They might be called hypogeae, menhirs, beaytiuls; perhaps steles with archaic graffiti. Or maybe labyrinths, spirals, funeral barges. They might be called Ajanta, Lalibella, Petra, remote cities carved in stone.

They are sculptures by Gonzalo Fonseca, which develop the monumental, primitive, prehistoric, mythical aspect already harbored in the work and in the preachings of his teacher, Joaquín Torres García. He develops and changes it, counterposing man’s seal and the natural formation of the stone.

Fonseca is not fanatic about abstraction or geometry, and thus he tolerates contradictions within a single work: in Membrada disjecta —the title in itself already sets the course— a particularly complex sculpture, he includes a naturalistic foot, hand and head. It could be considered a postmodernist attitude, but it is instead the obscure desire for the human figure, as if, after the recovery of the object as taught by Torres García, Fonseca were proposing the recovery of the human figure.

In Rome, more so than in Greece, sculpture was associated with commemoration and with power. Nevertheless, when sculpture sought to free itself from a destiny that threatened it into glorifying dictators, politicians, mythological or religious figures, what other choice was there other than doing away with the human figure? For many years Fonseca has used architectural themes for his stones. It is perhaps this choice that makes his human figures, once again insinuated now, seem unresolved. The head that emerges in Urania, 1975, is inside the stone. But this will to recover the human figure would also seem to be lacking: the figure is reduced to mere fragments.

Sculpture tradition can be broken down into those who “add” something—by modeling—and those who “take away” by—carving and excavating. Gonzalo Fonseca belongs to the latter group: he excavates the stone, and when he adds a form, it is as if it had been carved earlier, somewhere else, and were incorporated now.

Fonseca assumes the attitude of man at a time prior to all styles. Thus he takes a rounded stone—or an irregular one, it makes no difference—and performs an incision on it, as a way of leaving an impression, a mark on an object which does not lose its natural state.

This natural state makes his sculptures seem—intentionally—unfinished, incomplete, non finito: a perhaps giant stone, after treatment by the artist, continues to be half natural and half worked, making his will for the not finished absolutely clear.

The mannerist Giulio Romano knew how to use this resource of the non finito in his architecture, where it allowed him to show, simultaneously, the differences between classical and natural order, between things conceived of and built by man and natural disorder. Where does nature end and art begin? Muro bianco, 1977, could be a natural wall, yet Fonseca intrudes upon it with rectangles, furnished niches, votive offerings or hangings, of what could not have been carved—letters, numbers—and almost never free forms.
The sgraffito on the surfaces and the masses captures the most minimal changes in light and produces a dynamism of a pictorial sort, which reveals that Fonseca, as a sculptor, deals with the dialectics of close and distance vision.

Architectural themes predominate in his sculpture. Parenthetically, here we have the old polemic, which seems anachronistic today when artistic genres have very much fused: What is there of sculpture in architecture? What is there of architecture in sculpture? That issue brought about the confrontation between Frank Lloyd Wright and Le Corbusier regarding the Parthenon.

Fonseca’s sculpture can evoke the heterogeneous syntax and the sign images of Early Christian architecture, an architecture made up of bits and pieces of other cultures (Oriental, Roman, incorporating capitals, columns, etc.). Just as the spatiality Fonseca proposes could be linked to that of the basilicas, with their ethical, civilian aura.

Over the last 2000 years of the history of art, the subject of virtual architecture has been ever present. In Flemish art, to cite one example, all of van Eyck’s madonnas recline on some cathedral. Is it that he could not paint those figures without an architectural support?

Renaissance artists, on their part, painted their figures with the rigor of architecture (Piero della Francesca, Leonardo), and their architecture like human figures inscribed on an architectural floor plan for a church (Francesco di Giorgio’s drawing).

Another theme of Fonseca’s sculpture are ruins, a theme whose genealogy has links to the school of Giotto (The miracle of St. Sylvester by Maso di Banco), to Piero della Francesca (The nativity), to Mantegna, and, notably, to Piranesi (the one with the black brain, as Victor Hugo would say).

But Fonseca’s ruins are different, because for him—just as for ancient man—there are still no marked differences between landscape and the urban system. He therefore deduces that ruins are a sort of assimilation or architecture by nature; thus, his attraction to them.

Fonseca’s work—like that of the primitives—has a cosmological dimension. That of a rationalist seduced by irrationalism. Just as the pre-Cortesian astronomical observatories survive (the “Caracol,” at Chichen Itza, is perhaps the most complex of all) along with those of India, the Inariwata at Macchu Picchu, and the Mesopotamian ziggurats, so the rationalist and Calvinkist Le Corbusier abandons the rational canons for Ronchamp, as does Tatlin for the Monument to the Third International, as does Fonseca. In sum, it would seem to be a rationality incomprehensible by today’s parameters of understanding. The numbered steps of a staircase suggest something rational. Uxmal, Saqqara. But where do they lead? What are they? Only the magic of astrology covers these questions.

Gonzalo Fonseca’s proposal makes reference to the oldness of the world. The testimonies of that antiquity long remained confined to ethnographic and archeological museums. Only in the thirty did Cubism grant them artistic status. And Cycladic sculpture ceased to be archaeology and became art. But does Fonseca love ruin, love archeology? No, since his work bears witness to the fact that he is not a nostalgic or a romantic.

Instead, Fonseca would seem to love the dawn of civilization, when everything was still to be named, at a time, now, when contemporary civilization is severely put to test. And his work is a delayed retrieval of far-off origins, a primeval dialogue that takes place before being able to give things a name.