

THE TRIANGLE OF STONE SINGERS

For more than thirty years, the studio of the sculptor Michele Benedetto, is located at Pietrasanta in an old workshop where marble is processed. A long and narrow structure which flows out into a neglected vegetable plot. Cherry and medlar trees explode with flowers in the Spring. A virginia creeper submerges the place with its brilliant red coloured leaves in summer. Candid geometrical totem-like sculptures stand around this area rising out of the green with incredible natural simplicity. Such a simple and secluded site, but which all the same is imposing like a quiet synthesis of nature's creative spontaneity with laborious artistic rigour.

Adjacent to the railway line, every train that passes by throws the tranquillity of the place into confusion and then falls back into a stunned silence. During the day one perpetually hears the prolonged groan of the pneumatic chisels which sink into the stone, spurting out a swarm of dust. But as soon as the daylight disappears, the thirsty chirping of the cicadas starts, bringing back to mind how many summers in which my

youthful enthusiasm was renewed by meeting these “Three” singers in love with stone. Cesare, Michele, Ray, these three inseparable friends, my friends. Under the pergola around a rustic marble table.

I remember their sun-burned faces, freshly cleaned up, ready for a brotherly love feast. There they are: sharing flavoursome glasses of white wine and common projects of beauty. They would tear a hat to pieces over an idea, joking together with mutual affection or mocking the absurdities of this world of ours, while, with tenderness, the Versilian night surrounds them with velvety perfumes of fresh cut grass. Arguments, drinks, and interminable laughs. Words roll out free, so free in the starlit darkness: the exact opposite of that harshness, patience and hard work with which, during the day, the chisel has tried to win the hostility of the granite, or to conquer the seductive transparencies of white stone.

Indeed it has been their profound mutual feeling that has long kept them so united in their research. Stone is the flesh of the world. Stone is the crystallised silence of inexpressible

time. Stone precedes us and then overtakes us. Stone lives of its own purified transparency. The sculptor is the one who knows how to embrace the totality of the world in the beauty of a fragment. It is also he who is able to contemplate and unveil the sacred mystery; the heart of materials revealed in their secret spell of enchantment. The sculptor is the one who gives himself beyond all limits, so as to be able to embody the ephemeral harmony of forms, only imagined, in the translucent certainty of the stone which will live on.

How many times, in the course of the years and of those pleasant evenings, have I heard them become animated and reaffirm, even polemically, against every hypothesis of sculpture which has the pretence of wiping out any conscious comparison with the intimate artificial resources of the chosen materials, their absolute necessity for a never ending passionate dialogue with stone? It is not by chance that these three artists, sons of illustrious European cultural matrixes, yet admittedly rather distant from each other (Benedetto's sunny Lucan disposition from "Greater Greece", Riva's Longobard Como descent, the inventive

and observant Flemish spirit of Ray L.) arrive in Pietrasanta each magnetized by a shared un-suppressed passion. Destinies that have intersected with each other, always urged on by a precise concrete objective: to make the most secret soul of every piece of marble sing, even if on different registers, but always in tune with each other.

Of those mythical cradles of origin, each one of the “Three” has brought with him the nostalgic know-how of antiquity. The idea is: a work of art that is neither left to chance nor an easy way out. Thus for each one of them this is precisely the “trade” of the sculptor: to demand an extreme virtuous tension. At what price and effort have they learned with how much tenacity each material plays to hide its own fabulous magic. But what differs between them, what in the end determines the exact matrix of their style, that symbolic formal figure that distinguishes and characterises them, has to be sought just there, in their personalised way of descending into the carnal mystery of the hidden body, feminine and stone-like, of the world. One could say, that together they form a trio in which each one plays a different

instrument. One is a lover, one is geometrical and one is a juggler. Here are three definitions that to my mind define the prerogatives of their poetical temperaments in the best way.

Regarding the intransigent austerity of “Donna Pietra” (the female in stone) there is no doubt that Cesare Riva is the one who has played the most ardent and lyrical role of the lover. With a happy intuition, it has been quoted that in his sculpture the finite of form is always borne from the infinite of the material. Even in the compact and synthetic solemnity which each of his feminine declined figures always assumes, the material imposes itself on the form. The material wraps the form, absorbs and integrates it into its mystery. It confers it with a sacred majesty. Riva’s hand has not only nourished itself with the renewed simplicity of new Brancusian codes, on a level with certain medieval masters of stone, working at some Lombard cathedral, but in Cesare there is also an interaction with the stone, which seems pervaded by a religious harmony.

These bodies of his female goddess, often headless, traced in the rhythm of a few sinuous

lines, overflow with a tangible age-old energy, nocturnal and lunar. Daughters of who knows what kind of unknown archaic civilization, one would think them exhumed from the bed of an ancient dried-out river. They come back to light as if they had been half buried in the desert, but without ever shining impudently, as happens with the images which yell out so outwardly in these times of ours. The power of the stone block from which the sculpture emerges always surpasses the humble design into which the sculptor attempts to confine them. Never smooth, rough and porous, his jet-like chiselling, with which he rounds off the surfaces, discretely moulds the shadows, makes the volumes palpitate, protects the secret of its life, so that it can be preserved intact, and in the future, come back to life.

On the other hand, the geometrical guides the plastic-constructive spirit of Michele Benedetto, understood in the most classical search for an aural proportion with which one can measure one's own experience of the world. Indeed, in each of his works, it is always the form's mental rigour which imposes itself on the material, to subjugate it to the intimate constitutive

essence, to reveal it in a solar explosion of joy, the secret brightness. As I have long sustained, standing in front of his sculptures, it is not of mere abstract forms of which one should talk. One always finds oneself in front of mythical manifestations on which a memory full of praise brings about a severe eidetic reduction. A parenthesis of what one's glance can perceive or one's memory can store, comes out of what the mind is able to extract, the admirable proportion of the geometrical figure, essential to exalt its solarly. Therefore what the sculptor intends to render dynamically "explosive" to us in its most immediate transparency, is the beauty of an order of the Cosmos or of experience which escapes our perception. Totems, stars, standing stones, families of ancestral characters rise up in front of us, in all their most elementary archaic ways, but also submissive to the mental happiness of these radiant geometrical figures. Cleaned, polished, refined, outlined by neat edges, the surfaces end up exalting a harmonious dialogue between the proportions and light.

To complete the poetical resources of this Trio, finally we have the ability to enchant of Ray

L, the juggler. In the refined inventions of his sculptures, the raw material, indeed, has to bend itself to rules, always different and secret, of a prodigious and unexpected trick. During his first artistic days of youth, Ray L., as an ebony wood carver, experimented the pliable sweetness of wood under the chisel. And in his inlaid work he seems to have brought the grace and lightness of embroidery. Therefore even with stone he gives himself to the agility of a writer using a sign to determine forms and surfaces. Rather than show us its natural intimate beauty, the chosen material is obliged to transform itself, gradually enduring the spell to which the form submits it. In this way, in each of his works we witness the unfolding of a profound gathering of emotions. A stratified memory, which, under the chisel, finds the shortest agile way to back to life and light. For us to realise this, it suffices to look and the highly refined series of “Evolutions”, in which the plastic invention is solely entrusted to the unwinding/winding, to the divertissement of the full/empty of a spiral column. Oh, as shadow and light or as eye and hand travel along the surfaces which unravel the minimal tactile variations! Almost without even noticing,

they pass through these elegant perceptive resonances. Does the charmed material no longer know if it still belongs here, or rather has already pushed itself into an infinite and unknown beyond?

This has already happened to the lover, my friend Cesare Riva. Ideally, also in the next summer evenings, this Trio, who has made the stone sing, will come back to reunite around the big marble table, under the pergola. Following the throb that each train leaves behind, they will drink the breath of absence.

Pietrasanta, 14TH of May 2007.

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