



Balancing Families in Stone

A Conversation with

Boaz Vaadia

BY JAN GARDEN CASTRO



A sculptor who grew up on a farm, Boaz Vaadia is inspired by the nature around him. Vaadia says, "I work with nature as an equal partner. The strongest thing I address is that primal connection of man to earth. It's in the materials I use, the environments I make, and the way I work." Vaadia's stone figures are often set against glacial boulders. His work seems created by natural forces, such as wind and water, yet looks simultaneously ancient and futurist, as though the workmanship forms a bridge from the Stone Age to the digital age. The figures' rounded forms, anonymous and elemental, create universal models of humanity to which all viewers can relate.

Vaadia was born in Israel in 1951, three years after it became an independent state. He moved to New York City, in 1975 on a grant from the America-Israel Cultural Foundation. In 1989, he moved his studio to Williamsburg, Brooklyn. During the last 30 years, he has created more than 200 stone sculptures, each weighing as much 10,000 pounds. These compelling works, executed with a hammer and chisel, have won him audiences worldwide. Vaadia also champions public art. Four of his works are installed in permanent locations around Manhattan, including the Time Warner Center, and he recently lent seven works to the New York City Department of Parks' "Art in the Parks: Celebrating 40 Years." Other Vaadia sculptures can be found in museums, outdoor spaces, and private collections throughout the world. He has several upcoming exhibitions, including one at Connaught Brown Gallery in London in October 2008.

Jan Garden Castro: *How do you compose the layers that turn into bodies in motion?*

Boaz Vaadia: The inspiration for my work is sedimentary rock. They were ripping up the old sidewalks around SoHo and putting in new ones. When I started working with those old materials, I realized the layering formation of the rock. It eventually inspired me to do the figurative work I'm doing today. I carve each individual layer, then stack them up. In relation to the poses of



Opposite: *Elyagim 2nd*, 2005. Bronze, bluestone, and boulder, 50 x 78 x 78 in. Above: *Asaf and Yo'el*, 2000. Bluestone and boulder, 78 x 110 x 80 in. Work installed at the Time Warner Center, New York. Right: *Asa*, 2000. Bronze and boulder, 65 x 78 x 78 in.



my work, I find poses that allow the finished piece to stand totally by the force of gravity. Then I drill a system of holes and put threaded rods through the piece and glue it for permanence and safety.

JGC: What are your sources for stone?

BV: As you can see, some of my pieces are sitting on glacial boulders that came to the New York bay area during the ice age. They introduce that ancient natural formation into the work. Those boulders come from construction sites within 20 blocks of my studio. Everywhere they dig in Brooklyn, there is a great deposit of these boulders. I have a good communication system with the construction people, and I pick up boulders from the construction sites.

JGC: Why did you decide to work in bronze?

BV: The stone process is a very long one. The piece that I'm just finishing, *Noomi with Family*, is going to a person in the Netherlands. It took me five or six months of full-time work. My way to get exposure and show the piece is to 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 and the bluestone.

I keep one bronze from each edition to loan to municipalities and museums for shows. For example, two pieces of mine are now at the DeCordova Museum. The sculptures that were temporarily installed throughout New York City are also from that collection. They

Above: *Elizur*, 1994. Bluestone and boulder, 55 x 100 x 100 in. Right: *Noomi with Family*, 2008. Bluestone and boulder, 80 x 105 x 105 in.

are not for sale. There is no commercial side to it. It allows me to share my work with the public.

My main work is with stone. I carve each individual layer of bluestone and stack up the layers to create my sculpture. I've been working on a new body of work, portraits. I realized that the layered style I developed does not allow me to do detailed features. It was a challenge to try to create likeness with my signature style by trying to focus on the shape and form and textures of a person. I can recognize a friend from the back, so I try to achieve likeness by recognizing that presence and that energy.

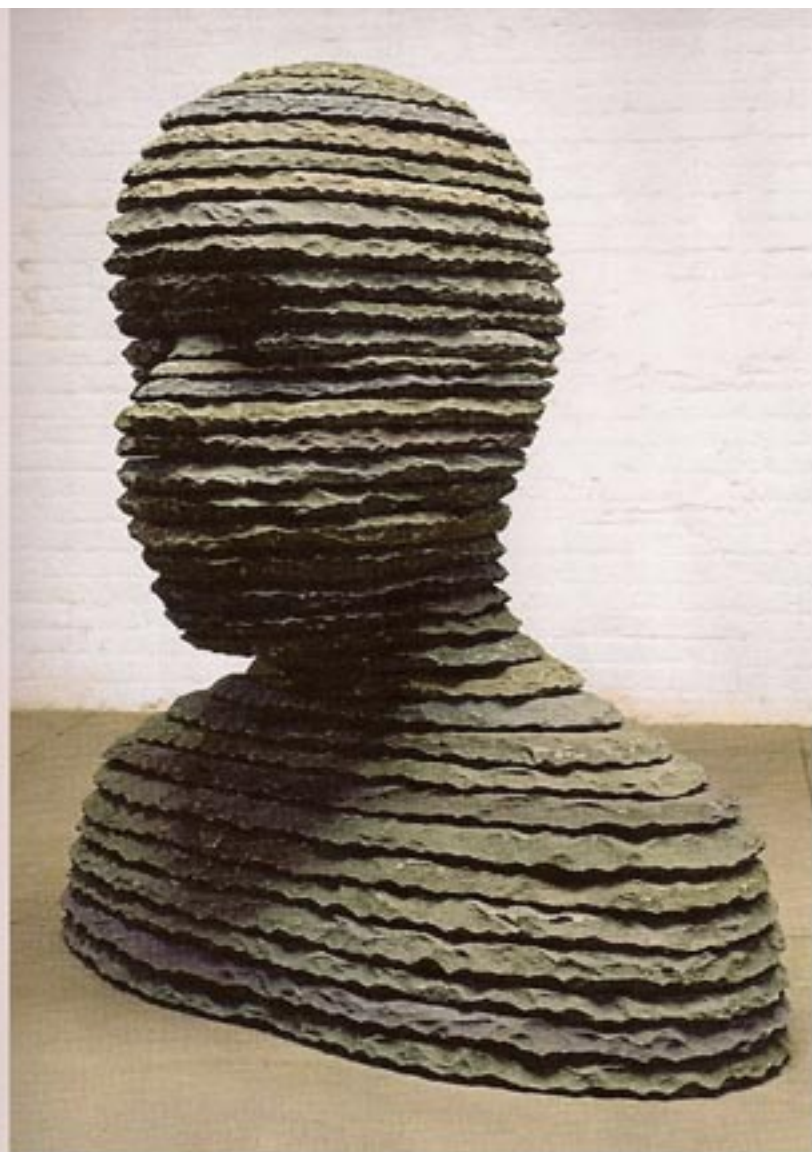
JGC: The portraits capture a range of races, cultures, and ages—people from the neighborhood; so there's a lot of information in these works. What stone do you use for them?

BV: The small work that I do, whether it's figurative or portraiture, is made from slate roof shingles. Again, it's a sedimentary rock. The way they make the slate shingle is by separating the natural formations of the rock. It is that same inspiration of how the stone was formed in nature and then how it was quarried in nature. I bring back the layering of stone formations in nature, and this allows me to do smaller scale pieces like the heads. And you're right: some portraits are people from the streets. I picked them out because they have a specific shape and character that I like. I started by doing portraits of my friends and of my family because I was familiar with them. Throughout my career, my work has dealt with the primal connections of man to nature. When I came to New York, I was trying to find the materials and things that made me feel connected to that primal force within nature.

JGC: It seems to me that even the smaller pieces have a big feeling.

BV: The big feeling you're talking about—you can really give the credit to the material. Stone has a great impact on us as humans. We've had contact with it throughout our





Above: *Zamir*, 2004. Bluestone, 50 x 49 x 29 in. Right: *Sara*, 2002. Bluestone, 65 x 46 x 34 in.

entire human evolution—it's the fact that we're familiar with the material and the weight of it. And the scale is basically dictated by the fact that slate roof shingles are about a quarter of an inch thick. So I work with that and the fact that this is how it naturally forms. In the big pieces, the layers are one to two inches thick. They come that way naturally. I use the natural layers in different thicknesses and colors. I usually create a piece no larger than twice life-sized, because I relate the scale of my work to human scale.

JGC: Also, I can see some shepherds and sheep and Buddha figures. Do you want to talk about the spiritual aspects of your work? For instance, does the shepherd go back to pre-Christian sculpture, or does it derive from another era?

BV: A lot of my pieces take meditative poses. I create forms and poses that allow me to be true to my understanding of gravity. Buddha shapes are usually balanced in posture, so I can do the total shape with layers. In addition, meditative forms have a spirituality common to many different religions. The goal is to respect the materials that inspire me. The shepherd is related to art history, as well as to my personal experience with sheep in the desert. When sheep walk, they gather together. Where they touch, several layers of stone connect the sheep. The same is true for my figures—for instance, in the way that a woman hugs a man. The layers of stone connect the two figures in a primal way.

JGC: The glacial boulders are so gorgeous.

BV: If you look at my work, you'll see that I try to leave the boulder shape as natural as possible.

JGC: Japanese and Chinese cultures also revere stone. Do you have a cultural background that you bring to your practice?

BV: I grew up on a small farm in Israel with a tremendous amount of love for the earth. The earth provided for my family. My father was a basic farmer. He thought that using heavy equipment was raping the land, and he used to plow with a mule. Traveling, I realized that a primal connection to the land is universal. I'd like to add that working with stone has had a tremendous impact on my life. It's a material that keeps you humble. You have to be present while you work, and it really puts you in the right place. Your entire life is only a second in the lifetime of a stone formation. So, I have respect for the materials I work with; I have respect for nature, natural forces, and for what I learn from the processes that I'm doing. The processes I use have a tremendous impact on my style. That's why even today, with all my success, I keep only one assistant, because it allows me to be connected to the process and to continue to grow as a sculptor.

Jan Garden Castro is a writer living in New York.

