

ABU DHABI INTERNATIONAL SCULPTURE SYMPOSIUM 2010

by Professor Billy Lee

The first Abu Dhabi International Sculpture Symposium (ADISS) took place recently in the capital of the United Arab Emirates. The timing could not have been better as the city is in the middle of promoting the largest concentration of premier buildings by world renowned architects in the cultural district of Saadiyat Island. The district's main institutions will be: Zayed National Museum by Sir Norman Foster, Louvre Abu Dhabi by Jean Nouvel, Guggenheim Abu Dhabi by Frank Gehry, Performing Arts Centre by Zaha Hadid and the Maritime Museum by Tadao Ando. Following the tradition of fine art, architecture and sculpture have always had a strong symbiotic relationship. It is fitting that these sculptures be introduced as Abu Dhabi enters the international cultural scene. These monumental sculptures under the theme of "Bridging Societies Through the Language of Art" are the initiative of His Highness Sheikh Mohammad Bin Zayed, Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi and Deputy Commander of the Armed Forces as part of his 2030 vision to establish Abu Dhabi as the cultural centre for the region.

The ADISS event is under the patronage of His Highness Sheikh Mohammad Bin Zayed and under the guidance of His Excellency Sheikh Nahyan Mubarak Al Nahyan, Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research. It was organized by Zayed University, a globally

Konstantin Dimopoulos (Australia)_SINUOUS RED



accredited university, in collaboration with the Salwa Zeidan Gallery, one of the most prominent art galleries in the country, with strategic partners such as the Municipality of Abu Dhabi and the Armed Forces Officers Club. This is the first collection of public art in Abu Dhabi and will be installed along the fashionable walkway of the Corniche for a year before being permanently placed throughout various parts of the city.

Over 450 proposals were submitted from around the world out of which only seventeen were accepted. Each of the selected artists was asked to submit several design options for final selection by the organizing committee. Salwa Zeidan, herself an artist, was responsible for selecting and curating the symposium and felt “it was imperative that we find renowned and experienced artists who could not only elevate the standard of the event, but also add value to the lecture programme and in turn, enrich interaction with the public and [Zayed University] students.” According to Salwa, this project took over two years in the making before coming to fruition. Her keen perception, determination and vision made this symposium enormously successful in introducing public art to the city. It is a difficult task to put together a collection of contemporary sculptures, given the pluralistic condition of art in general. This has been particularly true in the last few decades where boundaries in art have been blurred and it would seem that anything short of being nailed to a wall is now considered sculpture. The success of Salwa’s initiative, insight, persistence and passion for art are certainly reflected in the outcome of this symposium. The sculptors she selected are diverse, but have still maintained the fundamental tenets of sculptural language.

In 1957, Karl Prantl, an Austrian stone sculptor,

established the first of the sculpture symposia in an abandoned stone quarry in order to encourage networking and collaboration amongst international sculptors. It was this basic premise of inviting sculptors from around the world to meet in one location in order to work together and discuss and exchange ideas, which created a strong network of sculptors leading to the numerous symposia held around the world today. In general, symposia stone sculptors have developed a strong set of skills in crafting stone and working with traditional concepts of sculpture. Following in that strong tradition of master stone carvers are works by Joni Gogaberishvili (Republic of Georgia), Jo Kley (Germany), Fabrizio Dieci (Italy), Caroline Ramersdorfer (Austria), and emerging artist Husam Chaya (Lebanon). It is refreshing to see the exquisite execution of a traditional process, which was once the training for young sculptors. In the United States and United Kingdom the practice of stone carving as the primary medium for sculptors has long been defunct. It has been eradicated from the curriculum of art schools as a basis for training sculptors. Since the 1960s, art in general, and particularly public art, has evolved beyond these traditional concepts. The 1970s and 1980s paved the way for a large number of diverse artists to move out of the studio and interact directly with the environment and an audience in the public arena. Engagement in social and community collaboration became prevalent and evolved during the 1990s where multimedia and technology added to the reshaping of public art and blurred the boundaries of sculpture even further.

Although the event in Abu Dhabi was called a symposium, its goal and concept deviated from the norm in that the makeup and selection of artists was contemporary in its thinking, while

still maintaining the notions of sculptural language. Salwa Zeidan sought to combine the sculptural attitudes of traditional stone carving with that of contemporary critical inquiry. There were seven sculptors who were not stone carvers, of which six worked in steel and the other, a kinetic sculptor, using carbon fibre rods. This combination created a catalyst for an interesting and diverse collection of sculptors and viewpoints. Each sculptor was asked to produce a durable sculpture which would address public spaces in Abu Dhabi in concept, stature and scale. Egyptian artist, Ehab El Labban, carved a powerful six-metre high vertical black marble monolith entitled *Highness*. As the title implies, the sculpture stands aloof in its position, pondering its surroundings and the horizon. It has a strong sense of place and presence,

allowing layers of past and present to surface as it is rooted in the ground. The simplicity of the vertical form suggests an anthropomorphic presence, but is minimalist and contemporary in approach. It alludes to the notion of questioning identity, context and place.

Water Mark, by Yoshin Ogata from Japan, has a simple and minimal approach to stone, but the results are grand in stature. His thinking is characteristically Japanese with regard to the idea that less is more. With a few ripples on a six-metre high piece of marble, he transcends the stone into a monumental experience of nature, not dissimilar in concept to the Japanese tradition of the Ryōan-ji dry gardens in Kyoto. Like El Labban, Ogata has managed to maintain his identity and sense of self with a contemporary awareness.

Gheorghe Filin's *Sailing in the Desert* is as poetic as the title suggests. The vertical white sail, which breaks the horizon, is a metaphor for travelling in one's own mind to an ethereal magical place. As a single object in space, the engagement of spatial interaction works well in both a macro as well as micro way. From a distance it is what it appears to be, a single sail in the vastness of the desert, a mirage of illusion, but upon closer scrutiny the transition of scale is human and thus engages an intimate experience. One is easily seduced by the sensual tactility of the ridge marks and holes. The idea of addressing scale in sculpture is evident in Petre Petrov's *Spirit*: two very simple forms, stacked one upon the other, standing in a traditional stance of monumentality. When one approaches and stands directly underneath this four-metre high stone sculpture, one finds oneself engaged on an intimate and personal level of being inside,

Ehab El Labban, (*semow*)



which is a very different sensation from that experienced at distance. The interior void has a wonderful surprise of light and a sense of comfort which engages the viewer on an intimate level and yet at the same time is inaccessible. The idea of accessibility and interaction is what Masahiro Hasegawa's Lotus is about. It is an invitation to walk through and under nine elegant stainless steel lotus pads ranging from one metre to nine metres. The lotus pads are laid out in a meticulous and precise arrangement as in most traditional Japanese gardens. At the same time, Lotus has an imaginative playfulness about it. It has a contemporary "Alice in Wonderland" adventurousness, especially with the placement of a number of crystal clear glass drops on the rims of the pads. One cannot help but think that there is a playful side to what may at first seem traditional.

Spanish artist Juanjo Novella eloquently suggests interaction and engagement on both the physical and conceptual levels in Durango, which has many layers to unravel. The paradox Novella creates raises interesting issues regarding our urban environment. The sculpture stands by itself and yet its presence is defined by its environment. The one-inch thick plate is a modern industrial material, and yet in his hands, it is transformed into something as delicate, vulnerable and intricate as might be found in nature's living and breathing surroundings. The environment and structure are synonymous in that one cannot see and experience one without being aware of the other. The scale is monumental while its seductive accessibility allows for an engagement of intimacy.

At first glance, Herald, by Korean artist Seung-Woo Hwang, seems to merely mimic a stack of books, but upon closer examination one



Gheorgi Filin (Bulgaria) *SAILING IN THE DESERT*

experiences a hint of an underlying suggestion of the intentional monotony of our daily preoccupations. The careful monotonous repetition of cutting what might be endless edges of the pages of books cannot help but make us think about the value or point of daily rituals and their repetition. It poses questions about our daily engagement with paper on all levels. Hwang's sculpture is deceptive, as what may appear to be obvious is indeed exactly what he is pointing out and thus, he questions its validity. This is an interesting way of dealing with abstract ethereal concepts through a solid traditional monolithic material such as stone.

Elusive Cycles, by Billy Lee, is a striking five-metre polished stainless steel sculpture and is the only piece that has directly engaged the

context of the Middle East by its employment of letters of the Arabic alphabet. The form, which is simple and minimal, changes and evolves continually, much as the title implies. What may seem simple at first, engages the viewer in what alludes to a complex gestalt. The mirror finish surface between the calligraphy reflects the environment as well as the letters on a perpendicular plane, fusing reality with illusion. What is interesting is that there is a “place” which one is not fully aware of as one negotiates reading between a flat plane and moving in a three dimensional space, that “place” between two and three dimensions.

Sinuous Red, by Konstantin Dimopoulos, is a six-metre high kinetic sculpture made of carbon fibre composite rods that are activated by the wind. The beauty of Dimopoulos’ concept is that he allows nature to be part of his piece and does not fight or attempt to control it. His sculpture is the conduit through which nature acts to create its own symphony. It sways, vibrates and oscillates like a series of line drawings in space. It recalls a childlike fascination of anticipating what will happen next.

Slovenian artist Gregor Kregar’s stainless steel sculpture, *Twisting the Void*, is made up of 428 equilateral triangles forming multiple modules assembled in a biomorphic cloud like formation. The form is monolithic and massive and yet at the same time is transparent and elusive. Kregar points out the beauty of mathematics and systems in nature and their relativity to the urban environment. The mirror-polished surface fragments the reflection of the surrounding environment, not only assuming its appearance but also fracturing and changing it, thus questioning whether things are really what they appear to be. As can be the case when



Salwa Zeidan - Lebanon_ *ADISS FLOWER*_Size 165 cm x 215 cm Height

observing nature, what may be seemingly within one’s grasp becomes illusive. Jon Barlow Hudson from the United States and renowned Dubai artist Hassan Sharif both have large, six-metre high linear steel sculptures soaring in space and looming over the viewer. Jon Barlow Hudson’s simple linear form, *Eidolon Elliptical Sphere*, activates the negative space as it encompasses it, making us very much aware of the void between. The simplicity of *Step 2010*, by Hassan Sharif, is as precise as the clarity of his thinking. Its fluidity and gesture of the stance is typical of his prolific career as an artist in Dubai.

The artists in this symposium have provided us with probing and revealing ideas of their human experience. Rather than attempting to provide us with answers, they have set out to raise questions. It is interesting that these artists have a sense of place and identity, which has been displaced in much of contemporary art as globalization becomes prevalent. The danger

of a rapid premature growth in the guise of advancement is the risk of homogeneity and the loss of that self and identity. A great deal of work around the world does not seem to be rooted in place or identity, but rather seems to look much the same. As our lifestyles and environment become more transient and similar despite our cultural and geographical differences, it is important that we maintain our individuality, identity and sense of place.



Yoshin Ogata - (Japan)_WATER MARK

Billy Lee was born of Chinese and Dutch parentage in Uitenhage, South Africa. As a child, his parents immigrated to England, where he later received his BFA, 1st class honours, from Birmingham College of Art and Design, and his MFA at the Royal College of Art, London (RCA). Upon graduation from the RCA, he received the prestigious award of Kennedy Scholar, to attend the Centre for Advanced Visual Studies at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and was later named a Fellow.

Thanks to the considerable and growing international reputation, Lee is consistently invited to exhibit and place works throughout the world. His sculptures are represented in public collections across the globe, including Yuzi Paradise Sculpture Park, Guilin, China, The Hakone/Utsukushi-ga-hara Open Air Museum, Japan, Goodwood Sculpture, UK, The Memorial Rose Garden, Chin Pao San, Taipei, Taiwan, Dunaujvaros Sculpture Park, Hungary, Cementerio Carretas, Putaendo Sculpture Park, Chile, Abu Dhabi, UAE, and many others in the United States.

Recently, he has been working in China creating large outdoor sculptures. In addition, he continues to exhibit in the USA, UK, Europe and the Far and Middle East. Lee currently resides in the United States and is a professor at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.