**An Alchemist in the Eternal Fields of Basalt \ Haim Maor**

**Remarks on the sculptures of David Fine**

An Inspection of David Fine's sculpture from its beginnings to present reveals a conspicuous characteristic: a movement from a small format to a large one, and from that back to the small format; from the particular to the colossal-environmental, and from there to a miniaturization and reduction of the world into a tine gray stone, a stone hidden in the palm of the hand, caressing, caressed, cool, pleasant to the touch, as though it were a children's game or an expensive piece of jewelry.

*Basalt Arch,* a sculpture by David Fine from 1983, symbolizes the connections and the bridges that unify the extremes of his total *oeuvre:* monumental environmental sculpture, and miniature, intimate sculpture; sculpture which is made by carving, by subtracting and polishing, and sculpture without human intervention in the exterior or the interior of the stone; sculpture with archeological context and associations, and sculpture which draws its sources from various ethnic and tribal elements in Africa, Japan, and the Middle East.

The height of *Basalt Arch* is close to five meters, and it is composed of basalt rocks weighing ten tons each, which join together into an arched spine of fossilized dinosaur. Through and around the arch rise undulating mountains which surround Kiryat- Shemonah and Tel- Hai Yard, or look out towards Lebanon, and converse with them in an organic flow.

In a broader perspective, this arch joins the group of dolmens that stand in the region, and an arched building in Tel Dan, and becomes part of them.

The nine stones of the arch were selected and marked by David Fine, were brought to the site, and then, in an ancient architectural- engineering method, were placed beside one another, on a mound of earth, with small wedges inserted into spaces between them and 'binding' them. In the end, the arch was sealed by the center stone, 'the headstone', which remained arched, standing by its own power, after the removal of the earth from under it. A delicate balance, based on forces of thrusting and halting, a connection between the stones which before this had been foreign to one another.

It is difficult to ignore the verbal and the real/ material symbolism implicit in the act, as evoked by the meanings of the various Hebrew words derived from the root *chalaq:* particle |*chaluq*|, plot (of land) |*chelqah*|, dispute |*machloqet*|, division, or distribution |*chaluqah|,* to smooth |*lehachliq*|, and to share |*lehitchaleq*|…

With such simplicity and naturalness, David Fine makes perceptible the divisive and the bestowing; the dismantling and the constructing; the participant and the resistant; the partial fragment and the complete plot (of land).

Like a fractal structure, the tiny wedge – which like an anonymous laborer in a factory takes upon its shoulder the weight of the great arch – is a solitary particle which contains within itself the complexity and the pattern of the monumental whole.

**A Field of Stones**

Kibbutz Ma'ayan Baruch is situated on the borderline between the basalt deposits of the Upper Galilee and the limestones of the Hills of Naftali. The basalt stones, black and gray, large and bulbous, lie scattered in the fields around the kibbutz, like a large field of stones. These basalt stones seem to silently hold the stories of the Creation which took place here thousands or millions years ago. For David Fine, they are traces and remnants of a battle of giants, which have remained there in order to stimulate his imagination.

As in Pompeii and Herculaneum, the bulbous basalt stones of the Galilee appeared to David Fine like cocoons which conceal a secret that will be revealed when their shell is burst. Michelangelo Buonarotti's saying. "In every stone a sculpture is imprisoned, and it is the sculptor's task to expose it, to remove what is superfluous", is always in his mind. In this spirit, David Fine devotes much time to selecting the right stone and examining it with his X ray eyes, which strip away the outer shell and reveal what is within.

Indeed, for David Fine, in each stone there is a story, which is hinted at in the marks engraved in it, like lines of fate in the palm of a hand, and the secrets of this story are to be explored and investigated. Deep contemplation of the forms of the stones enables him to reconstruct in his mind's eye the movement of the boiling lava which erupted, flowed, and emerged from the depth of the earth, like fire from the bowels of terrifying dragon, streamed forth and covered plains and cities, fixating and embalming people, flora and fauna, and coagulating over them like hard shells, wrappings of gray ash, imprisoning bubbles of life and terrors of death inside them.

But David Fine's wandering through the eternal fields of basalt also led him to those stones that has shells which actually contained their secrets and their stories, etched in the grooves of time like an old record, and bruised by the touches of people and their implements: scratches made by the plows of the anonymous tillers of the soil who worked in this place and raised crops and children; eroded millstones milestones; cornerstones and foundation stones which have remained bereft of owners and of walls; sling stones, ballista stones; signs of army legions that passed through the area and left traces of dagger, an ax, or a track from an armored personnel carrier on the corner of a stone; enigmatic symbols which condensed and perpetuated the beliefs of previous resident, who used the large stones as an available and reliable surface on which to leave mark of their presence, a message to the future. David Fine, like a skilled detective or scout, takes a stone from the earth. Looks at traces, reads the signs, and connects them to what will emerge from them when he activates the electric saw or knocks on them with sculptor's chisel.

Fine: *"Everything is connected to the earth and to nature and everything is also connected to man. Once' in thought, I saw myself as a man of the world. Today, I have limited myself to the earth of the area and the basalt stones in the field". \**

**Masks of Eros and Death**

The hollow- eyed masks of marble and basalt that David Fine sculpted in 1982 resemble the masks of women in the Greek theater, with a distinct allusion to classical, Stoic, portraits, and with a trace of resemblance to the artist's own facial features. They contain something of the special magic projected by a perfect female persona, an anima. The masks, more than the conceal, reveal Fine's Duchampian "Rose Sélavy", a rose that contains within it life as Eros |Marcel Duchamp: *"Eros c'est la vie"* ("Eros is life")|.

Indeed, Eros, lusting for and desiring to be fruitful and multiply, connects, in these masks – as also in the sculptures of horses, of oxen, of men with erect organs and of fertile women – with the frozenness of death, with embalming and memorializing, with the sweet womanly smile which has been fixated into the future, quite like the death mask of an anonymous French girl who drowned in the Seine and whose portrait was memorialized by an unknown sculptor.

The head of this girl, cast in plaster, served as a model for the 15-year-old David Fine, in the first sculpture exercise he was given in his youth in Johannesburg, South Africa, in his studies with Miss Benson, This sculpture, and the heads of Voltaire and Victor Hugo, the mouth and nose of Michelangelo Buonarottie's *David*, and the torso of Auguste Rodin's *Lady Fairfax,* were his first loves' his entrance gate into the world of sculpture.

Concurrently, David Fine was exposed to the traditional sculpture of the black servants who worked in his parents' home. To this day he feels that the masks, the horses, and the oxen that he sculpts draw upon the small wood and clay sculptures that he saw there.

Fine's parents, Zionist Jews, imbued with the dream Fine joined the "Machal" (Volunteers from Abroad") corps, immigrated to Israel, was posted to Ma'ayan Baruch' met Ruti (who was in the Palmach company at Kfar Giladi)' married her, and remained in the kibbutz.

For many years David Fine worked in the fishponds and the dairy, and served as Coordinator of the kibbutz's economy, and as it Secretary. *"This satisfied my creativity",* he says. *"We built a kibbutz."* While he was Coordinator of the economy, when the Art School at Tel- Hai was in its early stages, David Fine studied ceramics with Dalia Vissik. Very soon he too became one of the teaching staff at Tel- Hai, and taught in the Sculpture Department there for thirty years. David Fine continued his studies in various frameworks: sculpture in stone in Pietra Santa in Italy; he was invited to Japan by Isamu Noguchi, and there, through the gardens, he learned the special Japanese approach to stone. Step by step he paved his way to the basalt stones.

**Scenes and Groups**

Like the stones of the *Basalt Arch*' Fine's sculptures "feel" better when they are part of a group, presenting a scene from a group of masks; a group of men in a circle around two women; a pile of stones heads, resembling a mound of skulls in some catacomb or in the monastery at Santa Katerina; horses grooved with fine line in plates of basalt, and thick oxen bearing men with erect penises on their backs; ample- bodied women, standing in remonstrative postures or kissing the men opposite them. Head to head, in a kind if tribute to Constantin Brancusi's *The Kiss.* The sculptures are present in space even when they are small and stand on the floor or on basalt base. Their presence bursts through their dimensions in a lust for life and Eros, in a movement which split out of their actual static character into a primordial, harmonious nature, in which man and animal become a single entity.

Fine: *"For many years, as a cattle- man and as a dairy- worker, I spent time on horseback. I was a real cowboy, armed with rifle, leading the herd to pasture, floating, free and quick. This combination of horse and man, which became a single entity, conquered the world. At times this has something beautiful and connected to nature about it, and at times – something monstrous. The connection between man and the ox or the calf is different: the ox is more earthy, basic, slow and dependent, like a mass of basalt…"*

***The Power of Imagination***

David Fine is a sculptor, and thus he thinks and works in the three- dimensional, with masses of matter, with volumes and confrontations of textures, but the surfaces of his sculptures resemble a rich painter's canvas. Fine exploits the oxidation of the outer shell of the basalt (which creates various brown and orange hues) and extricates from it colorful painterly qualities which respond to the grays and the blacks that have been exposed from the depths of the stone. A painting of sculpture. The lines of the flow of the lava, too, serve David Fine as a kind of sensitive 'brushstrokes', which refine the coarseness of the basalt and leave it to the viewer's imagination to complete what is hinted at or apparently missing.

The power of imagination, the magic that is behind any art creation, is what has enabled Fine to liberate the spirit of his fossilized creations so that they may run or gallop in the eternal fields of basalt.

\*All quotations of the artist's words are from a conversation with the author.