

Stones that speak: the sculptor Rainer Fest / by Marc Wellmann

Rainer Fest's dialogue with stone is founded on an in-depth knowledge of the material - together with his 20 years of experience as an independent artist and a wide-ranging educational background.

In his sculptures he mainly uses erratic granite boulders. The essential aspect of these stones, which were brought to their present sites by glaciers in the Ice Ages, is that they were shaped by thousands of years of natural processes. They attest to the immense and continuous natural forces by which the fragment was weathered and rounded. For a long time the provenance of such random boulders, apparently fallen from the sky, remained a mystery to human observers.

Throughout the Neolithic and the Iron Age man set them upright as Menhirs with religious significance, as for example at Carnac in Brittany. They also served as building material for places of worship of which Stonehenge is the most notable. Some of the largest were given names, such as "Buskam" near Rügen or the "Old Swede" on the banks of the Elbe at Övelgönne. But even the smaller ones were invested with a particular aura or individual personality, by force of their history and their self-generated form, setting them apart from the artificially shaped blocks extracted in quarries.

Rainer Fest is aware of the magical, primal and archaic properties inherent in the boulder as a material for sculpture. His sculptures lead straight into this context, which consciously turns its back on the frantic busywork of fashions and technologies.

Every encounter with a stone is unique, determined by its form, its composition and its texture. Distinctly personal relationships develop between the sculptor and the material, deepening during the working process.

The interventions of "stone whisperer" Rainer Fest are minimal but authoritative. His cautious handling pays respect to the stone's primal substance, although from a sculptural and spatial perspective he controls it absolutely. The harsh and weathered stone surface is contrasted by a few sections worked with the utmost concentration, in which Logos cuts sharply through Matter. In this way Rainer Fest exposes the nature of the material: he renders its hardness, weight and composition comprehensible to the viewer.

Rainer Fest's artistic production culminates in a series of "fountains" or rather water sculptures in which the differing properties of stone and water are revealed as a phenomenological contrast of self-contained stasis and continuous, fluid transformation.

The invisible, the concealed are also important to Fest, as in the large work in the courtyard of Berlin's Konrad-Zuse-Institut for Information Technology. The interior void of this granite block is actually a space for thought and meditation, in which energies are produced that the stone protects and stores.

The sculpture entitled "Metaphysical Landscape", completed in April 2007 and sited in the park of Schloss Hohen Luckow, is the sculptor's largest work to date. It is composed of three granite boulders, found by Rainer Fest in his adopted home of West Pomerania, and set one behind the other.

An upright, elongated stone, a rounded plateau, and at the end of the sequence a low stone of which about a third has been removed, leaving sharp edges - the vertical cut face of this stone, part of which is buried in the ground, is pierced by a rectangular aperture through which steps lead downwards. The steps are continued - across the gaps - in the other boulders and connect them with one another.

On the central plateau, at the edge of an inscribed circle, we find two houses, two sections of bridges and two portions of staircases, rendered in positive and negative respectively.

As in other works by Rainer Fest, these are ciphers for human culture. The third boulder, pointing skywards, is left largely unworked in its lower portion. With increasing height however its surface grows ever smoother, culminating in accurately aligned steps at its summit.

The entire arrangement is orientated North and the axis formed by the steps points to a specific part of the firmament: Polaris, the Pole Star, at the furthest end of Ursa Minor is one of the brightest stars of the night sky and in the northern hemisphere marks the axis on which the entire cosmos appears to turn.

Rainer Fest's "Metaphysical Landscape" is an approximation or rather an adaptation of a cosmology, a topos which has been present in human thought for thousands of years. About 5000 years ago an air channel from the royal chamber in the Pyramid of Cheops was built to show the Pole Star (then Thuban) in the constellation of the Dragon. In Fest's work, the axial connection of the fixed star in the sky and the Underworld (or perhaps a burial chamber) is formed by a staircase which can be read as descending or ascending. Life as the passage between the poles of becoming and passing away.

Rainer Fest is concerned with Wholeness. First and foremost this means the cosmological, wholistic relationships in which his sculptures are embedded: heaven, earth, underworld - nature, culture, metaphysics - birth, life, death - matter, mind, spirit. The sculptor intends his outdoor works as landmarks with topographical and historical lines of reference, invoking elemental flows of energy.

They incorporate light, wind, the tides, the sky and the earth as processes giving shape to matter. At the same time the "whole" refers to integrity of stone as a raw material, which Fest always presents in its natural given physicality and which forms the soil on which his work and his creativity grow.

The precisely worked prominences and recesses of the houses, steps and bridges which appear in practically all of his recent works seem to domesticate his feral material, but in fact they rather re-constitute the stone on an intellectual level. It is clearly readable in these miniatures that nature, represented by raw stone, is the actual source of culture. This exemplifies the difference between Rainer Fest from a stone sculptor such as Ulrich Rückriem who demonstrates the machine-based working of material in dramatised splittings. In Fest's case, the boulders retain their dignity, and in their wholeness testify to primary forces and masses.

In Rainer Fest's hands the stones begin to speak and to pass on messages to us about stretches of time which are not measurable on a human scale. The term "matter" is derived from the Latin word for "mother", and for Rainer Fest his handling of stone is always connected to a preoccupation with his own origins. The viewer is invited to follow traces left by the elements, to experience them in contexts which are largely eliminated from view nowadays.

It is a journey into quite singular realms of experience, originating beyond the immediate bodily encounter with a three-dimensional object and also in its dissolution, invoking a transcendence of matter.

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