





# BOAZ VAADIA

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## Five Years

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In the Chinese garden, a well-eroded stone stands-in for the mountain home of The Immortals. The stone's owner hopes to learn the secret of immortality when The Immortals come to visit his surrogate rock formation. In the pre-Columbian Andes, stones that resembled human forms were worshipped, and in Christian times people carved stone "likenesses" of God for the same purpose. Various primitive peoples use stones to produce rain, or conversely, sunshine, and in more than one tribe stones function as external souls. Our own Pet-Rock craze of a few years ago was distantly, but distinctly linked to this universal sense of "stone-power." In contemporary sculpture by artists as disparate as Rodin, Brancusi and Noguchi, one senses a shared concern and respect for the spiritual potential of the stone itself. For Boaz Vaadia, using stone is like making sculpture out of the bones of the earth.

Vaadia, who used stones as a child on an Israeli farm to make pieces that imitated the art he saw on weekly visits to the galleries and museums of Tel-Aviv, rediscovered their meaning to him in his early twenties after years of art-school and private experimentation with every other kind of sculpture material. Finding stone again was nothing less than a revelation to him. He remembered that he'd asked for an African fetish as his 13th birthday present, because he'd been so impressed with the primitive sculptures he'd seen in the museums. In 1972, after his first one-man show of painted metal sculptures, he realized that certain materials threw otherwise well-designed pieces out of balance and that he wanted to shape works naturally, so that the laws of gravity, counter-balance, and tension dictated the forms. Preconceived shapes and formal but not physical problem-solving had come to seem as artificial as synthetic materials.

The initial pieces Vaadia made with natural materials — stone, fur, hair, leather, wood and bronze — bore a superficial resemblance to Surrealism, but were actually precociously Neoprimitive, particularly for an artist working so physically far from the center of the avant-garde. Many of his pieces from the past five years continue to have the fetishistic quality of those late Israel-period works, and they continue to contrast hard and soft materials within a given piece, but they are less organic or biomorphic and more geometrical. The pieces done in Manhattan not only reflect the rectilinear architecture that forests the island, and the many bridges that arch off its shores, but are also actually constructed of stones and timber found in the area.

Since 1977 Vaadia has been working with slabs or blocks of stone either supported by, or bound into wooden frameworks of slender cedar logs lashed together with leather thongs. These



logs are the same as those used to support young trees in our sidewalk oases, and the slabs of stone are sills ledges and curb-stones recycled out of the city's continual de-construction. Like the Philosopher's Stone, which is familiar to all yet unprized except by the wise who know of its gold within, his stones are the cast-offs of urban decay transformed into works of art. The city streets are a sculptor's supply paradise, as Vaadia discovered soon after his arrival here in 1975: with a van, a lever, a skid on wheels and an occasional helping-hand, you can garner all the bluestone, granite, brownstone and slate you can use. Vaadia loves the way these stones are layered in sheets that can be lifted off by deftly aimed chisel blows; he also loves the "peels" of quarried rock, those top layers which evince the ravages of weather over time. Working into the stone from all six sides, he shapes it in sympathy with its natural lines and characteristics. The resultant look is like stone-chipped arrowheads rather than metal tool-carved sculpture, and has a raw, primitive urgency about its apparent lack of finish.

John A. Roebling, who designed the Brooklyn Bridge, once wrote: "A force at rest is at rest because it is balanced by some other force or by its own reaction." He saw his great suspension bridge as "a spiritual or ideal conception." These notions condense much of what Boaz Vaadia's structures are about. A huge slab of stone resting on one side of an inverted timber "V" is locked into upright stability by its weight (rather than despite it) because it is balanced by the force of the inclination of the other side of the "V." This configuration was varied often in pieces from 1977 to 1979, culminating in the ideal Untitled piece of 1979 in which two stone slabs merely resting their short edges together to form the apex of that inverted "V", their opposite short edges resting on wooden bars of a supporting framework, perfectly express interactive tension and counterbalanced forces at rest. The very simplicity of the work's conception is what makes it seem spiritual; stone's essence is weight, its motion is downward, its "intention", compression — which is why its creation of an upward pointing triangle is so emotionally effective here, as in a Gothic church.

Vaadia's major installation at the Jewish Museum in 1978, his wall pieces, and some of his models for large swing- or bridge-like pieces operate on an opposite principle. Here the stone's weight is pulling away from the support, which must be in turn secured by wall or base attachments, and one reacts to this tension situation somatically, with some trepidation. In an arch these two opposed directional thrusts are fused (suspension bridges are based on a fusion of arches and counter-thrusts too) and Vaadia has long



planned to execute a major outdoor “keystone” arch piece. The massive construction of an inverted arch in 1981 represents a variation on this theme; it resembles a suspended rope bridge, in fact.

A number of 1977-79 pieces were rectangular cages of wood surrounding or supporting upright slabs of stone. This image — it conjures up Oriental fenced-in magic rocks, Andean monoliths, and protected steles of Greek or Mayan sites — is continued in recent works where two slabs are now enclosed by the cedar posts, but it also connects in meaning (though not morphologically) to a group of less typical works he’s done during these five years. At Bear Mountain the wood frame seems to hold up the mass of stone it encloses (though it couldn’t), and in the group of cobble stone dolmens he erected at Ward’s Island in 1979 there is a similar sense of the artist’s intention to recall primitive, ritual-associated, uses of stone. Interestingly, the one piece he’s done between 1977 and now which is organically rounded instead of rectilinear or made of cubic shapes, was executed in Israel where the pull of the land and its associations for him with earlier primitivizing and biomorphic work is very strong. Smaller stones “spill out” of large ones in three groupings which look like conjunctions of the monolith and the stacked dolmen. If Vaadia had done that piece in certain places in Melanesia where people believe that sacred stones have miraculous powers corresponding in kind to the stone’s shape, he might have been rewarded with riches or an increase in his own crops, or his livestock’s fertility because the units resemble bags with spilled-out seeds or coins and, less distinctly, a sow among her litter. Such possibilities are not completely foreign to Vaadia’s deepest convictions about the spiritual potential of the simple stone.

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