

Darrell Petit

Marion M. Callis

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DARRELL PETIT

MARION M. CALLIS

DARRELL PETIT,
Gondwana, 2001.
Photo courtesy of
the artist.

New sculpture by Darrell Petit reflects a maturing minimalist aesthetic, leaning increasingly toward a surrealist tradition of exploring meaning in biomorphic forms. Influences from Western art tradition meld with Eastern principles in his work, imbuing it with the subtlety and directness integral to both. The process for making sculpture is ongoing for Petit; as part of his initial, direct intervention with the material, he positions the stone to follow its physical nature and to continue toward further transformation.

Central issues for Petit are the concept of the earth as a living thing, possessing sexuality, and the body's capacity for interaction and identification with the earth. The idea of the sexualized living earth was persistent in early Eastern and Western cultures — like plants and animals, earthen ores were classified as male or female.¹ More widespread still — from Native America to Greece, the Old Testament and India — was the idea of man's birth from stone.² Petit studied at University of Iowa, naturally absorbing elements of earth and the legacy of performance artist Ana Mendieta. While Mendieta identified with the earth as a female source of power,³ Petit finds affinity with the older idea of a complete sexuality found within the earth, and an interchange of energy therein. A sense of spirituality in his approach to materials and process echoes ancient Japanese worship of stone, which later transformed into an appreciation for Nature.⁴ Petit also became aware of the tenets of the Mono-Ha sculpture group,⁵ which led him to adapt their principles to recognize truths he had perceived intuitively. He acknowledges principles of some Japanese sculpture as confluent with his own, "... that material is not incidental to the work, but is an integral part of an ongoing process; and through the process of experimentation, the work may be realized."⁶

The artist identifies the physical space of the granite quarry as "... correspond[ing] to the anatomy of my brain. My interaction with the quarry has evolved so that my creative thought springs directly from its environment: material, spatial presence, geological time — all inform the sculpture. Metaphorically the quarry is the inside of my head cut open... where perpetual blasting, drilling and further exploration are part of an ongoing process to excavate ideas..."⁷ His process is intuitive, sharpened on progressive, empirical knowledge of the material. Experiments and accidents reveal new information that continually redirects his process and goal.

Petit's use of the torch is atypical for stone sculpture⁸ and stems directly from extended experience with American quarrying techniques. The torch heats to 3400 degrees Fahrenheit, a temperature capable of rendering granite molten. Various minerals within the stone melt more or less quickly under the torch's flame, leaving a veined, tactile, flesh-like surface. In Petit's hands, the torch imparts a sense of vulnerability to the material, and refers to natural processes occurring in the intense heat of the earth's hidden interior.

Petit's work for the past 13 years has been concerned with questions of balance, both physical and spiritual, and with the contingencies that permit or prevent it — between opposites of male and female, dark and light, vastness and intimacy, flux and order.

Balance and contingency are explored in work produced from 1988 to 2000, in which sculptures comprising two or more individual elements were placed initially in leaning and supporting positions, and later, as the idea and process matured, in interdependent balance. *Contingent* (1992-1996), recently installed at the Chyubu Museum and Cultural Center (Tottori, Kurayoshi, Japan), is typical of Petit's developing process in its composition of two 18-ton blocks of Stony Creek granite, in an interdependent relationship. One is immediately aware of the intensity of the forces involved in the relation-



ship, emphasized by the highly polished area where the two elements meet. The high polish, employed to stimulate visual penetration of the material's exterior, suggests friction and energy, while revealing the stone's structure. Each element, leaning against and supporting the other, "enters" the form and energy of the other.

The relationship is not static, however, but alive with change. Potential for its metamorphosis is assured by the artist's insertion of wooden dowels along a natural crack in the lower block. Subject to expansion, contraction, and deterioration on a time scale far shorter than that of stone, wood has been used this way for centuries as a tool for splitting stone. Wood can absorb water, freeze and thaw, and thereby expand and contract, causing conditions that may eventually cause the stone to crack apart.

Event, currently exhibited at Lyman Allyn Museum of Art (New London, CT), is perhaps the most accomplished of Petit's work in the genre, and distills its essence. Comprised of two 25-ton Stony Creek granite blocks placed in true equipoise, *Event's* heroic scale contrasts with the delicacy of the stones' interaction — their point of meeting is considerably smaller than in previous work, with a minimal polished area of contact whose delicacy implies intimate communication. *Event* evokes the sublime in its combination of upward formal movement and pinpoint balance, qualities that transcend the sculpture's material and imply spirituality. Its contingencies lie in the earth beneath it, the atmosphere surrounding it, and maintenance of its own upward reach.

In his newest work, Petit revisits balance and contingency, this time within individual stone elements in the landscape. Three sculptures, installed on the grounds of Eastern Connecticut State University (Willimantic, CT)⁹ in 2001, address his classic issues with remarkable subtlety — the living earth sexualized, contrasting elements opposing and supporting one another, spiritual and physical balance. The scale of the three sculptures — *Axis Mundi*, *Gondwana* (for Richard Bellamy), and *Bear* — is not epic, but human. They range from 6 1/2 to approximately 8 tons, and embody heights and widths that correspond to the human body, engaging the viewer on his own terms.

Axis Mundi's form echoes the landscape (perhaps the one scarred in the quarrying process) while it implies the flow of water. The stone is cut and polished to follow the grain, as it slopes away from a centre hole. The central "navel" alludes to the ancient belief of the earth as a creative being (*terra mater*), and man as born from stone (*petra genatrix*).¹⁰ The highly polished surface reveals the morphology of the stone, the experience in this instance akin to looking through clear, moving water, and gives the impression of water flowing from a source, and thereby refers to the creation of life. Light playing over the stone during the day introduces another aspect of time to the work.

Gondwana (for Richard Bellamy) is the nearest echo of Petit's previous colossal-scaled work, largely for its chosen site above a sloping natural stone outcrop adjacent to an excavated parking area. Its apparent and undeniably solid form is made

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conditional by his insertion of white oak dowels along a white fissure in the stone's black biotite exterior. In *Gondwana*, the potential for a split is tantalizing because of an unusual geological occurrence in the sculpture's material — the ancient black biotite was intruded upon at a moment in its history by molten pink granite, which filled one of its fissures in a form that evokes a human figure. Petit emphasized the figurative potential of this deposit by re-melting the surface with the torch and polishing it, leaving a flesh-like surface. The idea of the two sexes' presence in the earth is thereby manifested in a form corresponding to an African belief in mineral classification as black, hard, brittle ores as masculine, and red, warm, soft ores as feminine.¹¹ Other areas of the pink granite's intrusion are also melted and polished to emphasize their difference from the rough, black, "masculine" biotite.

Bear further addresses the concept of the earth as sexual, and stone as generative. Made of pink Stony Creek granite, it stands slightly over five feet tall and bears a deep vertical cut made by melting stone away with the torch. The resulting interior surface is again tactile, flesh-like, warm and moist in appearance, evoking the inner heat of the earth itself, and of a female generative organ.

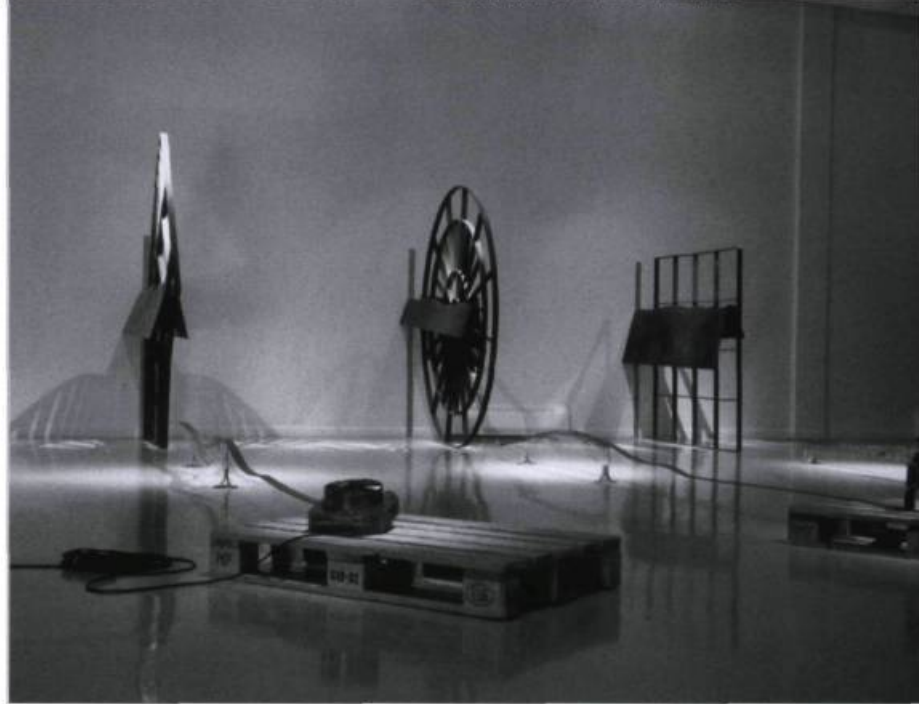
A small sculpture and related group of monoprints recently exhibited at Eastern Connecticut State University correspond to an experience with injury and recovery Petit suffered following a 1981 accident. *Subdural with Outtake Shaft* (1995) bears similarities to several of his small, perhaps necessarily "siteless" sculptures, in that their subjects tend toward introspection. Initially, it appears to be a glance back to Petit's earliest work, in which ready-made objects or forms were often integrated. The steel shaft in *Subdural* is, however, effective for its incongruity, penetrating the organic form of natural granite. In the monoprints, which served as developmental studies for *Subdural*, small arrows

appear as on geological maps or x-rays, indicating points of interest or concern in the anatomy of a landscape or body. Arrows also symbolize transition and movement of life, death, and the spirit in Eastern and Western art traditions. One senses forces scattered, but also the process of regathering energy. The physicality of the evolving images, emphasized by Petit's use of irregular, handmade wool paper, sumi ink, graphite, and oil stick, is dense, physical, and yet somehow amorphous, as a physical being gathering forces for creation or rebirth.

Balance, contingency, nature on a scale ranging from cosmic to intimate, and the inexorable processes inherent to all are expressed with growing clarity as Petit's ongoing experiments with stone are honed with experience. ■

NOTES

1. Mircea Eliade, *The Forge and the Crucible: The Origins and Structures of Alchemy*, 2nd ed., University of Chicago Press, 1979, p. 36-37.
2. Eliade, p. 43.
3. In Mendieta's performances (e.g., *Death of a Chicken*), the artist embodied and enacted both male and female roles, described by Donald Kuspit (p. 38, *Ana Mendieta*, Barcelona 1996, Gloria Moure, ed.). My thanks to Laudymarie Rosado for translation assistance.
4. Referenced by Isamu Noguchi in *Isamu Noguchi: Essays and Conversations* (p. 61; New York, 1994, D. Apostolos-Cappadona and B. Altshuler, eds.).
5. Described by Janet Koplos as the direct approach to ordinary material, the actual reality of space, the relational emphasis of sculptor, sculpture and the world as one continuum, and the expression through the material of an inherent sense of time, movement and change; in Mono-Ha and the Power of Materials; *Material Mediations*, "New Art Examiner", June 1988.
6. Darrell Petit, in correspondence, 2001.
7. Darrell Petit, artist's statement, 1998.
8. Lucio Fontana, among others, used an acetylene torch in process for metal sculpture.
9. *Darrell Petit: Lithic Alchemy*, Akus Gallery, ECSU, March 8 - April 29, 2001.
10. Eliade, p. 43.
11. Eliade, p. 36.



Guy Nadeau, *D'objets avérés*, 2001. Détail de l'exposition. Photo : avec l'aimable autorisation de l'artiste.

Pour interpréter le sens global de sa dernière exposition, Guy Nadeau fait appel à la notion de territoires qu'il associe étroitement aux notions d'étendue et d'espace. D'autres notions, relatives à la constitution d'espaces perceptifs visuels, telles la profondeur, la distance et la perspective, traversent en sourdine sa réflexion sur son travail. Dans ses installations, des composantes abstraites, majoritaires, côtoient des objets factices, faits main, reproduisant des objets appartenant à l'univers quotidien de l'artiste, relevant particulièrement de sa pratique artistique. Il s'agit donc de territoires définis par la topologie des lieux et par l'exercice de l'art.

Dans son ensemble, l'exposition procède d'une structure malléable, ouverte aux changements, sujettes à des restructurations selon la lecture que l'on en fait. Les constituantes de l'exposition semblent tantôt s'agglomérer dans un tout unitaire pour former une seule et unique œuvre, une installation, tandis que certaines tendent tantôt à s'individualiser pour former davantage des œuvres particulières, indépendantes les unes des autres. Ainsi, l'exposition paraît participer d'une seule installation si l'on considère que la totalité des constituantes circonscrivent une structure en arabesque, mi-circulaire, mi-spiralée, qui concourt à définir un espace unifié, évidé en son centre. Cette structuration est également marquée par une progression dans la dimension des volumes des composantes¹ et dans leur addition. Les constituantes se succèdent en longeant les murs de la galerie en même temps que leur volume s'accroît. Leur progression, allant de la simplicité à la complexité, débute par un objet solitaire accroché au mur pour se terminer dans des