

At the Noguchi Museum, Worlds of Stone Fuse the Physical and the Dreamlike

Equal parts surreal and symbolic, modern and primitive, Gonzalo Fonseca's miniature landscapes are relentlessly mysterious.

The Sculpture of Gonzalo Fonseca | NYT Critic's Pick

By WILL HEINRICH FEB. 1, 2018

The best place to start at the Noguchi Museum's modest but tightly packed retrospective of the whimsically literary Uruguayan-American sculptor Gonzalo Fonseca, is with his 1961 painting "Facade II."

For that piece, Fonseca, who arrived in New York in 1958 after dropping out of an architecture program in Montevideo, made a small wooden frame filled with cement and divided the piece with incised lines into seven irregular vertical stripes. He also incised a drawing of a ladder, and outlined other simple shapes, including a window, a cross and two human silhouettes; painted most of the surface maroon; and scraped away some of that surface again to reveal the dingy gray color underneath. In the bottom near the right corner is a small blackened doorway.

It's a hallucinatory vision, equal parts surreal, symbolic, modern and faux-primitive, and the fact that the two human figures are of dramatically different sizes makes it very difficult to get a bead on. There's a roof marked out, too, as well as a window, and thin gray lines between the red stripes that could be walls, but if you start to imagine yourself entering the doorway, like a worshiper into a smoky kiva, you get stuck on just how big you're supposed to be. The key to it all, though, is that

ladder. Hanging in the air, leading nowhere, it's emblematic of Fonseca's relentless ambiguity.

"Castalia" and "Arethusa," two low, horizontally oriented sculptures from 1980, currently sited next to Noguchi's rock garden, are also covered with basic structures — pyramids, basins, tiny post-and-lintels — that could be ruins, notes, or references to pueblos or to Cappadocia rock formations. Or they could be unfinished architectural proposals. Whatever they are, they're unusually dependent on the viewer's own imagination to give them life.

When Fonseca wasn't working in a studio on Great Jones Street, he was scouting travertine and marble in Italy with Isamu Noguchi. Roman travertine comes up in "Alexandrian Pillar (Pillar)," and a weathered panel called "Tabularium." Taken with "Castalia" and "Arethusa" these ruins struck me as a kind of compulsive graffiti. It seemed at first as if Fonseca was making a kitschy, dishonest attempt to claim the natural material richness of the stone as an artwork while also reducing it to a background for his own half-baked ideas.

My mistake was reading all those columns and doorways as a series of separate decisions. In fact they're more like a palette of colors. In "Facade II," Fonseca sliced to get black, scraped his way into a range of grayish whites, and used oil paint for maroon. In the same way, in "Castalia," the white of the travertine, the black of its shadow, and the complex compromise effect of a notch cut into it or a pillar raised over it aren't alternatives but equal players in a total system of formal ambiguity.

A small chunk of limestone called "Barge," 1987, about the size of a paving stone and easy to miss in the middle of the floor, makes another important point. The artist barely did anything to it: He cut one square step into a corner and drilled a couple of holes on top. In those holes he stood a couple of wooden rods and attached a little red sail. But while the sail helps, it's really the title that makes it look like a barge: The way Fonseca frames the piece essentially changes the way we perceive it.

Among the other five dozen or so columns terminating in human feet, dreamy red ships festooned with curious anchors, graphically ominous wooden boxes of loose fingers, and other strange and supple products of Fonseca's imagination, one final piece not to miss is a severely cut block of white Carrara marble called

“Ludovisi,” 1975. The few marks he made — a deep rectangular notch here, an inset circle there — are perfectly positioned to interfere with every possible view. There’s no angle from which the piece reveals even a single face completely, because there’s always some small, empty shape suggestively turning a corner out of sight. In this way the piece amounts to a masterly portrait of subjectivity. You could say it’s less an object than a psychology.

The year before his death in 1997, Fonseca made himself the perfect memorial, a small, dark gray pillar of limestone called “Self-Portrait.”

On top of the pillar is a shallow basin, in front is a cubic chamber half filled with smaller stones, and descending from the basin through the chamber to the back is a cord, which emerges from the back to loop through a blank stone tag. To me it’s a dryly hilarious picture of just how clunky and inefficient a machine a person really is: His head is empty and open to the rain, his eye is contaminated with a dozen pre-existing forms, and his identity, if he has one, hangs in the back, where he himself can’t see it — but he can still sculpt.

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Through March 11 at the Noguchi Museum, Long Island City, Queens; 718-204-7088, noguchi.org.

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