

Alain Kirili at Nuits-Saint-Georges

Conversation with Martine Dancer

Catalogue Alain Kirili, Musée d'Art Moderne de Saint Etienne, 1992

M.D. : *There have always been currents of exchange between worlds that are geographically and culturally quite distinct. There were ancient transmissions of philosophical, technical, and artistic knowledge between Asia and the West. The modern world has certainly accelerated this process, this curiosity for what is other than oneself. It seems to me that you have embraced this attitude from the very beginning of your career.*

A.K. : To be a French sculptor is also, paradoxically, to draw nourishment from foreign sources, just as Romanesque art was nourished by contact with the East. Burgundy itself, for example, discovered its identity in contact with Flanders, as illustrated by the presence of the Roger Van Der Weyden polyptych at the Hospices de Beaune or by the works of Claus Sluter. I have not made particular references to Islam, but rather to Chinese calligraphy and my reflections on Sluter's *The Weil of Moses*. These are a few of the references that matter for understanding my current work.

M.D. : *In Saint-Etienne this summer, an exhibition will explore the development of your "Commandment" series, from the first groups in iron that were created in the 1980s to the new pieces conceived at Nuits-Saint-Georges in 1992. This could also be seen as a direct confrontation between your investigations in materials that require distinctly different treatments: iron, clay, marble, and stone. In approaching such dissimilar registers in this manner you remain faithful to the plurality of intention that you have always claimed for yourself, since you can be related to the American sculptor David Smith just as easily as to the lineage of Rodin.*

A.K. : Your question begins with a remark on the variety of my materials: at this stage of my life, it seems to me a little premature to be making definitive statements about this. What I can tell you, though, is that I refuse absolutely to associate abstraction with the repetitive monotony that for me produces a feeling of the end of art. My desire is to maintain a formal register that is extremely open in order to assure that my creation possesses intense life.

The restrictions I could indicate to you would be on the order of moroseness, of what is merely depressing, of what draws one toward a sexual, physical, mental negativity. On the other hand, I want to avoid a process of selection that would have only naturalistic effects, like the simple appropriation of a piece of stone or wood. My creative desire lies fundamentally in the transformation of materials. Otherwise I would be committing a zen gesture that, for me, corresponds too much to the effacement of man before the omnipotence of nature. As a French and Western artist, I consider sculpture to be an art against nature. My assumption is that artistic creation is against nature and that it is in the modification of nature, in the maximum expression of human ambition, that the entire creative amplitude of man can be satisfied. The mark of man in the transformation of nature must be determinant, dominant.

M.D. : *At present, you are preoccupied with one particular event, your encounter with Burgundy and the quarry at Nuits-Saint-Georges, with its marbled stone whose tints blend so well with certain of your terra cottas. You seem to be living this confrontation as a crucial moment.*

A.K. : I think your visit here, today, to Nuits-Saint-Georges is very important because you are witness to something that is never sufficiently spoken about and which is, for sculpture, the relation between the artist and the artisan. Pascal Pique and Xavier Douroux, of the D.R.A.C. and the Consortium, respectively, helped me initially by showing me the region's different quarry sites. I chose the Société des Carrières de Nuits-Saint-Georges because its proprietor, Pascal Loichet, presented it to me as an atelier or studio. At that moment, the quarry at Nuits-Saint-Georges became the most beautiful workshop imaginable. What I mean is that he gave me a free space that allowed me to fully utilise both the time and the means this quarry provides. This invitation was redoubled by the exceptional availability of the site foreman, Richard Luttké. This hospitality was the essential condition of the realization of these monumental works.

M.D. : *What were your relations with the stone?*

A.K. : My relation with stone goes far back. I did a show devoted exclusively to works in marble from Carrare, I think in 1981, at the Museum of Innsbruck with Peter Weiermair. Carrare provoked a sort of obsessional desire in me. Wanting to be creative in Carrare meant wanting to escape academicism, engaging in both a challenge to academicism and an ambitious dialogue with its history. This is what I mean by a confrontation, this kind of challenge to memory that recently produced *La vague*, which was first exhibited at the Villa Arson. Subsequently, in Nuits-Saint-Georges, I discovered a truly carnal marbled stone of flesh pink color, close to that of my terra cotta, my dream of the 18th century. We are not only in the medieval Burgundy of Vézelay and Autun; we are also in a region that contains one of the most beautiful capitals of the 18th century. Dijon, the city of Crébillon and Rameau, the city of a certain lightness that belongs to the 18th century. All of the mansions, the hôtels particuliers of Dijon, are constructed with this pink marbled stone.

This is also what explains the transition from terra cotta, from the carnal modeling that generated the titles *Noces* (weddings) or *Ivresse* (Ecstasy), to this stone which is diametrically opposed to the cold, rude, minimal aspect of granite.

The stone of Nuits-Saint-Georges has the great freshness of having been left virtually unexplored by artists. Although the monks of Cîteaux employed it in constructing the Château de Clos Vougeot, sculptors have never made use of it. I suspect that the red traces in this stone made it undesirable for the realization of figural sculpture. For non-narrative creation, on the other hand, the chromatic choice is much freer. I acquire the freedom of a colorist -which would have been refused to a sculptor like Sluter, since in his era sculptures were painted by a guild of painters. But in the 20th century, as a sculptor, I acquire this freedom of choice as to color. The effects of direct cutting, of slicing with an electric saw, the effects of piling, which go against any naturalist selection as sufficient creation, are the second primordial aspect of a sculpture that is not meant to be narrative but elaborated and constructed.

M.D. : *During my visit to the quarry at Nuits-Saint-Georges, we travelled through vineyards that recalled certain quattrocento landscapes. You are very responsive to the qualities of places like the Château de Clos Vougeot and the Domaine de la Romanée Conti. For you these sites are as mythic as the quarry.*

A.K. : Absolutely! The pink marbled stone of Nuits-Saint-Georges is also inscribed in the wonder I feel when walking through the Domaine de la Romanée Conti. Its smallness recalls the Ryoan-Ji garden in Kyoto. If we compare the Domaine de la Romanée Conti and the temple

of Kyoto, we find two civilizations perfectly opposed in their relations to nature. Here, unlike in Japan, there is no metaphysical dimension of submission to nature: to the contrary, nature is disciplined for the pleasure of man. One must not forget that Romanée Conti, the vineyards, are an invention of the gods and their representatives on earth, the monks and priests. There is, then, this incarnate spirituality present in the entire majestic site of the hillside of Nuits-Saint-Georges, crowned in a miraculous, extraordinary fashion by the quarry. I establish a relation between the color of the stone, the vine, and the quarry. And this trilogy is the source of a new dimension of my work.

M.D. : *When you evoke Sluter's "Weil of Moses", I think of this expression of Malraux's, in La tête d'Obsidienne:*

"Giotto, the sculptors of Romanesque tympanums, and those of the grottoes of India and of China, invented unknown forms because they were inventing the forms of their praise. " It seems to me that there is a certain parallel between this reflection and everything you 're living right now.

A.K. : Yes, just as for my earlier iron pieces that often had a pathetic connotation I thought of the pleurants of the Tombeau de Philippe Pot² and of the Tombeaux des Ducs de Bourgogne, so the force of *Calvaire, à Max Roach*, a new version of *Commandment*, was nourished by the founding force, the power released by the bodies of the prophets Jeremy, Isaian, David, Daniel, and Moses. It is a sculpture nourished by a memory and by the notion of the *Musée Imaginaire*. It was very important for me, in my adolescence, to have seen Malraux's *Musée Imaginaire* at the Fondation Maeght -in 1965 or 1966, I believe. But my own *Musée Imaginaire* also extends to the Gregorian chants at mass in the monastery at Citeaux -which I attended with my entire team and that of the quarry as well. We came out very stimulated, there was a quality of heightened transparency, of elevation, in which the work itself enriched us; there was an enrichment of sight; of hearing; of taste, the savor of the wines. This question of taste or savor is never mentioned; referring to it in refined circles is supposedly superficial, but I refuse that attitude. In his inaugural lecture at the Collège de France, Roland Barthes remarked: "*Who am I if not someone who has developed his intelligence in contact with savors?*".

M.D. : *In the "Celebrations", your most recent ensembles spread out on the ground, there are pyramidal elements on short stands. Should these be considered as pedestals?*

A.K. : I think the piling-up of heterogeneous elements, the fact of not thinking uniquely of a monolithic sculpture is at the origin of these large ensembles. I have stone from Buxin nearly the color of honey, which is meant to dialogue with an African wood called mangion, and I have white terra cottas that will dialogue with pine. These elements serve as both bases and columns, but they are not simply elements of support and presentation, which is the restricted role of the pedestal. These are elements in dialectical interaction, elements that enter into the dynamic of this heterogeneity, into this variety of materials I set into dialogue.

M.D. : *You have just completed a monumental sculpture that you relate to the preceding series, to the "Commandments". But in this case a new element has been added: monumentality. what are the stakes, the challenge in this gesture?*

A.K. : It is above all the perspective of the exhibition at the Musée de Saint-Etienne that has provided a stimulating occasion for this work. The approach of an occasion like this one has led me to reflect on one of my earliest sculptures, one that is very important for me: the *Commandment I* of 1979-80 in the Ludwig Museum. Between that work and the sculptured

ensemble just finished, twelve years have elapsed. *Commandment I*, in fact, is already monumental since it surpasses the dimensions of the human body; monumentality can be either vertical or horizontal. Thus the present work has to do with a monumentality that is different from that of 1979; today I have a desire for confrontation with external space. And this immediately poses the essential problem of sculpture, mass and weight.

The pink marbled stone of Nuits-Saint-Georges, this "carnal" stone, helped me respond to this double question because it lightens the approximately sixty tons of this sculpture. The color and quality of this warm (*chaleureux*) material create what is perhaps a welcoming relation to the observer. Far from exploiting the dissuasive, violent, menacing relation that monumentality sometimes suggests, I took great satisfaction in approaching these technical questions of mass and weight in such a manner that pleasure, an almost jubilatory pleasure principle, should remain a part of this sculpture. This is also why it satisfies me, for it remains faithful to the overall principle of my work: never create a coercive relation with the public.

M.D. : *Let's go back now to the sculptures in clay. They will be very much in evidence in the exhibition. In the first video on your work, filmed in your studio on the rue Rodier by Jean-Paul Fargier, you seem to face the clay in a combat of tremendous violence. At moments you speak of crime. One gets the impression that you need to alter this material to suit you, and to do this in view of a total freedom of execution.*

A.K. : For me, the rapidity of execution and the satisfaction of a drive remain closely linked to the incarnate, sexuated body of the artist. I feel very close to the notion of *fa presto* that one can find in art of all periods, for example in the gestures of direct, precise cutting in Michelangelo's sculptures. These relations of *finito/non finito* and of *fa presto* certainly make up the universe in which my work is elaborated. Jean-Paul Fargier shows this very well in his film. I often think of Hans Namuth's film on Jackson Pollock; like Pollock when he paints, I have invented a new relation of the body in modelling, a veritable creative kinesis.

M.D. : *The titles of your works are always very precise. Do the works that have just been completed at Nuits-Saint-Georges and at Saint-Etienne have titles?*

A.K. : The titles come after the execution, for the work is obviously never an illustration of anything. It is the extension of the universe of sensations in which I live. This universe of sensations nourishes the variety of formal registers and needs to be related to what I call "*the abstract autobiographical universe of these forms*".

In April, I installed my recent sculptures in the Musée de Saint-Etienne in a studio setting so that Yves Bresson could photograph them. At a dinner with Bernard Ceysson and Jacques Beaufret, our conversation turned, precisely, on this problem of titles for the works they had just seen. They thought of titles like *Hommage* and *Tombeau in music*. In this manner the title *Célébration* came to me.

M.D. : *You generally adopt an attitude that could be described as very positive. In fact, you oppose yourself to the negations of our time. Does this attitude not result from the fact that you were born in 1946 and that you oppose the tortured attitudes that characterized the world-wide aftermath of the war?*

A.K. : In any case and in every period, as you know, there never seems to be a need for artists and it never seems to be the right time to create. Opting for an orientation that is not one of morose negativity is a personal decision. A decision to be undertaken without any naivete about the fundamental permanence of chaos, of life or of death. One to be undertaken with the will to

oppose moroseness, to oppose the principle according to which it is never the right time to create, one to be undertaken with the will to express a celebration of life. In this sense, for me, Claude Monet is aesthetically and morally the heroic figure who paints the *Nymphéas* during some of the worst carnage of the 20th century, that of the First World War. The *Nymphéas* are thus what I would characterize as an ethical model for an artist like myself.

Translated by Philip Barnard

Notes:

- 1 Tr. note: Translated into English under the title *Picasso's Mask*.
- 2 At the Louvre, Paris.
- 3 Presently installed on the campus of the University of Dijon (reproduction on pages 108-109).