In its purity the word architecture generally conjures up a tangible and three-dimensional meaning. A secondary definition is the “structure of anything.” Employing the broad spectrum of the word’s use, I would describe Gonzalo Fonseca’s work as architectural art, for his creations go beyond the structural and the constructionist and can best be understood in that limbo between the narrowest and the broadest interpretations of architecture.

Whether it is a drawing, painting, model, project, or completed piece of sculpture, his work has a substantial presence so real that by three-dimensionalizing it, or one of its inviting apertures, the beholder comes to feel that the work can be entered and would in fact offer interesting accommodation.

It is this inviting intimacy into an environment that certainly could be, but never was and most often isn’t, that is the seductive, and beguiling aspect of Fonseca’s work.

Yet look closely at these fantastic constructions. Are they meant for us or are they reserved for a different breed who are the result of a composite culture of Incas, Egyptians, Romans, Qatabanians, et al. The sheer walls rising penetrated by spayed recesses and reached by cascades of stairs and tricky little ladders, for whom are they? The conundrum that intrigues me is whom shall I meet as I try to make my way into these massive fabrications which are the visible products of an extraordinarily rich mind with a superb inner structure.

Gonzalo Fonseca was born in Montevideo, Uruguay in 1922, the son of an engineer/novelist. He visited Europe with his family when he was eleven and apparently that voyage to Rome, Venice, and Paris made a tremendous impression on him and, in a sense, gave the long-term direction to his creative energy. When the Fonsecas returned to Uruguay, Gonzalo started carving marble and, though he attended university, drawing, painting and sculpting completely overwhelmed his life. In 1940 he met Joaquin Torres-Garcia who was to be the most singularly important figure in his life. Torres-Garcia, also a native of Uruguay, had returned to Montevideo from Europe where he had spent forty-three years and had attained a serious measure of success. An individual like Mondrian, and the spirit of cubism and neo-plasticism influenced Torres-Garcia who, in turn, formed the “Humanistic Constructivism” movement.

It is extraordinary that neither Uruguayan artist has had a major exhibition in New York. Now both are the subjects of important shows being held in New York at the same time. Torres-Garcia’s creative and spiritual impact on Fonseca must be acknowledged.

From 1941 to 1949 Gonzalo Fonseca studied and worked with Torres-Garcia together with many other students. Living in a tower in Montevideo he joined Atelier Torres-Garcia and concentrated on painting.

Uruguay is a poor land archaeologically. Fonseca’s attraction to antiquities was sharpened during his European trip when he visited monuments, and museums. In 1945 he went to see the pre-Columbian and Colonial sites in Peru and Bolivia, and started to record his incisive impressions and collect ancient and ethnological artifacts.

At twenty-seven, with ten years of independence and professionally successful artistic experience, Fonseca set off for the ancient world. Then the following three years were devoted to investigating and slowly assimilating his impressions of Greece, Turkey, Egypt and Spain.

Faith, art as an act of faith, seems to be Fonseca’s central concern. One must not try self-consciously to “make art”; real art as an act of faith successfully strips the work of all its superficiality. By identifying with some substrata of “style” a work of honest merit can be achieved. Creating by empathizing with group consciousness puts one in touch with “style” and the result can only be a work of art of integrity. This is what Fonseca strives for. It is this deep commitment to the natural integrity of the art of the past which will lead artists back to roots, to origins which are substantial, genuine, functional and universal.

This blending makes for a personal style. Walking into Fonseca’s studio gives the visitor a strange horizontal-cultural profile in vertical time. Placed in vitrines, and resting on ledges, on shelves, squeezed in between rare volumes on archaeology and ethnology are pieces of the past, artifacts from a brilliantly varied collection of cultures. Enigmatic pieces from dozens of different places in as many kinds of materials. These artifacts are constantly being studied and reevaluated. Fonseca, who has excavated and studied cultures in situ and the indigenous arts of half the world at first hand draws in part on his books and his collection for his “faith” and finds the common denominators in his search. Here in these volumes and in his hands are the products of faith, of human dedication/devotion which were categorized as works of art only much later.

Walking from his museum-like entrance room into the studio is not a cultural shock but a logical continuum. Fonseca’s work is full of the acts of faith using his private repertoire of signs, symbols and totemic objects.

Once long ago, Fonseca wore his iconographic vocabulary with objects dangling from his body like a Shaman. Happily he has divested his own person of these materials and returned them into his work. Happily, too, the fragile constructions he once carved into the wet sands of Long Island beaches—huge fantastic creations which lasted but a few hours until the sea reclaimed the sand—are now
permanently preserved in sculpture, and models that he has completed are being realized as projects now.

This may sound sober and solemn—far, far from it. In everything Fonseca introduces wit, charm, humor and a private quip which, though at times too personal to be thoroughly understood, makes itself very much felt.

After living and working for four years in Paris, Fonseca arrived in the United States in 1957. After an exhibition in Portland, Oregon, he moved to New York and worked on a number of commissions.

Fonseca is now thinking of carving an entire limestone hill in Uruguay, a site possibly in Tacuarembo over fifty feet high and two hundred feet long. His drawing for this truly monumental task is in this exhibition and it, like so many of his most recent sculptures, will have that strange mixture of fantasy and reality, humor and profundity, substantility and ethereality, enigma and logic that make most of his work searching, provocative and beautiful.

Karl Katz