

maria cristina carlini

Maria Cristina Carlini. Monumental Works

Maria Cristina Carlini's sculptures never represent the human figure directly, but only through its artifacts—gates, stairs, walls, small objects similar to those found in Egyptian tombs. And they don't seem to be carved from the outside. Rather, it is as if the materials had dictated the shapes, as if the shapes had been there all along, hidden within their core. Like the Inuit artists from the Far North, it feels as if, with faith and great patience, Carlini had waited for the spirit of the form to rise and dictate what it wanted, then shaped that vision from inside out.

As a result, her sculptures never seem contrived. Placed in cities such as Cosenza, Milan, Paris, Madrid, Miami or Rome, the monuments give the uncanny impression of being rooted in these places, utterly integrated, as if they had always been there. This apparent naturalness stems from Carlini's long observations of the sites and her modesty—she does not want her work to dominate its site. The result recalls 19th-century photographs by Gustave Le Gray or Giacomo Caneva, where antique columns and classical forums blend into the contemporary buildings and monuments, as if leaning into them. As Carlini remarked in one of her very rare comments, "The sculpture converses with the city, entering its soul." Likewise, the sculpture enters in a private, intimate conversation with the viewer that entangles itself deeply with his emotions.

Most of Carlini's monumental pieces, parts of them polished, other parts left gritty and raw or incised so that light plays on their surface and changes them according to the hour, exude a deep and unstable energy, as if they had just survived a catastrophe or were just being made under our eyes.

In *La Città che sale* a twisting staircase, merging wood and iron, leads nowhere, evoking Escher's etchings or Jacob's Ladder stretched between the heavens and the earth. *Letteratura* stands like giant, empty pages of an open book, words erased by time, replaced by parallel, vertical marks, leafed through by wind's hand. We could enter it. It is reminiscent of Walter De Maria's rusted labyrinths.

Africa, *Inizio*, *Madre* and *Globo* are imploded spheres that evoke primordial eggs ready to yield their creatures, ancient geodes or meteorites just fallen from the skies. *Il Giardino di Pietra*, its white truncated shapes placed in front of Paris's Pantheon, makes us remember that antique columns were originally inspired by trees and think of Baudelaire's line "Nature is a temple with living pillars..." Torn then sewn, supple yet resistant, the hanging shapes of *Stracci* evoke the sheepskins spread out on Moroccan hills outside Fez's gates. *La Vittoria di Samotraccia*, with its absent face and torso represented by vertical lines of iron,

its ragged wings where air circulates, seems both to ascend and to fight a contrary wind that blows and pushes her wings back, like those of Walter Benjamin's Angel of History.

Carlini, who in the 1970s learned ceramics at Palo Alto, California, always has, physically and emotionally, remained attached to her first love: clay. When she decided to give her work a monumental scale, it was not always possible or practical to use this material. But most of the other materials she chose—wood, iron, stoneware, bronze, iron, steel, and even synthetic materials—seem to borrow their colors from the primordial earth. The whites and grays to rusty ochres, browns and reds, seem as if they too had gone through the fire of the kiln. The clay's color is never painted over but created by the material itself after interacting with heat, bringing breaks and fissures as well as subtle and uncontrollable variations in tint and oxidation. "Fire is the last maker," says Carlini.

Her monuments embody a paradox: they are sensual yet pared down and severe, massively ponderous yet light, utterly contemporary yet steeped in a history that ranges from prehistoric caves, Etruscan and Pompeian art to the Baroque age. Carlini's knowledge of history does not dominate the pieces or seem like an intellectual conceit. Rather, she employs her knowledge to link us to the past, bringing it to the fore, while adding a twist, a sense of mystery, so that the works, both familiar and surprising, seem to have emerged from the strata of time yet reach into the possible, the virtual, like the remains of cities that could have been and might still be.

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