encountering a Vaadia sculpture in a public park or private garden offers a gentle, centering reminder to those who pass by—by being neither threatening nor overpowering—that we, as always-striving individuals need only pause for a moment and remember our delicate mortal state. In this sense, Boaz's sculptures seem to echo Seurat's well-known painting, A Sunday Afternoon on the Isle of La Grande Jatte (1884), right, where his Pointillist figures appear to stand, immobile and apart from their surroundings—

each serving as a reminder of a newly-modernized world; where the shaping of private ambition and public persona can easily trump individual authenticity. In his version of the modern world, Vaadia's sculpture silently emits a wake-up call to keep our priorities straight.

Yet, in spite of the deliberate effort on Vaadia's part to achieve a degree of anonymity in each piece, they don't emerge from his studio as "Untitled." Each has a name arising from an unlikely beginning. Inspired by the Old Testament, Vaadia selected names from the ancient text, if only to identify individual pieces as he completed them. "When I had my studio in SoHo, I had a mattress on the floor that was used by family and friends who came to visit from Israel and I would name the pieces after them. When I had my first show in the city, someone asked why all my pieces had Biblical names. I realized that all my pieces were named after my Israeli friends and family, where everyone is named based on the Hebrew Bible. So I decided to honor my roots and use the Old Testament as the source for the names of my pieces."



Ahiem 2nd (2006), bluestone, 32 x 90 x 60" A/P edition of five, private collection.

An additional structural component in many of Vaadia's sculptures is the large boulders that figures into the many compositions. The large stones add a sense of quiet contemplation to the serenely anonymous and spiritual element of the figures, themselves. These stones, too, have a story linked to the sculptor's experience in his neighborhood studio on the streets of Brooklyn. "Years ago, when I first occupied this space, city crews were working in the streets, outside. They were pulling up huge boulders from the holes they were digging. I was amazed at the size and number of them. Just like the bluestone, that comes from ancient sea floor, these boulders were pushed and dropped here by the leading edge of the last Ice Age, ten-thousand years ago."

"Once again, as I did when I first came to New York, I asked if I could have them. I bought a forklift and moved them into the studio. One day, I asked the workers to come in out of the rain and at their lunch in the studio. Each took up a position on, or beside, a stone that was an expression of their personality... some sitting, some leaning, some reclining. I decided then, that these stones should become an extension of the sculptural elements of my pieces. As a guy raised on a farm in Israel, the primal features of both types of stone really speaks to me."

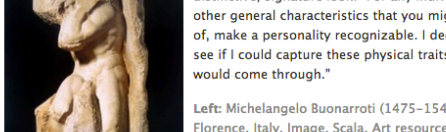


Artist with The Family (2008), bronze.

What is lost in the bronze casting method in the subtle variation in color that separate layers of blue stone offers, but with expert patina finishes, the differences are negligible. Bronze itself is a molding medium almost as old as civilization; so too, Vaadia's work can continue to reflect its primal roots, even while using 21st century techniques. The freedom of having available to him addition versions of each piece, allows the sculptor to mix and match figures to create vignettes of multiple figures without having to recreate better-known works. He is clear though, about the persistence of originality in each piece, when he explains, "One of the things I do is add stone to every bronze piece: whether it is a carved blue stone base or a glacial boulder, I find a different treatment for each bronze piece so that it has its own special characteristics."

Right: Sarah 2nd, (2002), slate and steel pedestal, 9.25 x 8.75 x 7.5" Private collection, Florida.

More recently, Vaadia discovered that individual characteristics, based on something as subtle as body posture or attitude of the head, can make them recognizable, even using his layered stone technique. Some of his work now includes family members, people from the neighborhood around his studio—even the UPS delivery man—carry a distinctive, signature look. "For any individual, sunglasses, hair style, or other general characteristics that you might not even be consciously aware of, make a personality recognizable. I decided to experiment with stone to see if I could capture these physical traits in a way that their personality would come through."



Left: Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475–1544), Slave Called Atlas, Academies, Florence, Italy. Image, Scala, Art resources, NY; below: Henry Moore, Family Group. Courtesy, Henry Moore Foundation. Photo: Katsuhiko Ogawa.

In the history of sculpture, the human body serves as the most central axis. The body, as a concept, captures of impressions of gods, other religious figures, nobility, pharaohs, and aspects of beliefs, nature and our concept of beauty, the last of which has remained remarkably consistent over millennia. Boaz Vaadia carries on a long legacy of notables who have brought emotional content to the inanimate medium of stone. Michelangelo, in his series, The Slave, left the human body tarnished, unfinished, partially hidden in stone, leaving it to the viewer to extract the full figure—and the full emotional impact—from the stone itself. Bernini magically infused marble with the very essence of timeless human emotions; Rodin, too, transforms stone into living flesh, claiming that his task as sculptor was to "remove all the stone that was not the figure." Picasso disassembles his figures, rearranges them and creates exaggerated features. Giacometti elevated the stone in his work, aiming it toward the spiritual and the heavenly. Aristide Maillol admired the feminine figure, polishing his stone to illuminate passionate tells. For Vaadia, in particular, "I was influenced by Henry Moore. The way Noguchi worked with stone tells me he had a deep understanding about the material that I feel. And Giacometti, too, absolutely understood the boundaries he was working within, and his work reflects a respect for those limits."

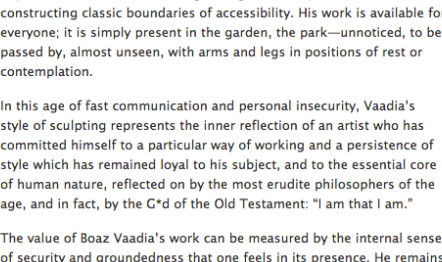
Vaadia's sculpture remains simply human, democratic, secular and unpretentious, without elevating the figure to lofty ranks or constructing classic boundaries of accessibility. His work is available for everyone; it is simply present in the garden, the park—unnoticed, to be passed by, almost unseen, with arms and legs in positions of rest or contemplation.

In this age of fast communication and personal insecurity, Vaadia's style of sculpting represents the inner reflection of an artist who has committed himself to a particular way of working and a persistence of style which has remained loyal to his subject, and to the essential core of human nature, reflected on by the most erudite philosophers of the age, and in fact, by the G'd of the Old Testament: "I am that I am."

The value of Boaz Vaadia's work can be measured by the internal sense of security and groundedness that one feels in its presence. He remains devoted to returning to the same subject time-and-time again: to the human form, which is, as he says, "all shadow and anonymous, the invisible and the non-existing," ultimately revealed in Nature's open spaces through the shaping of primal materials as old as time, itself.

By Richard Friswell, Managing Editor

See more of Boaz Vaadia's sculpture at http://www.vaadia.com



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. He began by creating abstract sculptures in stone, wood and leather that were inspired by tribal art and his fascination with ritual artifacts. But, it was not until 1984, after several critically-acclaimed New York gallery exhibitions of his abstract work, that he began to view stone differently.

With his move to his Williamsburg-area, Brooklyn studio, his sculptural exploration began 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.

The first major publication of Israeli-born sculptor Boaz Vaadia takes the reader on a journey from his early days growing up on a small farm in Israel to his copious stone sculptures.

11 x 11.5 inches, 284 pages
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