

“To walk, to look, to do”

I have been a sculptor since 1974. Before that, I was a painter, or at least I wanted to dedicate my life to art. At the time, I made plaster or wax molds for bronze sculptures – a technique that is very different from what I do today. But as I look at this more closely, I realize that the same themes I was working on at the time have emerged again today.

My first sculptures were entitled “*Chrysalide*”, “*L’homme du Vent*”, and “*Adam*”. “Adam the serf” in the words of André Chouraqui. Calling your neighbor a peasant is undoubtedly a compliment of sorts...

I learned to really look at the world in the Gironde and Landes regions of southwest France. My guide was a grandfather who had been a logger. Like all kids, I picked up pieces of driftwood, feathers – all kinds of stuff. This was nothing unusual; curiosity is the source of discovery and knowledge. A little later, I tanned the skins of the rabbits and lambs from our Easter meal.

My interest in preserving these skins probably came from the first books I read about the Eskimos (not yet known as the Inuit).

My own unique landscape forms a triangle. One side is the very long, very straight strip of sand that holds back the ocean. Another side is the left bank of the Gironde river. A marshy river, difficult to reach and swarming with life. These two lines meet towards the north, at the “Pointe de Graves”. “Graves” comes from “graviers”, the beds of gravel that built the reputation of the Médoc and Bordeaux regions. The base of my triangle is the Pyrenees mountain chain. In my child’s mind, this was truly the end of the world.

The Landes forest covers nearly this entire space, interrupted here and there by large lakes and streams teeming with trout. All of this water makes it look a bit like a tundra, with marshes where all the migrating birds stop to feed. A look at the local tourist brochures will give you all the information you need...

Is it to rediscover these vast spaces that I go walking, alone or with my partner?

In fact, we are walkers, ramblers in the countryside. About as far away as you can get from organized group hikes. The French word “*Randonneur*”, or hiker, comes from the Old French word “*randon*”, which means fatigue, or exhaustion. The expression “*courir à randon*” means running till you drop, while “*randir*” means moving with ardor, impetuously. In all of these words, there is a sense of the urge to walk, a sort of impatience to be elsewhere which is the opposite of taking a stroll, as Jacques Lacarrière said.

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When I walk, I ramble and I gather.

I attended the applied arts school, “*Ecole Boule*”, which taught me artisanship. Artisans, even today, carry on some of the tradition of the master craftsmen of France – “les campagnons” - a institution that required its members to make a journey of discovery throughout France to learn and perfect their craft.

Perhaps it was at this school that I picked up, involuntarily, a bit of these old practices. In any case, walking is a very important part of my work as a sculptor.

When you walk, you have to fall into a rhythm, and choose a theme, for example, from the Sea to the Ocean, which would take us from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic, at a rate of 20 to 25 kilometers a day.

Choose a route, outline it on the map and stick to it as closely as possible, but not too strictly, and stop when it strikes your fancy. I like this sort of stroll to come to a natural halt at the edge of the ocean.

During our talks, which we called the “Fécamp negotiations” with tongue in cheek, we decided that the shore, as the first line, the first picture that inspires walking, should be the archetypal space of geopoetic art. Along with its corollary, which speaks to us, invites us to discover, to travel.

The map.

The Huitcholes, or “Wirarika” Indians, came down from the western Sierra Madre in the State of Jalisco to the area around the town of Tepic in the Nayarit, to celebrate or confirm religious or secular rites, such as marriage. These rites only took on meaning in contact with the Pacific, the symbolic source, from which all departs and to which all returns.

On another trip, we crossed the lofty plateaus in the center of France. From St-Guilhem de Désert to the mountain chain of the Puys. From the Plateau at the End of the world to Careless Valley – I didn’t invent these names! The last volcano in the Puys chain, looking out over the Limagne plain, signaled the end of this trip.

We also took walking trips in Mexico, in Sonoro desert, more specifically in the Pinacate desert, that vast stretch of black lava, where a tiny red herb grows, as well as the famous cardere cactus, cousin to the famous Saguaro of Arizona.

A hill in the form of a circus tent is the Acropole of the Papagos Indians.

This area, one of the hottest and most inhospitable on Earth (along with the Libyan desert), was used to train the American astronauts who walked on the Moon!

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Through “grand voyages” we physically experience the richness of the earth, and its multiple differences and incredible variety. But I also experience this diversity, and these emotions, during my trips in France.

Earlier, I said that I ramble and gather. I gather abandoned things, pick up what has been left, forgotten – feathers, skeletons of birds, insects, wood that has drifted, or been folded and shaped by the wind.

They no longer fulfill their primary function, in the living world.

Left inert on the ground, they become signs, traces.

An animist could place them in the category of hierophanies. The Laplanders, or should I say “Sams”, would call them Sehites. Without touching or moving these objects, they would worship them, or at least salute them in passing.

For me they become an alphabet, the telluric alphabet.

The beauty of the found object doesn't matter, because the simplicity of the object reflects our world as much as an exceptional object.

Take for example, the little goose known as the Bernache Gravant, found a winter day in its feeding place at the mouth of the Ars-en-Ré. This little skeleton immediately connected me to its annual 12,000 kilometer voyage to spend the winter under a more clement sky than in its native Siberia. It also expresses the land of Shamans, Yakouts, Tongouses and Nenetz, with whom it has points in common. They are familiar with all three kingdoms of our existence: land, water and air.

And it reminds me of those nomadic hunters who follow troops of reindeer as the ice melts, and who left the Dordogne region in France one day to form what we now call the paleo-arctic civilizations. This tiny sign has vast powers of evocation.

Others will be more modest, and still others too strong for me. Too bad... So much the better.

Do you understand the emotion of making a real find, a small thing that stops me in my tracks and triggers my creativity?

To gather, or simply contemplate. That is the heart of the art of discernment.

To make a conscious choice, because the sculpture is taking shape here and now.

At 6 o'clock in the morning, at the end of the rapids between two walls of rock and moss-covered trees, ink blue replaces black. The drop in temperature doesn't cause frost, but covers the ground with dew as we pass from the sweetness of the night to the heat of the day. Even the noise of the rapids is not peaceful.

I find myself at the source of an experience as old as time: listening to the earth.

This state of receptiveness, inspired by the earth itself, can also be experienced in other places.

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At moments like these, I understand, or rather I sense how the power of the earth can give rise to legends and fairy tales.

This ancient telluric force was the source of creativity, or cultures. As a contemporary creator, I draw on this source.

To speak of the world, and its immensity, I can only use these fragments that I assemble, group, and fit. That's what I am, a fitter. Even if I am not a master stonecutter. For a laugh, I could even complicate things a bit more. I could call myself the Fitter-Strider of Kratophanie Chthonienne (walker and assembler of the earth's manifestations of force).

But that's perhaps a bit too much...

My work of "fitter", which starts at the edge of a path, with a spontaneous spotting of a finished, viable sculptor, then continues in the studio.

There, I have to breath new life into these elements.

Assemble them so that they take on a large, or at least denser sense than they had at the edge of the road.

They must be made denser to transmit a message, to be seen.

My job is to see that these objects, fated in the natural cycle to disappear, are recreated once again in the cycle of the living, since they bear thoughts.

And that's what I mean by making them denser.

Perhaps the best example is the bonsai, which is not a small tree, but rather a densified tree.

In the studio, there is obviously a second phase, a second discovery. Nothing remains still. Our expression must stay loose, on alert. Because the spontaneous creation along the side of the road, the first sculpture, will of and by itself impose certain variations, a suite of adaptations.

The first glance opens a realm of possibilities.

This is always exalting, a profound pleasure in creating my sculptures.

It is manual work, a time of calm and reflection. But that doesn't mean that everything is easy. In the final analysis, constructing something like this is a celebration.

Right from the time I first look, it takes shape, but it has to work afterwards.

Assembling the different elements in the sculpture is done classically, using glue, string, tenons and mortises, raffia, and brazing if needed.

But the connecting material I use most often is Plexiglas, because I seek links that are as invisible as possible. As if the air or water linked, separated or held at a distance things and beings.

For now, I prefer transparent plastic materials, that create the illusion of a neutral, empty space.

Their main qualities are discretion and relative strength.

Other bonds, which may be better looking, such as raffia or leather, are often more associated with

the objects or creations of so-called “archaic” or primitive peoples.

Today, it is very hard to use a feather without drawing comparisons to Westernized folklore, but this simple object is the best way to speak of a bird, the air, wind and voyage – it even evokes writing.

The Huitcholes Indians go even further. They say that the feathers of sacred birds (sparrowhawk, eagle, falcon) are attached to the Muweiri, the sacerdotal scepters of Mara’Akamé (the shaman who leads the peyote ceremonies). The drawings on these feathers represent the laws and doctrines of the ancestors. Their history is written on the very object that was so long used for writing – and I find that a delight.

I also use skeletons, most often birds, a very strong image when lying on the ground.

You cannot be indifferent when passing a sign of this type along your route.

Most people’s first reaction is morbid. I refute this simplistic interpretation – soon, our civilization will be afraid of its own shadow.

Bones are enduring elements, the least perishable structure, and the life-bearing structure that resists erosion the longest.

Paleo-artistic civilizations, like all peoples who are hunters, consider bones as symbolic of rebirth, renewal.

I use these bones like a paleontologist who neither wants, nor has the time to wait for space/time to disappear to tell a story.

And this leads us to the family resemblance with Amerindian, Inuit or aboriginal cultures.

It is in no way a copy or a simulacrum.

On the other hand, it could be considered a conscious nod to a respected culture.

The analogy is above all based on the fact that we both draw on the same source, on the same telluric alphabet.

The text by Peter Sutton, “The Great Dream, an Australian Vision of the World”, tells the story of a young aborigine who goes to fish with his father, and lets his spear drag along the ground. This forms a trace, a furrow. His father stops him and explains: “Making a mark, or digging without reason means you are hurting the bones of the people who have lived here forever. We should only dig or make marks when we are hungry, or when we hold a ceremony.”

I would compare this relation with the world with what the grandfather of Pierre-Jakez Elias says in the well-known book, “Cheval d’orgueil”, a memoir of his peasant upbringing in Brittany. He tells how once or twice a year, they would take a day off and go to the seaside. Children played in the water with stones, crabs, etc. But as they got ready to return, the adults asked them to put

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everything they had played with back where they found it. There was no reason to disturb the order of the world.

I don't want to say that the Bretons are animists, but I see a correlation in their attitude to the world.

Animist cultures see the world as something finite, that has to be continuously maintained in state by rites and ceremonies that update its creation by their mythical ancestors.

Although not scientifically correct, this way of thinking seems better adapted to a human lifespan. In 40 to 70 years, the world renews itself very little, and the evolution of species can't be measured. With this in mind, they paid more attention and had greater respect for the earth.

And this way of thinking, exempt from all religious connotation, or any illusion about a former golden age, seems to me fertile ground for research and reflection.

Our great chance in being alive today, is precisely that we can go to meet other cultures, and not to conquer them.

In their art, I feel a down to earth wisdom, in accord with the outside, with the world that was often overshadowed, minimized, or even mocked in our culture.

These cultures have helped me express what I felt, along with extensive ethnological readings, observations in the natural history museums in Paris, my first trip to Mexico in 1986 and all my wonderings on foot, everywhere.

I took many years to realize that this "rediscovery" had started naturally and unconsciously back in childhood. Then it was continued as a hobby and a habit when I reached adulthood. And finally it became a conscious gesture, and the very foundation of my sculpture.