

Vitrified clay sculptures

Daniel Maillet

“The drawing is of such excellence that it not only examines the works of nature but it brings forth infinitely more than nature does.” (Leonardo, pensieri)

“You will make the figures in such a way that you succeed in showing what the figure bears within its soul; otherwise your art will earn no praise.” (Treatise on Painting, n° 290, Leonardo da Vinci).

Only after I had emigrated to Brazil in 2002 did I start to become seriously involved in sculpture, among other things because in the Italian part of Switzerland and in Lombardy, which lies nearby, where I had previously lived and studied, I could not find a kiln large enough. In the southern hemisphere, close to the Equator, there is a different, preindustrial world. It was there that I discovered the wood-fired kilns and the clay of the potter, Heitor Nunes Mendes from Fortaleza, where I lived for five years. The clay he uses is highly suitable as it is sticky and when it is soft it still has sufficient mechanical stability. And most importantly, it does not distort at high temperatures. It is rare to find these properties all together, although I only realised this much later after I had closely studied the composition of clay for high-temperature firings.

The sculptor usually uses clay or plaster to make forms and moulds for casting in bronze. The plaster originals can be kept, so as a matter of course there are collections of plaster originals, but there are no collections of clay figures because the clay disintegrates if it is not fired. Anyone who works in bronze uses constructions from other materials to support the clay artwork, and the figures are not hollow. These are the reasons the original sculpture cannot be fired, the form is lost and the clay is reused. But it is a pity to forgo the original, which in countless nuances and details reveals the genuine mark of the maker's hand. The bronze copies lose these subtleties. For precisely this reason, I studied methods and strategies to make the clay more durable, i.e. ultimately to fire the sculpture. The modelling technique for terracotta is very different from that for a bronze sculpture. But of course this material has its limitations too!

I work with a special technique: slabs measuring 7 x 14 cm, 13 mm thick are joined together; larger dimensions lose their stability. But I do not join them edge to edge but make them overlap and “weld” them together by smoothing the clay firmly on both sides in opposite directions with my fingers.

There are artists who, once they have found their own style, limit themselves exclusively to production. In contrast, I am probably one of the ones who quickly get bored and who are therefore always on the lookout for new challenges. To make my life more complicated but also more interesting, I have therefore devoted myself to studying high-temperature firing.

In 2007, I migrated to the south of Brazil with my family. At the Tropic of Capricorn and at an altitude of 1,000 mtr., there is a plateau above the beautiful Paraty Bay. In the region between the Serra do Mar national park and the small town of Cunha, a health resort amongst the green hills with rich flora and fauna, there is an interesting community of potters who make functional stoneware in a noborigama kiln.

Instead of working tonnes of stone with a hammer and chisel, for me it is the fire in such a noborigama that causes the minerals to vitrify and literally turn into granite at 1,300°C, with the difference that it has already been shaped.

With regard to the technique, this method can compete with the lost wax process for bronze sculpture, which is already thousands of years old. In the art world, there are only very few sculptors who bring these two ancient techniques together: classic large-scale terracotta sculpture and high-temperature firing, which comes from Asia.

In 1994, I did my first timid experiments with clay. This was occasioned by a trip to Bahia. I had never modelled anything before and started with what interested me most: the portrait – Indio faces and the descendants of various immigrants from every continent like mulattoes, cafuzos, caboclos, pardos and nisei, with their countless different physiognomies. The perfect melting pot for a portrait artist! The clay took shape almost automatically and the image of the model emerged immediately with a striking likeness.

I feel a sense of kinship towards the raw, austere realism of someone like Christian Schad, or with

for example. My figures in fired earth are also a kind of expressive naturalism, and in consequence of my dual cultural background, the unification of the Graeco-Roman ideal of beauty and harmony with the psychological, analytical aspects of Nordic, Flemish-German provenance are easy and spontaneous for me.

In the end, the character of the work is defined by the material used and the limitations that are imposed on the artist, as in the case of the model: how close should one come to reality without losing oneself in an "excessive" truth to reality, and how much freedom should one allow pure form without the work relapsing into virtuosity or degenerating into decoration?

In accordance with my poetic approach, the sculpture must be simple, clear and without frills. I stick to what my eyes see, and even that is too much. I wish I could introduce a heartbeat of eternally vibrant life to the crete-grès!

It is also impossible to challenge the past; the skills of the old masters remain unsurpassed. How enviable! But the skills of the past have faded and even the art academies have lost the sense of their original function.

Art has become anaemic and lies in convulsions. A single generation has been enough to lose everything in favour of a freedom that is (now) obligatory, as Giorgio Gaber once sang!

"The eye is the window of the soul." This lovely sentence originated from the pen of Leonardo da Vinci. But I, who live in a different age, say that contemporary art is a mirror of humankind: a horror and a parody! In Brazil I have acquired a scrap of land far away from the hurly-burly of the city, and immersed in the deep silence of nature one might almost believe one can hear the earth turning. The minute and the gigantic move closer together here, the environment is in harmony, heart and mind become one, opposites dissolve and I realise how far most of humanity is removed from that source which created us.

(7) "Codex Atlanticus", 119 v.a. Leonardo da Vinci

Daniel Maillet, Cunha SP Brasil, XV. XII. MMXIII

References

My father, Leopold Mayer, artist's name Leo Maillet (1902-1990), originally from Frankfurt am Main, expressionist painter and engraver, pupil of F. K. Dellavilla and Max Beckmann. "Leo Maillet, Bilder Skizzen und Notizen eines Frankfurter Malers" published by Erasmus Verlag, Mainz 1994

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I wish to thank my friends Laura Bortot and Roland Fermin-Schramm for their valuable advice on form and content of this text. This text is dedicated to my professor at the Accademia di belle arti di Brera, Beppe Devalle. Translation into German: Franziska Frenzel.

Daniel Maillet - The attraction of painting from life and the intricacies of working with, studying, and portraying the human body are the starting points for the work of Daniel Maillet (Zürich, 1956), studied graphic design with Bruno Monguzzi at the CSIA Lugano. In 1977 he began his training as an engraver in the studio of his father Leo, during this time he travelled to London, Frankfurt, Prague and Nice for work. He later graduated from the Brera Academy where he studied under the tutelage of Beppe Devalle and Zeno Birolli. Maillet's Italian phase includes a brief period in which he worked with Roberto Sambonet, and subsequently with Clino Castelli. The death of his father took him back to Ticino, where he lived up to 2002, then he moved to Brazil and he began a new period, devoting himself to oil paintings rich in colours and equatorial atmospheres, moreover he developed life size figures modelled in clay. He is dedicated to searching for the best vitrifying clays for high temperature, suitable for large-format sculpture. Daniel teaches drawing specifically for observation and modelling in terracotta sculpture for great size. His pedagogical experiences began at the Univ. SUPSI in Lugano and continue privately in his studio, as well as in art schools, cultural and social centres in different Brazilian cities. He works currently in Brazil and exhibits regularly in Europe.

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Text published in the International Ceramics magazine: Neue keramik, "Daniel Maillet, Gesinterte Ton-Plastiken" N° 5/14, Germany.

Content presented at the conference: "Daniel Maillet, Escultura Greificada", 11° Congresso Nacional de Cerâmica Contaf, Centro Bunkyo, São Paulo, Brasil 2014.