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The Enigma of Arrival: On Gonzalo Fonseca's Timeless Vista

by Phong Bui

The Sculpture of Gonzalo Fonseca

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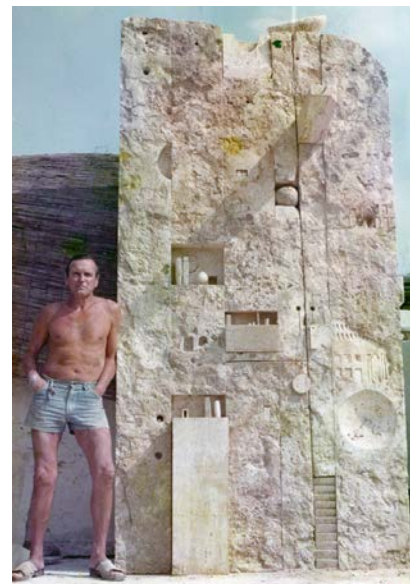
The legendary Jonas Mekas once said of his experience of exile, “I was born and raised in Lithuania. I live now in New York, but my country is culture.” In late April 1988, before leaving for Italy on a traveling fellowship, I finished reading V.S. Naipaul’s *The Enigma of Arrival* (1987) in the same afternoon that I encountered for the first time the work of the Uruguayan-born artist Gonzalo Fonseca at Arnold Herstand Gallery. The correlation between the book and the sculpture was not narrative, but rather a probing melancholy that seemed to have emerged from a profound sense of dislocation, which generally compels any immigrant to create a platform of earth below his uprooted feet, create his own “rebirth” without however, negating the past. For Naipaul, the newly adopted environment was the desolate countryside of Wiltshire, England, the opposite of Fonseca’s sprawling metropolis of New York City. (I later learned Fonseca had spent more time since the mid-1970s in Seravezza—a Tuscan town famous for its marble quarries—than in New York, and died there in 1997 at the age of 74).

My recent visit to see Fonseca’s exquisite retrospective in the Noguchi Museum, organized by senior curator Dakin Hart, rekindled this distinct memory and veneration of his work. As it’s often said, Noguchi’s admiration of Fonseca may have been based on their homologous aptitude to overcome the influence of their respective mentors, namely Constantine Brancusi and Joaquín Torres-García. Noguchi furthered Brancusi’s assimilation of the pedestal as an integral part of the sculpture by extending his work into the urban and natural landscape. Fonseca’s transcendence of Torres-García included an integration of avant-garde European geometric formalism with characteristics of ancient New World cultures in their two-dimensional and three-dimensional realms, pictorial and sculptural. In other words, while Noguchi had fulfilled the synthesis of the East and West through the repertoire of his earthy stones and meditative gardens, Fonseca was able to integrate the North and South with a personal composite of Universal Constructivism, open and receptive to endless references generated from extensive traveling in Latin America, Europe, the Middle East, and Africa, including various excavation sites in Bolivia, Peru, Egypt, Sudan, Syria, and Greece, all carefully studied and absorbed.

True to my first encounter of Fonseca’s work, it has remained enigmatic, allusive, and mysterious decades later. These characteristics are perhaps amplified in the context of current events, with divisive rhetoric that labels, pigeonholes, simplifies, and stupefies the culture of language.



Gonzalo Fonseca, *Castalia* (detail), 1980. Roman travertine. Courtesy the Estate of Gonzalo Fonseca.



Gonzalo Fonseca with *Tabularium*, 1980. Roman travertine. Courtesy the Estate of Gonzalo Fonseca.



Gonzalo Fonseca, *Piazza*, 1985. Persian travertine. 15 3/4 × 31 7/8 × 44 1/2 inches. Photo: EPW Studio/Maris Hutchinson.

Fonseca's subtlety is perpetually recalcitrant and rebellious. First of all, his miniature scale appears fluid, at ease, and constant in all of his work, whether in the smaller pieces from the recycled limestone of demolished buildings (created in his Great Jones Street studio in NYC), or in Seravezza where the large marbles were made outdoors. The architectural features such as windows, blind arcades, niches, cornices, among other undecipherable elements in the monumental piece *Alexandrian Pillar* (1986 – 87) resist the mass and surface of the stone while complying with it simultaneously, hence the total image becomes remarkably intimate. *Castalia* (1980) is an ancient ruin on top of an immensely robust façade of a fortress, which not only decelerates the image into a slow reveal but also simultaneously becomes monumental in our mind. On the contrary, in smaller pieces, for example *Tebaida* (1973 – 79) and *Castrum Doloris* (1974 – 75), the distribution of windows with open doors, niches, portals, in addition to an egg shape, fingers, ancient amulets, talisman necklaces with leather strings, a suspending ball and a plumb bob, etc. seem to populate the work in perfect placement relative to the stone's frontal plane (recalling the in-between space of Picasso's analytic cubist pictures and Paul Klee's playful paintings of architecture and nature infused). These features function as products of the artist's drawings of various forms prior to the carving of them. On many occasions, Fonseca left the drawing uncarved. In *Castrum Doloris*, an archway and a column are drawn with delicate yet incisive lines. To its left, a drawing of a ladder leads up to an opening of a carved entrance, from which a recessed wall and a receding doorway are drawn in perspective. Gaston Bachelard's dialectics of "inside and outside" and "intimate immensity" comes to mind as required components for the preservation of the flow of images through real and imagined space.

Elsewhere in the exhibit, the interplay between wall-relief, free-standing sculpture, painting, and drawing exemplify a process of discovery, where forms evolve out the imperfection of the physical material, hence calling forth its imagery. *Landscape with Pendulum* (1967), *Columbrarium II* (1968), and *Katabasis Ship* (1963) share this element of evolving becoming. *Nero* (1984), *Krepidoma* (1987-88), and *Oculus* (1982) are among a few that yield to iconographical flatness. While maintaining the frontal planes, each is accentuated by minimal intervention of images, by which they are suggesting depictions of a metaphysical nature. In other words, the action—or life force—is behind the surface, within them. As a result, it seems as though the drawn images and carved images correspond to a condition of time as one simultaneous flow because the decision, it seems, of selecting one way or another is so innate and phlegmatic. Time for Fonseca is a perceptible multiplicity. It enables him to embrace both abstraction (associated with signs, symbols, and generalities) and representation (associated with realism and specificities). Fonseca punctures the orthodoxy of flat forms with dwellings akin to archaeological Joseph Cornells, a synthesis of both tendencies that does not demand unity.



Gonzalo Fonseca, *Castrum Doloris*, 1974 – 75. Limestone. Photo by the author.

In refusing to be conditioned by the society in which he lived, Fonseca followed his imagination. Yet a longing for classical equilibrium also held him, as is likewise visible in the deep melancholy that pervades De Chirico's painting *The Enigma of the Arrival at the Afternoon* (1912). These intricate towns, ruins, façades of unbuildable architecture, haunting streets, empty piazzas, and water vessels of various shapes are alive, unpopulated because the shapes are the population, populating the stone and taking up residence as symbols, exuding their auras as objects made for backdrops and dreamscape still lifes. De Chirico once aptly remarked, "to become truly immortal a work of art must escape all human limits: logic and common sense will only interfere. But once these barriers are broken it will enter the regions of childhood vision and dream."



Installation view. Photo: Nicholas Knight © The Isamu Noguchi Museum.