

EVIDENCE OF FORMATION

*...the image of the pristine beauty
Lives in the very grain of the granite,
Safe as the endless ocean that climbs our cliff.-As for us:
We must uncenter our minds from ourselves;
We must unhumanize our views a little, and become confident
As the rock and ocean that we were made from.*

Robinson Jeffers, from "Carmel Point"

What is it about rocks that inspires humans to climb them, worship them, collect them, sculpt them, photograph them, and invoke them in a panoply of metaphors and similes? There are myriad types of stone on this planet and in outer space. From the bite-size to the positively enormous, in every possible combination of color, texture, density and shape, at the highest altitude and in the depths of the ocean, there are rocks. Despite the unfathomable diversity of this population of stones, they all have one thing in common: much like people, they each display the evidence of their own formation. For artists like Woods Davy, that evidence deserves our full attention; and indeed the circumstances of any given stone's creation, situation in the natural world, and subsequent selection by him for his work inform every aspect of Davy's sculpture, beginning with the original idea and extending all the way through its execution.

Davy evinces a kind of respectful awe in approaching Nature, with her maddeningly slow evolution of perfected forms and her ineluctable transience and unpredictability. He prefers to cooperate with the pre-existing uniqueness and objecthood of his materials rather than impos-

ing an *a priori* personal vision upon them. Yet at times in his career he has seemed equally enamored of the potential for Ozymandian sublimity of the power of machinery and architecture, and their particular components such as steel and concrete. As the noted critic Robert Pincus wrote in 1983 in the *Los Angeles Times*, "[Davy] is concerned with the large question: How does the artist combine natural and technological forms to forge an object that transcends the sum of its parts?"

In the early 1980's – when Davy's work first garnered widespread attention – he was making sculpture and installations that were architectural in sensibility, but he was already looking to challenge these intellectualized structures in unexpected ways. Angular steel beams were arranged and welded together with machine-tooled precision in balanced, asymmetrical structures resembling the iconography of Modern architecture – sleek, elegant and indestructible. To his predominantly geometric, industrial forms Davy would then add a conflicting element – one or several large rocks, broken chunks of concrete or sections of tree trunk, many of which were collected in the L.A. River



1. Los Angeles City Hall Exhibition, 1982, steel, eucalyptus, height varies 3'-16'

bed or Griffith Park, both close to the Downtown studio he occupied at that time. (ill. 2) The organic elements thus de-contextualized were set in opposition to the manufactured components, achieving a peaceful coexistence through both tension and harmony. (ill. 1) The different elements in this composite lexicon engaged one another in a lively dialogue, a push-and-pull both jovial and deadly serious; both awkward and fiercely graceful. William Wilson in the *Los Angeles Times* wrote of this series, "Every work is a variation on this almost alchemical mixture of pure formalism and subliminal evocation of imagery and sensation." And indeed, Davy has never ceased attempting to resolve the conflicting impulses in his work – in materials, in ideas and in forms. And here it is essential not to underestimate the relevance of his actual process of acquiring these natural elements in the first place. He will go to the sea, to the desert, to the mountains and the valleys to search for them. He will walk the coastlines and scout the arroyos – and when something speaks to him, he will do what it takes to bring it back to the studio. He is not always sure how

they will work or relate to one another until much later, but that is precisely the point. It's a kind of collaboration between the artist and Nature, predicated on a mutual regard that answers Pincus' old question. How to form a transcendent object? One asks for the help of all the project's components.

Davy has said that he felt the rocks were the emotional heart of even the earliest pieces, their consciences in a way, and thus he has in the intervening years moved gradually, intuitively toward focusing more exclusively on them. (ill. 3) He began organizing the rocks in clusters, positioning them in groupings that are anchored to the steel elements. Sometimes they are cantilevered off the metal beams like floating clouds. These new formations found their essence in the Cantamar series, which began in the late 1990's, and represents a whole-hearted return to rocks, employing them as the dominant feature rather than the coda. The Cantamar sculptures are made of stones gathered by Davy out of the Pacific Ocean in Mexico, near the small town for which the series is named, which translates as "song of the sea".

These rocks from the sea – pink, red, ivory-hued, micaceous, lava-black, striated – are delicate, almost painterly. Rounded by the tides, they appear to roll like the waves that shaped them, unfolding organically at each moment. Built of such stone and hidden steel, these works defy gravity, jostling our expectations and subverting our perception of their weight and natural presence in the world. Davy's use of industry in the form of supporting rods of steel inserted into each stone is integral to his process but does not assert itself; it is apparent only indirectly through the quiet phenomenon of lightness and movement achieved, evoking cloud formations, distant, rolling horizon lines, and oceanic waves. (ill. 7)

Works such as *Cantamar 7/14/04* have a reflexive cyclical momentum, a kind of spiraling in on their

own forms that keeps the viewer's eye in perpetual motion, yet always with a sense of forward progress. The undeniably serene, contemplative chord struck by these works makes it difficult to refrain from discussing them in spiritual terms. Yet while decidedly non-academic words like wonderment and magic serve to address the intuitive, visceral responses the work evokes in viewers, they also undervalue the artist's empathy with the stones as he convinces these natural objects to behave unnaturally.

His practice is, however, not about the ego attempting to exert aesthetic control on the natural world. It is instead about engaging the truly timeless things in this world – earth, stone and water – in the finite human creative process. It is first and foremost about surrender, and executed with a

2. Studio Installation, 1986, steel, stone, height varies 4'-8'8"



consciousness of mortality's limitations. Up to a point, Davy lets the rocks make the decisions, after which he offers his suggestions and does everything he can to see his vision completed. While sometimes letting the movement and orientation of the forms be suggested by the shapes and other properties of the rocks themselves, he affords



3. TOLUCA, 1986, steel, stone, 6'10" x 2'10" x 1'1", permanent collection: LACMA

them the power to defy gravity, and thus the expanded power to more fully express themselves in new and unexpected ways. The natural properties of his stones are thus both rejected and celebrated.

Over the years, Davy's unique vision has been referred to as Western Zen, and that is a good description, in light of his ability to coax formal richness out of simple propositions, but does not tell the whole story. It has more to do with Davy's process than with his finished work. He works through his ideas in the studio, analyzing them as he goes, so that any given series not only represents the resolution of an idea, but articulates the evidence of its development. Sometimes, ideas are revisited many years later as new aspects require further attention. In the late 1990's, he created four monumental site-specific environments composed of more than 100 tons of granite, massive concrete panels, landscape elements and two-dimensional linear extensions that appear to set these masses in flux. These large site works function as gathering places, where the viewer experiences the artwork from the inside to the outside, providing a haven for contemplating the notion that opposing forces may be forged together to produce an unexpected harmony. (ill. 4 & 5)

The sculptures in this exhibition, "Tierra Buena," result from Davy's movement into the realm of mass and volume. The work is heavy and earthy and has lower centers of gravity that are more relative to the world of flesh than the world of skin. These sculptures are not simply larger than those of the Cantamar series; they are weightier in their substance. While these forms retain biomorphic tendencies, their dramatic scale can sometimes project an almost menacing presence; they can also seem like brutish giants poised mid-motion, alien trees heavy with strange fruits and bowed heads. Works like *Yal-Ku* and *Pulpito* possess an almost mannerist anthropomorphism, with elements that tilt and cant, distributing their mass with inherent grace, as the forms seem to bow and flex. The steep

This current work, rooted in his stacked stone sculptures of the late 80s and early 90s (ill. 6), is made of granite boulders of various sizes unearthed from the California landscape. The process of their assembly, while deeply labor-intensive, is also quite spontaneous. Davy places them intuitively, moving them around like pieces of a puzzle, originating most often with the quality of one rock that may or may not form the foundation of the finished piece. Correspondences are created, modified, explored. Only afterwards are they drilled and anchored together with internal steel rods like the others. Because these pieces vary in height from five to nine feet, compared to the more compact Cantamar sculptures, they

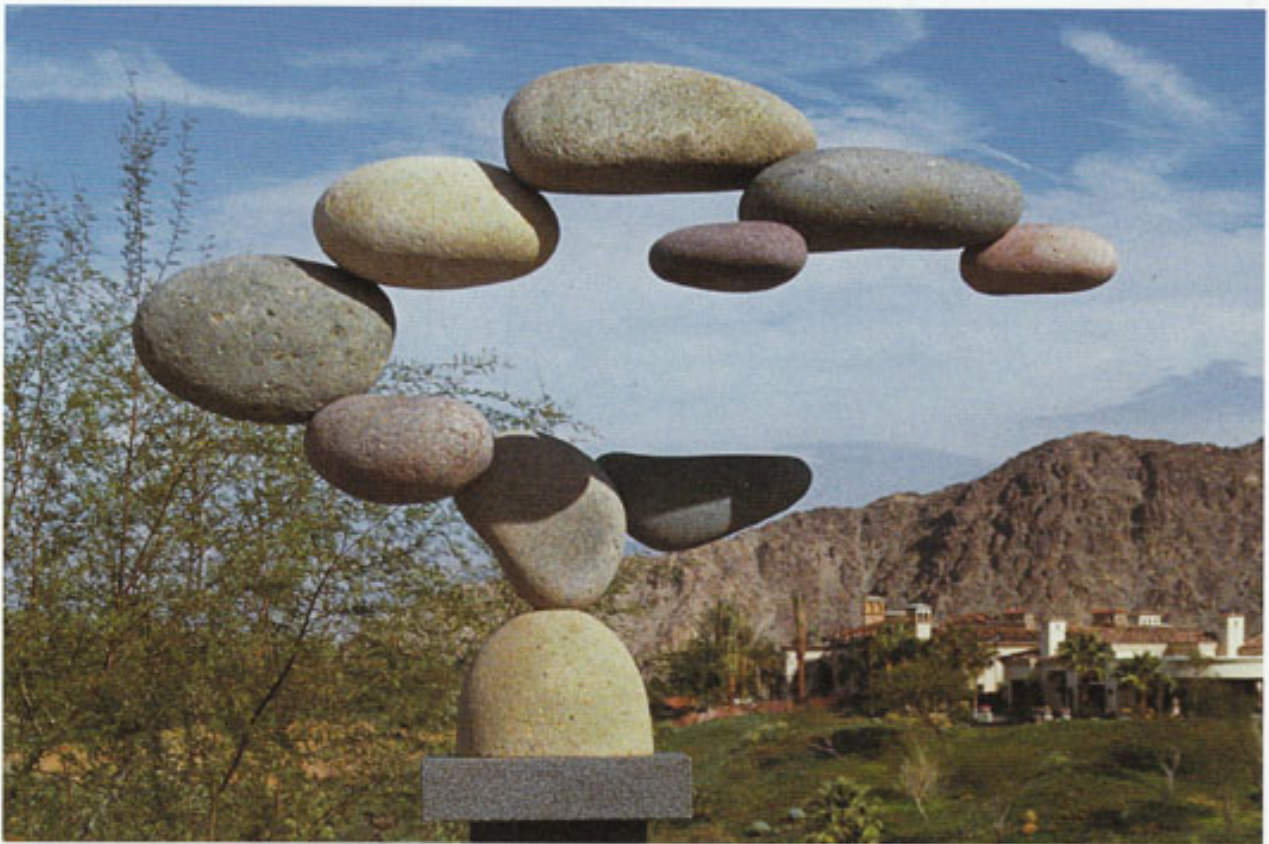
engage the viewer physically on the scale of his own body. And due to their size and complexity, they can be partially hidden from view by their own mass, so that they reveal themselves only slowly, as they are approached. This serves not only to increase the dramatic impact of the work, but also to reflect the physicality of the artist's process. *Calakmul* is a particularly vivid illustration of this relationship, with large, meaty stones joined end to end, point to point, enacting a segmented bloom, like coral heads in a tropical reef, rising and falling as though waving in the sea.

According to Davy, these sculptures often reference underwater landscapes that have been shaped by the ocean's chaotic currents, carving out places one can explore. They encourage movement, not only around their bulk but into their hollows, with the hands and body as well as the eyes. The rocks in Tierra Buena are more unassuming in terms of their surfaces than those in Cantamar, but they are not plain. Quite the contrary, they are richly textured, subtly opalescent and their other surface markings make them livelier still. The rocks are scarred from the teeth of the loading equipment required to unearth them, with the resultant pentimenti of technology looking like petroglyphs – ancient, yet man-made and inscrutable. Davy leaves them there in what amounts to a transparency of his process, as honest representations of their materiality and its demands.

The one smaller work in the series, *Tixko Kob*, evinces a captivating sense of balance. Its ten stones run horizontally across, hanging like a string of beads or birds perched on a bough. The whole thing stands on three rocks that support the entire form. Like a run of musical

6. Gallery Installation View, 1992, stone, burned stone, height 6'2", 8'2"





7. CANTAMAR 10/6/03, stone, 5'10" x 3'5" x 2', private collection

notes in a phrase, like the view of craggy mountains seen from a distance, like the trajectory of a bouncing ball, *Tixko Kob* has a heady dynamism that make it seem very much in the middle of it's evolution, fully capable of changing course.

The idea of flow and controlled chaos is active in the several works on paper included in this exhibition as well. Davy's smoke drawings are made with watercolor and oil stick as well as actual smoke from fire, once again inviting certain uncontrollable aspects of nature into the creative process. These works are won or lost instantly as they are being made, and the immediacy inherent in the way fire, air and water interact remains apparent in the images. Like much of Davy's work, they are entirely abstract yet still convincingly evoke elements of the

natural world like underwater vegetation, or the darkly forged and crackling surfaces of the rocks themselves.

Tierra Buena is perhaps the most convincing achievement to date of the marriage of spirit and intellect, mind and body that Davy has been formulating all these years. These sculptures keep the promise of the unexpected made in the early works and notably the Cantamar pieces, but they return more existentially to the stones by resisting resolution in favor of a dynamic, androgynous sensuality. Where Cantamar is serene and almost dreamy, Tierra Buena is rough trade, agitated and very much in progress.

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