Gonzalo Fonseca
By Jonathan Sinclair Wilson
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“Imagination and Memory are but one thing…”
Thomas Hobbes

For the past 25 years Gonzalo Fonseca has been creating fragments of imagined worlds, worlds continuous with but other than our own. These pieces, by tempting us with the pleasures of recognizing features of our world, and by denying us such facile resolutions, lead us in an ascending series of reflections on that celebrated trilogy of questions: “Who are we? Where do we come from? Where are we going?”

The second of these questions, in particular, appears to animate the work, offering clues to the answer to the other two. An encounter with his pieces—most in stone, either limestone or marble, some in wood, concrete or bronze—reverberates with images of the monuments of other civilizations and allusions to their achievements. Their terraces and steps can bring to mind the vast, mute remains of forgotten empires, invoking their hierarchical social structures and, often, terrible, religious observances. Inscribed circles, lines and digits may suggest the now irrecoverable computations of ancient astronomers preserved for us in lay lines and standing stones. Petrograms recall early, and still unfinished, efforts to devise a script adequate to our needs for expression, while half-erased inscriptions hint at the alternative conceptions there have been and may yet be of the social order and our place in the cosmos. Different objects, from different perspectives, inspire, in different viewers, a vast range of references, whether it be to the ideal city of the Italian renaissance, Egyptian funerary barges, Greek ritual, even the precarious cliff dwellings of the Hopi or Dogon.

Yet the resemblances are never exact and the echoes are merely echoes. As the references to meteorites contained in a number of works or their titles may imply, the provenance of the objects is mysterious and their connection with us on any dimension of time or space, obscure. The evidence they present is, seemingly, indiscernible; it teases us to supply them with an appropriate context of belief and practice.

Fonseca was born in Montevideo in 1922. His apprenticeship, during the 1940’s, was to Joaquin Torres-Garcia, during the final, “universal” constructivist phase of that master’s life. From him Fonseca assimilated much of the constructivist tradition of abstraction. Although not confined to the language of abstraction, Fonseca’s sculptures have evolved a related vocabulary, including steps, plumb weights, columns, movable grids, doors, stele, pyramid, cones and sphères. Rather than an abstraction of sensuous forms, this vocabulary represents a flexible range of abstract concepts.

In 1950, Fonseca left Uruguay, a country with neither museums nor old stones, for travels in the Middle East, where he developed a lasting fascination with classical Greek and Semitic cultures. From 1953-56, he lived in Paris and since 1957 has divided his time between New York and Seravezza near Lucca. In 1964, Fonseca’s concerns emerged in a haunting piece in stone entitled and stencilled, MEMORIA DISJUGATA, that, with its dislocations, wit and subtle references, such as the leather thong articulating the potential for movement in the foot suspended from it, the physical puncs, the suggestion that architectural forms encode a language of bodily parts, and most fundamentally, a subversion of the traditional view of sculpture as “releasing” the human form from stone, was a work that cast a long shadow forward. Since then, Fonseca’s work has described a consistent trajectory, exploring a subject matter made his own by the uniquely engaging spirit of his approach to it.

The immediate impact of that work is one of density, a density in the thought which has gone into the precise carving, the juxtaposition of textures and the conjunction of elements in the individual pieces. The specific gravity of the pieces is not that of sculptures striving self-consciously after the chthonic; nor is it in tension with the imposed form.

It is the gravity of the element used, on which the sculptor has scored the marks of time.

In their making, the assurance of the pieces is complete and, although technique itself is not offered as the object of our attention, it may be worth remarking how the artist has conjured the space of imagined possibilities the pieces occupy by two pervasive, means he succeeds in insinuating between us and the worlds we glimpse in these works a speculum in anima.
deliberately conflicting indications are offered, again unlike an architect’s scale model we realize that we do not know how we could participate in them. (In this respect, Fonseca’s drawings may offer a misleading point d’appui for approaching the sculptures. Frequently abounding with brief, almost Futurist figures engaged on strenuous engineering projects, they can suggest a point of view akin to Samuel Gulliver on his travels. Although the same imaginative intelligence is evident in them, it is functioning in a different mode. A drawing could not furnish the same sharp sense of a world elsewhere, the illusion that this is a fragment of such a world and not merely a representation of it.)

The second is the way the material is worked and the varying qualities of finish imparted to it. Whereas the use of scavo establishes our spatial relation to the works, the finish establishes the conditions for our temporal relations. A finely polished surface may convey the human endeavor to defy the attrition of time, while a rough, broken texture reveals the vanity of that endeavor, and a natural surface supplies a permanent and almost timeless baseline. Yet here, too, we discover that art has beguiled us. In what sense are we confronted with evidence of a past? Does it make sense to speak of a past? Why past at all, or even a suggestion of the passage of time? Having undermined the continuity of these works with our world, the unsettling possibility emerges that, as Thomas Hobbes claimed, “Imagination and Memory are but one thing...”

However, while the immediate impression of the works may be one of ingenuity, the invitation they extend is to play: a door waits to reveal what lies behind it, parts sit detachably in their niches or hang suspended by cords and thongs. Clearly we are not meant to resist the temptation to find out what they can do. When we try, conventions of public display permitting, we get, quite marvelously, a sense of the artist’s own enjoyment in creating them, and perhaps also a remembrance of childhood fun (another past, one might say). Only as we discover that behind the first grill lies another, or that the tools awaiting our manipulation half buried in a pit of sand are in the shapes of a cup and a spear, does it dawn on us that we are part of a wider game, a game with our expectations and associations, the natural metaphor for which is a labyrinth. As in any labyrinth, the process here is one of exploration in implicit dialogue with the creator of the maze. And here the thread we offered to guide us through is one of ironic humor at the expense of our attempts at explanation.

The six works at the Venice Biennale exemplify this. All of them are large, in two cases even monumental, and all in marble, of several varieties. The exhibition does not represent the range of Fonseca’s output; it would be mistaken to suppose that he always works on pieces of this size, and we must hope for a future opportunity that brings together the full gamut from the imposing MURO BIANCO shown here down to those that fit with a satisfying heft into the hand. Nevertheless, the exhibition includes some of the finest individual pieces and it demonstrate how intimately related his works are.

As one looks at these works one is confronted by their riddles. Where could KATABASIS II (perhaps the most impressive of a long series of such funerary stone vessels) be bound for, and is the name, that of the boat which carried Orpheus to Eurydice, a hint? What were the ceremonies performed on the open space of PIAZZA, and how do we retrieve the meaning of the broken concentric circles on the side of the stone? Can we imagine the purposes, apparently religious, with which the votive pillar, in such beautiful bleached Tiberine marble, came to be fashioned?

Of this last work, it is tantalizing to know that the hole drilled through it mirrors a hole in one of the columns in Santa Maria in Aracoeli on the Capitol Hill, a column which may have stood in an earlier Etruscan temple on the site, allowing Sirius to be observed at certain times. It reminds us how mathematical calculation and astronomical observation have so often intersected with religious belief ("Astronomy is the basis of all religion" for Walter Burkert in Greek Religion), and it suggests how much more might be disclosed by the details of these stones. But it remains merely as clue, to add to the others, which only raise more questions while answers to the puzzles are withheld.

Reflecting on the significance of these intricate and precisely carved features one detects a play of reason: the elements are those of a rational understanding, but reason too is played with and even its authority is in the end undermined by the inability to extricate us from the maze. Perhaps the neatest illustration of this quest is the word resto to be found on the PILIAR. Obviously part of a larger inscription, it is all that now remains and no amount of archaeological reconstruction or historical imagination is likely to recreate the original. If it were to, as the artist can tell us, it would only discover the palindrome "Esope restes ici et se repose", another blind alley.

It may be here that we reach the top of our ascent, when we catch a glimpse of ourselves inside the labyrinth, baffled yet persisting in our attempts to find the way through. Arguably, any serious and lasting art is informed by values relevant to more than the art alone, and this, wy, skeptical, and fundamentally humanist appreciation of our predicament is, for me, the one which emerges from these enigmatic and playfull works.

Jonathan Sinclair Wilson
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