Tangible Light, Solid Air

By Tom Wachunas

“I take pleasure in the beauty and wonder of earth. My sculptures are an expression of gratitude, a search for parallel, tangible, formal experiences that can be shared with others…I sculpt light and emptiness. Whenever possible, I penetrate a rock or a tree trunk. Not to subdue it, but to open it up. Open for eyes to walk through, traverse, wonder, imagine, remember, touch…and understand.”

-Barbara Stanczack -

Rounding out the exhibition by five women artists in “A Celebration of Women in the Arts: Director’s Choice II” at the Canton Museum of Art are 19 works by sculptor Barbara Stanczack (wife of the prominent abstractionist Julian Stanczack). And ‘rounding’ is a good way to begin sensing what her pieces are about. Round, as in curvaceous, organic forms. Fecund volumes. Brimming pregnancies of light and space, literal and implied.

Her contemplative sculptures are sensual, evocative celebrations of her enthrallment with wood and stone. Their simplicity isn’t of the kind so common to the cold, emotionally detached rawness of Minimalism. Rather, these are elegant, intuited harmonies between the artist’s graceful manipulation of the physical forms, and her respect for the intrinsic nature of the material at hand. It’s an honest, warm, and seductive symbiosis.

“Bulbous” looks to be a salvaged oak stump, split so as to expose an interior sealed with paper-thin, iridescent copper flashing. It’s an intriguing duet of materials, arresting and a resting, not unlike mother-of-pearl inside a shell. Indeed, there are other works here rendered to suggest the convex-concave configurations of sea shells, as in the stunning “Marking Time”. This is a spectacular, large piece of onyx which is, but for a few chiseled spots on its angled underside, polished to a sleek finish. With its richly translucent striations of green and reddish brown bands pressed amid layers of microcrystalline quartz, this single stone conjures an entirely ancient, mesmerizing and exotic landscape.

Exotic, too, is the nearby “Tip Toe Through My Garden”, with its five undulating flowers made of cypress wood. These upright blooms taper to rounded points, seeming to defy gravity. Similarly, the white forms made from Italian translucent alabaster in “Butterfly Wings” seem impossibly delicate and airy atop their sparkling stone perch.

If there is such a thing as earthly sacraments, then these works, born of timeless natural substances, are subtly sacramental. They are signs of things at once ostensible and obscured. Quietly mysterious, in manifesting the outward signs of the artist’s hand – her physical actions – they guide us toward a spiritual action of sorts, which is our inward communion with her sense of delight and discovery.

Michelangelo once wrote, “The best artist has that thought alone which is contained within the marble shell; the sculptor’s hand can only break the spell to free the figure slumbering in the stone.” It is, I think, a gentle breaking that Stanczack has engaged. As she has stated, it is not a breaking to conquer or subdue, but to reveal, and to present the possibility of our sharing in her gratitude for “the beauty and wonder of earth.”

In breaking the ‘spell’ mentioned by the Renaissance master, Stanczack lavishes us with marvelously sumptuous revelations, and in the process, holds us spellbound.

Photo, from barbarastanczack.com : “Marking Time”, onyx, on view through July 24 at the Canton Museum of Art, located in the Cultural Center for the Arts, 1001 Market Ave. North. (330) 453-7666.

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POSTED BY TOM WACHUNAS AT [2:55 AM](http://artwach.blogspot.com/2011/06/tangible-light-solid-air.html) [0 COMMENTS](https://www.blogger.com/comment.g?blogID=5830900456947692487&postID=6740552884670049705)