

REVIEWS

Saint Clair Cemin

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In *The Garden of the Forking Paths*, Jorge Luis Borges explains that "in all fiction, when a man is faced with alternatives, he chooses one at the expense of the others", adding that "in the almost unfathomable Ts'ui Pên, he chooses—simultaneously— all of them. He thus creates various futures, various times which start others, that will in their turn branch out and bifurcate in other times". "In Ts'ui Pên's work", Borges writes, "all the possible solutions occur, each one being the point of departure for other bifurcations".

As one approaches the sculpture of Saint Clair Cemin, as is the case with virtually any artist, one is tempted to develop a coherent storyline to unify the variety of his creations in a single, integrated whole. However, as one becomes more familiar with his work, one begins to feel that such an effort only leads to a strained reconciliation, as if one were attempting to subject inherently unrelated elements to a common denominator; those elements which, like the times and futures of Ts'ui Pên, are interchangeable and unstable, producing a reciprocal flow of attractions and repulsions that constitutes the dynamic and transmutative structure of a phenomenon which is in a constant state of becoming.

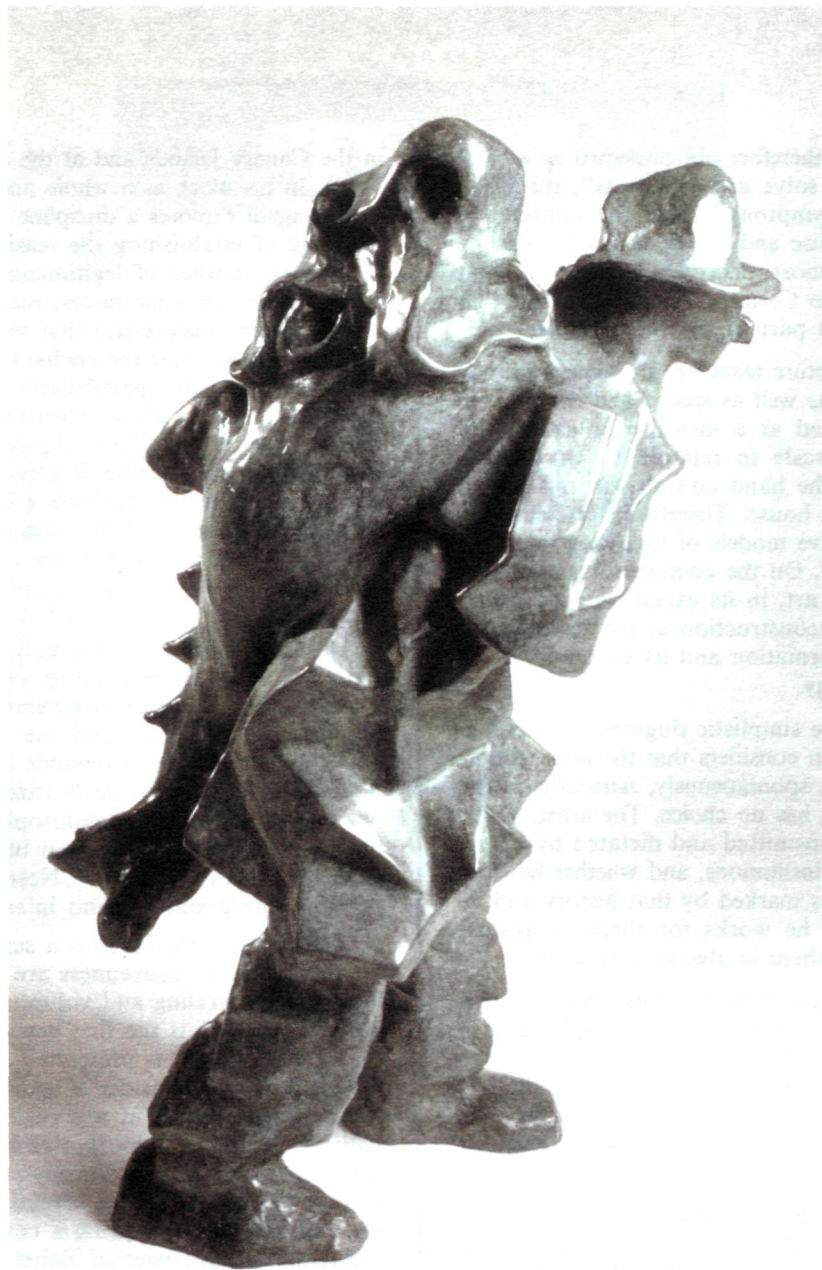
Be it sculpting stone, modelling terracotta, carving wood, casting bronze or plaster, Cemin attempts to break away from the artistic trend that is plagued with the fear of heading towards spiritual and intellectual chaos, radical skepticism and self-impotent relativism unless we find solid, unquestionable foundations and principles. On the other hand, in these post-modern times when the mixture of styles and disciplines is one of the most popular conventions for artistic banality, Cemin attempts to overcome the predictable sense of *cliché* and the formula that materializes the decadent, cynical art of

our times offering an alternative to the numbness and torpor that have managed to neutralize all our hopes and emotions in an expectant misery of sorts.

Cemin's sculpture lacks unity and consistency precisely because it stems from the contradictions and digressions of experience, or, to quote the artist, "what shapes our particular concept of sculpture is that which is not sculpture, what belongs to our everyday lives, what we handle from day to day, what we never consider". Indeed, before approaching sculpture as an art form, "we are already familiar with dolls, kitchen utensils, knives, cups, eyeglasses, matchboxes and any number of utilitarian objects that make up daily life. Sculpture is like the icing on the cake. But the cake is made of life, not of art".

However, this disparity and heterogeneity of forms, styles and materials does not attempt to recover the mimetic referentiality that modern art made such efforts to abolish, but rather to develop an independent vision with no external equivalents, removed from the long-standing relationship between the image and its reference, from the process of kinship and pairing, establishing an internal differentiation of the image with itself, where no element has referential priority over the others.

Unlike those who present a pastiche of references to history, art and popular culture, offering a fragmented and fetishistic sign only to end up reaffirming the traditional unity of the artistic discipline, Cemin's exploration does not reflect a deposit of stylistic attributes available for an *assemblage* in his sculpture, but rather a discipline that can be deconstructed according to methods of its own. Cemin actually uses the



SAINT CLAIR CEMIN. 1991. *Man with fish*. Bronze. 68,5×17,7×33 cm.
Cort. Galería Soledad Lorenzo. Madrid.

means and media of sculptural representation to create his own structure, which is both object and representation; unlike those who use *clichés* drawn from art history or popular culture as mere instruments or instrumental devices devoid of their context and their historical sense, Cemin pits them against themselves, pointing out that even those who claimed to establish new foundations and realms in art are equally marked by the prejudices they inherited from the very past they strive to cross out.

In this sense, the mixture and the crossing paths that replace the sense of unity, closure and authority which used to be an artistic requisite also acknowledge their own intellectual contingency, because their discourse paradoxically addresses yet inevitably contains the very preconceived notions that it attempts to defy, which does not imply a sort of antifoundational desperation nor intellectual confusion, but rather the need to question everything, even identity itself.

Thus, the sculpture of Saint Clair Cemin does not try to preserve or convey a canon nor a tradition. If anything, it engages in a problematic, inquisitive relationship with art and history alike. Or, as Umberto Eco notes: “The postmodern

reply to the modern consists of recognizing that the past, since it cannot really be destroyed because its destruction leads to silence (the discovery of modernity), must be revisited; but with irony, not innocently”.

This irony, as Donald Kuspit explained on several occasions in reference to Cemin’s sculpture, “is the only alternative to kitsch” and to “manufactured culture”. This satirical version of the concept of a central style and aesthetic purity in Cemin’s sculpture could in fact be understood as his defense against the postmodern trivialization of avant-garde art and its hollow opportunism. On the one hand, using languages and realms that are removed from art —such as furniture, utilitarian and decorative objects, or architecture— Cemin breaks the hierarchy established between art and popular culture, yet without that cannibalistic, consuming distortion that reiterates cultural myths, but rather confronting us with a critical analysis and research of banality and the deficiencies of those values, revealing the privileges of art.

On the other hand, with the use of appearances and a full awareness of the difficulty in distinguishing between different kinds of materials in a culture fraudulent nature of languages, including that of established art.

The sculpture of Cemin is therefore not presented as a solution ("I do not attempt to solve any problems", the artist admits), but rather as a symptom, "with the consequent absence of the traumatizing use and debasement of language, and with a serene and almost neutral recourse to what exists", according to Germano Celant, trying to make art that is related to everyday life, a part of the same whole.

In this sense, Cemin's sculpture takes on a practical attitude towards objects and figures as well as spaces and contexts, in which the body is established as a measure or a point of departure for a harmonic scale in relation to the human figure, the torso, the arm, the hand and also in relation to the physical environment of a house. Therefore, this sculpture does not address the discursive models of logic nor the arguments of abstract philosophy. On the contrary, it presents an environment, a place where art, in its excess and its displacement, is a construction/deconstruction at the scale of our particular culture, of its information and its economy, of its consumption and its ideology.

This means that unlike the simplistic dogmas of drawing-room neo-romanticism, Cemin considers that the artist simply does not "create" innocently, spontaneously, *naturally*, as the flowerbush blooms because it has no choice. The artist, above all, inherits a role that is transmitted and dictated by a specific history, through specific institutions, and whether he decides to continue in the process marked by that history and its institutions or not, whether he works for them or against them, his relationship with them is always inescapable.

However, that does not imply a deterministic view, because history is not a smooth terrain but rather a multiple, diverse and fragmentary flow of interchangeable and contradictory values established in different times and spaces, like static sets of values, history can also be used—as Cemin explains—as "psychotechnologies for the exploration of the natural and cultural heritage of people's fears and desires".

In this sense, Cemin's sculpture openly rejects any kind of recommendations as to what is and is not appropriate for and from art, in turn rejecting any intentionality in his art: "My work is more concerned with exploring a variety of different issues rather than creating a conceptual headquarter. In creating a static structure one is more concerned with homogeneity. When in movement, one is more interested with the different textures one encounters and with the complexity of the world, that is, with heterogeneity".

The no-man's which we have attempted to penetrate also has its counterpart in Cemin's personal experience. "I am also from a hybrid culture", says Cemin. Born in 1951, Cemin grew up in Cruz Alta, a southern city in the heart of the Brazilian cattle-farming lands. He spent his childhood in the rural environment, without electricity or running water, and later on in the provincial towns inhabited by the descendants of European emigrants. Cemin first showed an interest in physics, and moved to Sao Paulo to study, but soon changed his plans and left for Paris in 1974. There he studied at the École des Beaux Arts, where he received a rigorous classic education. In 1978 he travelled to New York, where he began producing prints and drawings. In 1983, at the age of 32, he started exploring the realm of sculpture in an attempt to renovate a language he considered academic, reductive and self-referential.

This fragmentary, heterogeneous and anti-hierarchical urge to renew is apparent in this first individual show in Spain (his work had previously been exhibited in the "Desplazamientos" show I organized at the Centro Atlántico de Arte Moderno

in the Canary Islands and at the Museo Luigi Pecci in Prato, Italy). In his work as a whole and in each one of his pieces, Cemin again explores a discipline for which there is no longer any way of establishing the feasibility or superiority of one form over another of legitimizing one given perspective or interpretation. In some pieces, such as *Griffin*, Cemin calls up on the absurd mannerism that was once used to recover the evocative power and the enchantment that art always loses at critical moments, particularly in prescriptive or programmatic times such as these, when many take on the role of judges about what should and should not be done in art. Cemin casts bronze for a medieval gargoyle of sorts with three legs (set on wheels) which supports a lapislazuli bowl on its wings. This strange creature, half horse and half dragon, has a long tail with a copper handle at the end, like a walking stick that invites the viewer to take the piece for a stroll around the room.

Another work in bronze representing the phallic protuberance whose base opens up in what could be a four-leaf clover is entitled *Homage to Unamuno*. Although the relationship between the piece and the Spanish philosopher is not easily discerned, Cemin reminds us that "on the first page of *El sentimiento trágico de la vida* Unamuno "refers to Man, but not to the Man of philosophers, not the abstract Man, but the real man of flesh and blood, the one who eats and defecates, loves and hates". Needless to say, I will leave the possible interpretations and inferences up to the reader.

Untitled (Turning Point) is a similar piece as far as its conical shape and its unevenness are concerned, but in this case the form is spiraling and voluptuous, stylized and multicolored. This piece is the first version of a monumental work, *Flame*, that Cemin is presenting at the Documenta and that Kuspit seems to consider a takeoff of a spiral, that symbol of modern progress that was evident in works that range from Tatlin's *Monument to the Third International* to Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*. In any case, as Kuspit suggests, the unresolved convergence of several visual languages points out the impossibility of sharing a common visual language: like a contemporary Tower of Babel.

The *Caprichos (Whims)* series, a clear reference to Goya, explores this domain of the picturesque and the picaresque the fluidity of manners and lines and the humor and frivolity of our little secrets and fantasies. Unlike the more static previous pieces—with the exception of the spiraling *Turning Point*, which may synthesize the hybrid, dynamic character of all Cemin's sculpture—these whims are closer to drawing than to sculpture; they are sketches, cherished like the porcelain figurines that certain mothers exhibit with great pride and others collect with equal obsession. Altogether, they offer another example of the diversity, the creative capacity and the possibilities offered by Cemin's exploration. Individually, each one of them maintains its paradoxical independence and self-sufficiency.

Finally, Cemin presents a colorful and ethereal architectural structure, open and luminous, very different from the closed space he is also presenting in Documenta but also decorated with concave, staggered geometric shapes in bright colors, in this case on the corners of the supposed roof. Although Cemin has presented some monumental pieces in the past, none of them—with the only exception, perhaps, of the *Guardian Angel* he exhibited in the Canary Islands—are as fragile and voluptuous as this one, which clearly opens a new realm in the complex, Babelized synthesis of Saint Clair Cemin, again forking the paths that he has been exploring in his efforts to resist the opacity of the world and recover the surprising and exuberant nature of life.