

# XOSÉ MANUEL CASTRO

Stone is no longer the medium through which the figure materialises. Stone is now the figure. Human, animal or vegetable forms will not be recognised in his most iconic work, because it is the stones themselves, with all of their mineral morphology, which prevail. Nonetheless, Castro's artistic creation appears to go one step further, moving closer to a sort of "neo-alchemy", in which he does not attempt to make gold from lead, but instead aspires to a new dimension of lifelessness. An absence of life that appears to be more of a state of deep sleep, the result of some sort of curse, or perhaps an unknown hibernation process.

Nature offers its inner raw product, an unborn element which the sculptor must essentially breathe life into. This refers neither to an anthropomorphic life, nor to a zoomorphic life, as while stones must remain stones, they must also depict emotions, a tear sliding down its epidermal surface, opening up through the clean cut of a scalpel. And, as in the work of the most prestigious plastic surgeon, it must all seem very natural following this aesthetic operation, as if it was nature itself that was the true maker of this work of art.

# THE PHILOSOPHER'S STONE

Alchemy, as practised in ancient Mesopotamia, Pharaonic Egypt, or by the Persian Empire before the Greeks and Romans developed their respective civilisations and placed down roots within our classical traditions, has always filled this particular space reserved for protoscience. Alchemy was constructed on philosophical foundations, and combined, in what was a *totum revolutum*, an almost mythical metallurgy, bringing together a variety of disciplines including astrology, medicine, physics, chemistry, art and mysticism to name but a few. And within this inscrutable alchemic universe, this philosopher's stone, was, for many centuries, its most sought after goal.

A legendary substance, which it was said could transmute lead into gold. But aside from its incredible and magical feats, this philosopher's stone was a true elixir of eternal youth, and the source of immortality. And for this very reason, this cumbersome and convoluted procedure was known as *Opus magnum*, or the Great Work.

But does art not share its eternal aspiration with alchemy? Does art not have the same aspirations as alchemy, to transmute the raw materials it finds within, adding a certain elegance, fineness, delicacy and life to this vulgar fruit which sprouts from the roots of the Earth? And the artist as a plastic alchemist. Does it not yearn for this very immortality that only his *Opus magnum* can yield?

# MAGICAL REALISM

And the city slept, and as it slept, the stones began to lose their inherent and natural rigidity. The senses were no longer alert, resting only as the moonlight is able to. The relative diminution of some of the organic functions which rise from this lethargy, already considered inert. And so with the enemy in their defenceless bed, the songs of the sirens ricochet off the surface of the River Styx, of immortality.

# OPTICAL ILLUSIONS

Alt was Vitruvius, in the 1st century BC, who first spoke of the optical illusions in ancient Greek art, followed decades later by the words of Pliny the Elder. But if there was one artistic period in which the artists really revelled in misleading their spectators through their extraordinary *trompe-l'oeil* techniques, it was the Baroque era. In this era, artists attempted to recreate unknown textures and qualities using marble and wood in their paintings, architecture and even sculptures.

In the twentieth century the idea of subverting reality was popular through surrealism and hyperrealism. An artistic tradition in which classical references to this timeless desire to achieve technical perfection through the representation or transgression of reality really appeared. However Castro's work does not make protagonists of neither gods nor humans. Stone now takes centre stage. Through his creations he transports us to a new paradox, another way of looking at art. Because the sculptor no longer tries to emulate Pygmalion, who was able to fall in love with Galatea, this beautiful woman he had sculpted.

# SKEUOMORPH AND PLATERESQUE

Etymologically, the term plateresque makes reference to the work of a silversmith. But its use in the art history field relates it to another discipline. Spanish architecture at the end of the fifteenth century which was still very much dominated by Gothic building structures, and which incorporated tiny decorations which reminded us of the meticulous work of jewellers.

The same occurs with skeuomorphism, this continued existence of the necessary and intrinsic form of the original object which ends up as a mere decoration on the piece which it will end up being replaced by. Julio Caro Baroja spoke of "an adaptation of a form imposed both on an object by the material it is built with, and, on another similar object which is subsequently produced using different materials".

Castro's work can be likened to that of the sculptors who also worked as silversmiths. This can be seen in the delicacy and perfection of the workmanship, the size of the pieces, and in the subversion of the material qualities evoked by skeuomorphism. Examples of this are the Doric Greek Temples with their drops and triglyphs; a marble and decorative transmutation of structural elements in the primitive wooden architecture.

# THE PRODUCED WORK

In line with the objectives and characteristics which have been chosen for this particular series, Xosé Manuel Castro has included a newly produced piece of work which has been specifically created for this area and space. Through this piece he hopes to be able to bring the audience closer to the creative process, searching for a certain contextualisation of his work, taking into consideration the characteristics, dimensions and lighting of this particular space, and the way in which it can be explored.

The origin of a piece of work always begins miles away from the actual exhibition space. In the majority of cases, the public only have access to the finished product and for this reason, photographic and audio-visual documentation can be so revealing as it gives the audience the opportunity to really bear witness to the whole process, from its very inception to the final display.

The wood carving for this pieces of work, produced especially for the MARCO, and entitled “*Unión aparatosa*” (Ostentatious Union), posed quite a challenge for him, as, having undergone training at the Escola de Canteiros in Pontevedra, this is not his chosen medium. The autochthonous raw material of the Galician Oak used in this piece is symbolic, just like the country’s granite and stone. The Atlantic forest, the under-brush, the vegetation, the deforestation upon which the cities are built.

# UNIQUENESS

It is no secret that making a unique piece out of a single block of marble by extracting the figure trapped within, is no easy task. However, it is certain that in Castro’s work the form seems to have been predetermined by the goddess, Gaia, the Mother Earth. This is apparent in the almost mystic respect that the artist feels towards his stones but which is not envisaged in the assembly. But this is not the true challenge. Perhaps this is the *de-petrification* of the lifeless, or perhaps the *de-fossilization* of the organic, who knows... there are secrets that an artist must never reveal, as it is said that magic is the daughter of mystery.

# MORCEÑA STONE

The use of the resources offered by nature to human beings within their natural habitat has been common practice since the origins of humanity. As such, no-one would be surprised to find pebbles, granite, quartz, and of course the characteristic morceña stone, (the name it goes by in Ponteceso, the town in the district of Bergantiños where the artist was born) in this exhibition display. In fact, to this day the sculptor still lives in Vilasuso.

A synonym of hardness, “*morceño*” was considered as anything which was unworkable. But perhaps for us the greatest surprise will be its beautiful black soul which

contrasts with the ferrous skin that coats and protects it. The accentuated effect which has been achieved by polishing its opaque core. This humble material of a Galicia, that, in the words of Isidro Parga Pondal, in Ramón Otero Pedrayo's *Historia de Galiza*, "...is only granite and schist". And it is precisely in this ancestral, authentic and traditional Galicia, where this humility, which today has been honoured by Castro's extraordinary hands, will be displayed.

## PARANOIA

A midpoint between Baroque and Neoclassicism, the unique work of a little-known German Sculptor, Franz Xaver Messerschmidt, would transcend the era. And perhaps it would be one of the most evident cases of this supposed connection between the artistic genius and the madness of those born under the sign of Saturn. Paranoia and hallucinations expressed in the exaggerated facial expressions of the series which he did well to sculpt and which would be referred to as busts of character. There is something of this in Castro's *Xestos* [Muecas], and also in the Michael Angelesque style slaves trapped in the block of stone and fighting for their liberty.