Although Gonzalo Fonseca (Montevideo, 1922 - Pietrasanta, 1997) lived in Madrid for a time and visited Spain on a number of occasions, his oeuvre has received little critical attention in this country. His vision of sculpture, his revision of the memory of this art form on the grounds of a personal experience within the XXth Century artistic production, from the coordinate of New York City, has not found a place on Spain’s map of art critique until now with this exhibition produced by the Fundación César Manrique, to whom I am most grateful, as well as I am to Gonzalo Fonseca’s family for believing in this project.

Fonseca’s works are on exhibit in nearly all museums of fine arts in Latin America, from Montevideo to Caracas, as well as in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the Brooklyn Museum of Art and the Jewish Museum of New York, which produced a retrospective exhibition of his work in November 1970. Furthermore, he represented Uruguay in the 44th edition of the Venice Biennale in 1990.

Fonseca was an original and brilliant sculptor; and above all he was a superb example of a wise man, a master of life, a scholar who spoke eight languages and had lived on several continents. His life and learning are embodied and clearly visible in his art.

His work was seriously presented in Spain for the first time in the exhibition curated by Cecilia Buzio de Torres and Mari Carmen Ramirez entitled La Escuela del Sur. El taller Torres-García y su legado (The School of the South. The Torres-García Workshop and its Legacy) held at the MNRS (Museo Nacional Reina Sofia), Madrid in 1991.
His works grace public spaces from the main square in Pietrasanta to the sidewalks of New York City. An important mural of his overlooks the foyer of the New School, a center for university studies in New York City, and his Torre (Tower), a sculpture of great size and complexity stands in the Ruta de la Amistad in Mexico City.


Critical Fortune

Some sculptors are famous in their time, but in a few years this recognition slips away, as if through a sieve. The more solid work of others sticks in the sieve in temporary oblivion until its enduring value is recognized, as they are not mere grains of sand but perceivable traces of the human imprint. One specific example of this neglect is Julio González, who was considered merely an artisan in his time and forgotten in Spain. Later, his work was rediscovered by David Smith and the art critics in the United States, but it was not publicly exhibited in the Pompidou (Paris) or the IVAM (Valencian Institute of Modern Art, Valencia) until the 1980s.

Gonzalo Fonseca is another example of this type of neglect. His manifest accomplishments were obscured by those of Torres-Garcia, whose school he did not attend in order to copy nor did he stay for a long period of time. He sought a personal and powerful language, imagined and shaped by other geographies with other winds, other rocks and other less Platonic geometries.

In 1962 he emerged from the shadow of the Torres-Garcia School with an individual exhibition at the Portland Art Museum in Oregon. We hope that this present show will serve to draw attention to Fonseca’s work in Spain and irradiate the magic that its gaze
demands. As time gives bronze a patina, it also leaves its mark on people. Time also chisels
the history of art: the works of some, lacking substance and consistency, disappear; while
the works of others crystalize and acquire the force of lightning. In Marguerite Yourcenar’s
words, “Time sculpt.”

The events in Fonseca’s own life can be deceiving. He was born in Uruguay and
represented that country at the Venice Biennale in 1990. He lived in New York where the
Jewish Museum produced his first retrospective exhibition in 1971. But he, like
Schliessmann, travelled in pursuit of languages and of what we call treasures, working on
his Trojan secret hoard amidst Seravezza’s marble and New York’s Soho. Fonseca believed
that a homeland has limits, or limits, whereas a place does not. Ivo Mesquita, curator for
the exhibition La otra cartografía (The Other Cartography), which questioned the concepts
of Latin American art, defending the hybrid and crossbred vision of the cultures, wrote in
the introductory text for that exhibition that “Latin America does not have just one identity.
Latin America embraces at least six cultural groups: the Amazon, the Caribbean (Venezuela,
Northern Brazil, Guiana and the Caribbean islands), the Southern Cone (Argentina, Chile,
Uruguay and Southern Brazil), the Andes (Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador and Colombia), Mexico and
Central America. One cannot perceive and much less represent in a single portrait all of the
region’s many hues without taking into account all of the particularities. The geo-political
criteria used to govern the Latin American artistic production has not been sufficient in
representing the current artistic creation on this continent”.

Fonseca had already broken away from that terminology years before. He considered
himself merely an artist, without any nationalistic adjectives. There is simply no basis for
relating his œuvre to that of other Latin American, Spanish or U.S. artists. For Fonseca those
who insist upon creating a regional history of art ignore the universality of much of human
action and thus create stereotypes that can only be false, particularly today when we can
buy Puebla Indian earrings made in Pakistan or Catalanion rope-soled sandals made in
China. But these traditional (and mythical) images of Spain and Latin America persist in the
Anglo Saxon world.

He knew that to become universal, cosmopolitan, one needs to be more a resident and less
a patriot. For this reason, he was always bewildered by the penchant to produce exhibitions
of current “Latin American art”, reducing myriad cultures to a single political whole. In his
life Fonseca also followed a path of humility - apparent poverty - between New York and Pietrasanta. At first glance he often appeared to be a simple workman. Fonseca had learned to renounce all material luxury in order to concentrate on a being a well-read person and on his own work. As the poet José Ángel Valente has indicated: “absolute poverty or the most private brand of poverty (die eigentliche Armut) referred to by Eckhart is the prefiguration of ecstasy: ‘poor is he who has nothing. Poor of spirit, that is to say, just as an eye is poor, empty of all color and receptive to all color, he who is poor of spirit is receptive to all spirit’. That is why poverty is another name for emptiness, void, nothing ‘to be bare, to be poor, to have nothing, to be empty transforms nature’. Or Juan de la Cruz: ‘to come to own all – do not wish to own something in nothing... To become what you do not own – you must go where you own not’. Poverty, nothing, emptiness are the substance of ecstasy, which is in turn the lack of any substance that the soul operates in itself in order to make enlightenment and union possible”. This pursuit of perfection and simplicity, clearly present in his work, was what Fonseca searched for in his own life.

As reviewers have stressed time and again, visual thought (das bildnerische Denken, to use Paul Klee’s words), so evident in Fonseca’s work, is worlds apart from Torres-Garcia’s constructivism or archaeology. His sculpture opens up a whole new landscape.

**Fonseca’s oeuvre**

There are two fundamental features in Fonseca’s work.

On the one hand is its intimacy and modesty, it creates private moments in sculptures addressed to memory and knowledge. Mnemosyne, the mother of the arts and history, continues to be the consolidation of rememberance, that trait that directs not just the eye but also, with innate and confidential logic, the sense of touch.

The other is a sense of grandeur, based on the power of the simplification, his sense of geometric form as a structure underlying an epidermis of light and symbols. A determination not to attract viewers to a landscape but to embed it in them: the motif (that is, the scene) and the artist’s response is merged. Fonseca eliminates the proscenium that all sculpture demands.
Fonseca's oeuvre is united in his text, in his voice and it gathers together visions of diverse civilizations. At times it is the tombs of Lycia, the remembrance of Petra with that architecture that never ceases to be a simple funerary relief. At others times these visions are of other worlds more exotic. The world of the coastal burials, like the facades on temples, is not only to be found in Lycia. The Toraja people from Ranteupa in the Celebes Islands, Indonesia, bury their dead in tree trunks and caves dug out of the rock. This region covered with an exuberant vegetation and rice fields is a mountainous region with an extraordinary natural beauty.

According to their ancestral rite of passage, the Toraja bury their dead in holes carved out of rock three or four metres off the ground. At the entrance to each rock small wooden doors are craved where plaster or wood figurines representing the spirits of the dead are placed. Legend has it that these figurines dance all night till dawn. These tiny temples, unlike the scale of those at Lycia, seem to be organised into cities that live inside the rock. That spirit of dwelling inside matter is what inspired Fonseca to create his underground cities, marked by the external beauty of the stone.

Fonseca guides us through his sculptures the way the Swiss adventurer Johann Ludwig Burckhardt, Chayakh Ibrahim, guided his colleagues through the Sik gorge on 22 August 1812 to discover the view of Petra. He noted it all in his drawing book: the treasure, the monastery, the daughter’s palace and the pharaoh’s phallus. David Roberts later trained the Cook agency to reach Petra and thus drew it closer to Western art history. Fonseca’s work possesses, however, what the poet Juan Ramón Jiménez called “indestructible posterity”, the incomparable scope of his poetry. Fonseca’s work, like Mallarmé’s poetry, is a place or point of convergence for other languages (architectural and sculptural, anthropological and religious) where chance and need, memory and incandescence overlap. Fonseca lived his life around a Mallarmian concept, a poet’s ideology: “the case of a poet in this society which does not allow him to live, is the case of a man who isolates himself to sculpt his own tomb”.

Unlike the Platonists, he was not excited by Mediterranean antiquity. What excited him, rather, was the contemporary view of Rome and Alexandria, of the valley of Thebes and the Maya stones, and so he sculpted - over all those levels of civilization - a new landscape. Fonseca followed Friedrich Nietzsche’s maxim from Use and Abuse of History: “the
language of the past is always oracular: you who know the present will only understand it as builders of a future.

Thus, in the catalogue for the 44th Mostra de Venecia, where Fonseca, as Uruguay’s representative, exhibited a fantastic installation of his diverse cosmogonies Ángel Kalenberg wrote: “Fonseca’s work – like the primitives – has a cosmological dimension: that of a rationalist seduced by irrationality. Just as the pre-Cortesian astronomical observatories survive (perhaps the most complex is the “caracol” at Chichén Itzá), along with those of India, the Intiwatana at Machu Picchu, and the Mesopotamian ziggurats, so the rationalist and Calvinist 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 on a stairway suggest something rational. Uxmal, Saqqara, but, where do they lead? What are they? Only the magic of astronomy is able to address these questions. Gonzalo Fonseca’s proposal refers to the antiquity of the world... His work is a delayed retrieval of far-off origins, a primitive dialogue that takes place before things could be given names.

Fonseca’s iconology

Before he made a single cut into a stone, Fonseca reflected at length not on its nature, but on its history. For example, the abrupt changes in temperature in upper Egypt cause the basalt quarries to shatter every night, gradually relinquishing their inner being. The wind sculpts the stone and whisk it away, depositing it on the banks of the Nile, its hardness converted into sand. Fonseca felt that stone - essentially sand - did not travel well, which may explain why he had so few exhibitions.

The analyses which have been done of Fonseca’s work inevitably associate it with either archaeological interpretations or with architecture as a narrative or an evocative form. The titles of his works, from Columbaria in wood to the red travertine stones converted into Piazza’s, convey a deceptive nostalgia. Fonseca’s work is not a window or an archaeological display, as the work of Charles Simonds (New York, 1945) is presented in a certain way or in his own body or in certain corners of the city. Fonseca’s work is a journey through the history of archaeology. Only he knew where that window, or this particular niche or that
other form belonged. Only the artist possessed the memory of the reference from which he recreated “his” civilization and his alchemy of forms, just as only the delta knows the origin of the sands deposited into it.

Nor is reference to Precolombian architecture the only basis of Fonseca’s work and visual memory. Archaeologies of all kinds appear in it, from the Precolombian world in all its blinding variety to the Eastern Mediterranean and its different epochs. All of this from a view that New York City, the megalopolis of the Western world imposes. What is left of civis metamorphoses into a current visual experience. Fonseca reflected at length - on cities from every kind of civilization - from New York City.

The steps in his works that lead to tombs are not very different from the stairs leading down into the subway, the under-ground. Metropolitan railways, subways, are the XXth Century cities’ circulatory system, like the labyrinths which lead or lose the hero who enters the secret nooks of the pyramids. For Fonseca the Maltese hypogaeum is an underground tunnel as large as Manhattan. His own ex-libris is a ladder with the motto dig we must. Fonseca has converted into a motto, has precipitated in another alchemy, a sign that Con Edison still uses every time they dig under streets of New York to repair cables. Fonseca’s ladder is not Jacob’s biblical ladder; rather, it warns us that for every plateau of civilization there is a descent into hell.

Fonseca’s iconography is the city’s iconography of the existing modern civis. The city and the flow of street traffic constitute the leitmotiv of contemporary art. Alberto Giacometti in his group of lithographs entitled Paris sans fin, codifies a city tour, the experience of a Parisian who never leaves the city and wanders through it. Jean Dubuffet, after a period dedicated to depicting villages and the countryside, freezes in his art the human tide that pours out of the subway each day. In Mark Tobey the rhythm of the city, the lights of Broadway, lead into abstraction, to his white writing. In Alexander Calder, sculpture sets itself up as a traffic light of Miroesque forms.

In Philip Guston the flight from the city, as in Julio Cortázar, awakens the memory of his ghosts; his terrible figuration from 1969 on, that speaks of the noise and the garbage, the agony of the daily struggle in the great metropolis. While the Pop world painted the city’s appeal, the aesthetic of neon, or as the practitioners of Land art who moved to spaces
without people, Fonseca has craved the city’s discourse, the forms to live in the city in its diachrony.

Fonseca constructed a sculpture like a topography, as a place of encounter for archaeologies directed to memory, obliging the viewer to enter into his universe, to step - just as Edison employees - into the labyrinth of his visual thought. His work broadens our horizons, but never allows us to reach into his sanctuary.

This is seen more clearly in Fonseca’s drawings, where the artist, with the imagination of a futurist archaeologist (pardon the paradox), attempts to shape the links between collective memory and today’s world. Fonseca has visited all cultures and all places, delving into New York’s jungle. His drawings are closer to Italian landscapes than to Corot, who knows that black and white are densities that complicate grey, where the hills of Tuscany look like ships run aground. In Fonseca ancient sources are petrified in symbolic spaces, such as Costolia (1980), where travertine marble is metonymically personified by a series of fingers, or in Arethusa (also from 1980). While boats such as the wooden Kathabasis (1973) or Islip (1975), craved in stone, run aground and metamorphose into buildings or inhabited quarries, cities such as Tebaída (1973-79), in turn, will need to be set on wheels like Odysseus’ horse-fortress to cross the walls of Troy.

If the Columbaria are presented as treasure chests – like the door to the unknown depths where Lord Carnavon kept his most cherished ancient Egyptian trophies – his cities refer to numbers which bring to mind the sections of an archaeological dig as much as they do the numbers on buildings and the cartography of Manhattan’s streets. Inscriptions also play an essential role, particularly a formal role, in Fonseca’s sculpture. For him the inscriptions on works of art “make” their history, whether in the Roman tombs, in the Cathedral choirs, in the Medieval miniatures such as marginalia, in the Baroque bells, in Dürer’s or Miró’s paintings (that type of “language of paradise”), or in coats of arms. Inscriptions have a dual meaning: the history of the forms of inscriptions (from the Roman upper case to Renaissance capitals, from Arabic to oriental) and the story that they themselves have to tell.

Viewers must “decipher” the inscriptions, obliging them to come closer to the work. Fonseca liked to tell the story of Yvonne Mensees, a German historian from Mainz who,
while studying the Geisenheim church bells dating from 1401, slipped on pigeon droppings and saved herself from falling off the bell tower by hanging on to the edge of the bell that bears the inscription hilf o got von hymelrich aman (Help me, Lord, not to fall from heaven!).

Aside from the inscriptions, Fonseca’s oeuvre often refers to the street and its numbering. In the mural Great Jones Street (1990), where the artist’s own ténemos, his studio, is located, urban headstones are mixed with shops. In the 1959 wood construction Pilar, he stressed the searching eyes of a figure (himself) represented by two support-like forms that support nothing but suggest the upward rising of the pillar. The sculptor’s gaze is a kingdom that takes everything in. The austerity of these forms dominate the instrumental paraphernalia hanging below. In Katabosion Barge (1977), Fonseca appears as Ulysses tied to the mast of his vessel to prevent him from heeding the song of the sirens.

Adorno and Horkheimer wrote, in Dialéctica de la ilustración (Dialectics of Enlightenment, 1968) that cultural development comes about through the petrification of instinct: “the difference between outside and inside, the potential to separate and identify oneself, self-awareness and moral conscience arise to the extent that man, under economic pressure, learns to distinguish between his own thoughts and feelings and the thoughts and feelings of others”. Artistic creation is central to this process and its most emblematic image is Odysseus’ insistence on being tied to the mast so that he does not hear the song of the sirens, which would bring an end to navigation. The need to reach harbour, where production and accomplishment take place, overcomes the instinctive urge for pleasure: “from the time the encounter between Ulysses and the sirens was happily thwarted, all song suffered. All Western music suffered from the paradox of ‘civilized’ song, a paradox which is nonetheless the inspiration for all serious music”. Fonseca sees himself tied to the stone from which he arises, they sail together.

Sculptural memory

Fonseca’s world has nothing whatsoever to do either with Joseph Cornell’s boxes or Louise Nevelson’s models. With his boxes, Cornell introduced the idea of a compact treasure box of souvenirs, a wunderkammer of personal obsessions, of possessions and mementos. It is an idiotic world, in the sense that it is particular. Fonseca’s world is an encyclopaedic universe.
Nevelson’s work, wood painted gold or black, is a severe, purely formalistic oeuvre. Fonseca’s is a philosophical treatise that unfolds in sculpture. From here, also, the enormous difference with Torres-Garcia’s work which is pictorial and concentrates on Platonic unity in a gradually narrowing language. In Fonseca the tonalities and geometry are enormously complex, from *Grand Orion*, an extraordinary wood relief dating from 1970-72, to the sandstone *Anolema*, done in 1983, where life takes place underneath a pendulum and a weight. As opposed to the writing in the sky that spells out our fate in *Grand Orion*, everyday life gets snarled in the clockwork that maps out the radius of our action in *Anolema*.

Fonseca’s huge murals have been interpreted to be landscape murals, stratas of written memory, like in Egyptian planimetric. Hence, Iris Peruga in her essay “Fonseca. La Soledad Habitada” (Fonseca. Inhabited Solitude) writes: “Fonseca also produced another kind of large work early in his career that can be regarded as walls, or perhaps fragments of large city walls. From the standpoint of their general structure, consistent with the union of vertical pieces of similar dimensions, as well as in the nature of their niches, gashes and protrusions, they bear a very close resemblance to certain types of wood works, in particular the columbarios. A wall is generally meant for protection, not so much from human attack but, much more symbolically, from the references, the chaos that the outside world represents. Its purpose, then, is to protect and conserve the cosmos created on the inside. Many of these huge pieces simultaneously evoke images of sculpture, architecture and landscape, either natural or impacted by human action”.

Fonseca records, inscribes, configures a visual enigma. Fonseca’s objects appear to us to be organic territories; they are not evocations nor parabolas, they are rather a presentiment that all civilization is in ruins. Fonseca knows what is in the Koran especially (17.58) which states: “No city will remain that We shall not destroy before the Day of Resurrection”.

Like Plinius the Elder, voluntary victim of Mount Vesuvius in 79, Fonseca creates a *Naturalis Historia* in books or stones. In his second last book XXXVI, Plinius speaks about marble in the Egyptian obelisks and in the Greek monuments. He concludes by telling us the story of Ocresia, who conceived when she touched the phallus that had mysteriously appeared in Tanaquil and Tarquinius Priscus’ house. The fruit of that stony encounter was Servius Tullius, Sixth king of Rome and founder of the Compitalia (festival of the lares). Fonseca would sculpt stone phalli and boxes of secrets; his geometric theories are not
written but inscribed in two stone books, *Disjecta Membra*, dating from 1964, and *The Geometrician’s Cave*, from 1975.

His geometry is on the one hand a manual of forms and on the other a game of dynamic prisms. Fonseca – like the Valencian sculptor Vicente Martínez – knew that the density of materials is diluted in space, that space can be created, delimited like Chillida with his forge, with the dynamic power that fills the surrounding atmosphere with a positive charge. They know that there is a stone which enables the sculptor to locate a space inside while there are other stones that are not compact, that are alloys like rhodonite, rich in iron, and which chip with a fragility that creates a texture like tapestry. Fonseca uses the *madre cova*, the outer layer of the travertine marble, as though it were elephant hide, to create landscapes such as in his *Fuentes* (Fountains).

He is not a romantic, nor is he an archaeologist or a realist. Fonseca is a builder who identifies himself with his subjects, which he inhabits. According to Damián Bayón, Fonseca has “a unanimous time in which the past merges with the present and stretches towards the future”.

Iris Peruga says that this artist’s work gives time a special dimension, makes it seamless, unitary, global, concentrated in the dimension of imagination: “the way each single piece manages to convene an unlike experience, spanning enormous periods of time, integrating not only the remotest antiquity with modern art, but also the modern architectural experience with the vision of what was humanity’s first attempts at construction, is possibly the key to this strange sensation of the passing of time in his works”.

This sense of timelessness and the scarcely ephemeral, in the polarity of immortality and what the passage of time destroys also interested Paul Klee. Many of his works allude in their titles or in the elements of the composition in retrospective, to the reflection in the traces of temporality. For example, his 1914 painting *Teppich der Erinnerung* (*Rug of Memory*) where oil and chalk are applied to a piece of canvas glued to cardboard, like something that works loose. Also in the lines that fall in the 1938 drawing *Verfall einer Architektur* and in many more titles, a subject dealt with in depth by Josef Helfenstein in his essay “Traces of Memory”.
Fonseca did not recollect nor reconstruct, but navigated through his works giving us a map of the landscapes he shaped. His work reveals that only by manifesting the meaning one gives to the present can one make the past speak.

Just as Hermann Broch (1886-1951) – with whom he shares so many traits (a loquacious conversationalist, a charmer in several different languages, a philosopher of culture) – art, whether poetry or sculpture, is an impatience of knowledge (ein Ungeduld der Erkenntnis). They do not see it as an end in itself but rather as an approach to totality (Welttotalität). For Fonseca, Adrian is fiction, Don Quixote is poetry. If the Viennese author in The Death of Virgil brings together all the classical philosophy in the final hours of the poet’s life, in this journey through the four elements, Fonseca in his sculpture, has engraved a long poem that altogether tells the story of the ruins over and within that which we live.

Fonseca’s oeuvre carries themes from the centuries, but its meaning is not to be sought in iconographies or Platonisms; its meaning is its very appearance, its voice. His visual thought, his sensitivity, has matured over a very long time like the stone with and in which it is expressed. His experience, the power of those enigmatic signs that announce and yet conceal secrets, enter into the natural movement of the universe, pertain to the History of Art. They are fragments which, like Lezama Lima’s literature, talk to their imam. Following the slogan of Charles Daubigny’s tu ne mets rien et tout y est, Fonseca does not place anything and yet everything is there.

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