

The desert is a visual point of view for me.  
Conversation between Luca Beatrice and Armen Agop

I met Armen Agop in April, on a beautiful spring day, and what would normally have been a normal visit to an artist's studio was tinged with a rather special significance. For over a year, as everyone knows, our movements have been somewhat limited to what is strictly necessary. We got used to working in a completely different way due to the imposition of distancing between people. Setting up a call on the computer and accessing the interlocutor's private life through a video screen has been transformed from an emergency to a standard. At the beginning we were convinced it was not so bad, how much time and how much money saved on trips, dinners, overnight stays when you can solve everything in less than an hour in the guise of time optimization. And yet this is precisely the problem: dedicating oneself to art means knowing how to waste time, allowing oneself the luxury of not being subject to frenetic rules dictated by production logic. In art, in fact, time is a luxury, it has no timetables or seasons, the perception that we - least of all we who love it - have of it is different.

That day in April, precisely on the 23rd, I couldn't wait to start wasting time again. More than six hours by car, between going and returning from Turin to Pietrasanta are 600 kilometers, listening to music, thinking, remembering, even the phone respected this first trip after months and months and hardly ever rang. In other moments, overwhelmed by tasks and commitments, perhaps I would not have insisted so much on meeting Armen Agop, I am not among the fanatics who say "the work must be seen in life", yes, perhaps, but in short, we have so many tools at our disposal, that I can comfortably study the Mona Lisa from home without having to go to the Louvre. More than the work, I wanted to meet the artist, get to know him, "question him", try to understand something, make eye contact. As a boy, at the beginning of this long history in the art world, the visit to the studio would have appeared to me as an essential condition, then over the years I have made up for it in other ways and I have certainly missed something, because beyond the work there is the artist, the person, his stories, sensitivity, empathy (being nice or unpleasant is a slight nuance).

What you will read is an almost complete dialogue between Armen Agop and the writer, with the participation of Flora Bigai, Armen's gallerist and in a certain sense also mine, we have known each other for at least twenty years, we have worked a lot together and I have an authentic feeling of friendship. This conversation was remotely recorded after our real meeting and, in my opinion, reveals several things about the artist's poetics. But I am sure that if we had not met that day, I had not gone to his laboratory, I had not touched the smooth surfaces of the black granite, we had not shared the tordelli with meat sauce in the gallery with Flora, with the plate on his knees and the glass of wine resting on the ground, had not informed me about the so inopportune choice of the municipal administration of Pietrasanta to cut down some ancient trees and impose yet another pour of concrete on the parking lot, without all this the dialogue would have been much colder and more detached.

However, this is not the case and those who will have the joy to read thoroughly, to take the necessary time, that the time of art is nothing but a pure and simple convention.

Luca Beatrice - Armen, tell us the first steps of your artistic history. From Egypt to Italy, from Rome to Pietrasanta.

Armen Agop - It all began in 2000, when I arrived in Rome and after spending a few months there I visited Pietrasanta which I immediately found very interesting, not only for the material I could have available but also for its entire history, the energy accumulated during the course of time. A tradition developed from the raw material, having been worked for many years and having created an accumulation of energy that has made the place acquire a particular energy, which in Pietrasanta involves not only the artists present, but even the absent ones, those who were once here, from Michelangelo onwards. At the beginning, however, I was going back and forth between Pietrasanta and Rome, after a year I decided to stay here, in Tuscany.

LB - You come from an Armenian family displaced following the genocide that began over a century ago, in 1915. You have sometimes referred to the word *koyadevel*, "continuous existence", a term familiar to every Armenian living in the diaspora. "In the ancient Egyptian civilization lies the dream of eternal existence." How much autobiography, personal history is there in your work?

AA - In these two ancient cultures, the Armenian and the Egyptian, I noticed the difference to the West, in particular with respect to the consideration of what remains, of what is worth building and therefore preserving. *Koyadevel* is a complex word, it means to exist and to last. Working with a material that could vanish does not satisfy me even conceptually nor does the idea of dedicating time and energy to an ephemeral and momentary experience. I think instead that a work of art is a container of a human experience, so if the container does not hold it, I'm left a little perplexed. It can be good for many other cultures but for me the circle is not complete, something is missing.

LB - And the dilemma between sculpture and painting? What weighs more, even in percentage terms?

AA - At first I was much more focused on sculpture, but in reality I have always drawn and painted but without the need to share with others. Over time this thing has changed, especially lately: they may seem very different but I think that what unites the latest works of painting and sculpture is the element of time, because the time passed during the working process corresponds to the raw material, granite. My work consists in the time shared with the material as granite requires a very long process, and I have tried this same thing with painting, I have even exaggerated, the time taken is even more important than the final result. It is an obsessive process, chasing the light in absolute darkness. Perhaps it is not even logical and yet it satisfies me, it lacks the desire to express, it lacks ideas to share, but it is very focused on duration and precisely on time. What I transmit on the painting is very meditative, the same repeated gesture, also deprived of the ability to draw or paint. I am not interested in demonstrating what I can do, a thought or a message, just a gesture repeated over and over with a very small point.

LB - It highlights, at least formally, your relationship with Minimalism, identified as above all American art which, however, has looked towards other cultures, even including a certain mystical component. I ask you: is there an "other" way of being minimalist, perhaps with an oriental connotation?

AA - Art reveals a hidden part of ourselves and resurrects the way we want to see the world. I think that the silence in my works allows the viewer to breathe their inner world in the process of perception. Each culture is reflected in what it does and how it sees. In the east, my work has been linked to Zen, in Scandinavia they see it according to their pure design aesthetics, in the Middle East to ascetic Sufism. In Eastern cultures there has been a sober approach since ancient times, sobriety that comes from contentment and acceptance and not from an act of reduction, ascetic sobriety that dares to renounce and seeks the unitary element to deepen the relationship with the outside world. The verb renounce (to do without) for some cultures is an act of strength, while for others it is weakness. Many times I have been attributed to Minimalism, but I find myself very distant, above all, from the American one, which arises from the development of industry and the consistent presence of geometric elements. In Minimalism there is the domain of thought, I see it close to design, there is a detachment between the artist and the work that I do not agree with. The simplicity of my work never comes from delegating the realization to others, it is meditative and while I work, as I told you, time plays a very important role, it is the raw material. The time shared between me and the granite brings out a certain work, not another, if I thought of a sculpture and delegated its production it would be closer to design. I see minimalism very far from me, I feel it is too industrial.

LB - So what are your points of reference?

AA - The desert is a visual point of view for me.

LB - Your relationship with matter, with material, is also fundamental. How you deal with it, how you treat it. In the face of the black work, we inevitably spoke of alchemy. Do you find yourself there?

AA - In Pietrasanta it is easy to use marble, I tried it but I didn't find it, it felt far from me. In Florence, in front of Michelangelo's David and the fact that it had been relocated inside I seemed to feel the fragility of the marble, it may seem absurd but it was a bit disappointing. I am attracted by open-air sculptures that resist bad weather, in the sun, in the wind and this fragility has moved me away from marble: I find it very beautiful for its veins and its sweetness, while granite is not so sweet, it is more neutral and this fascinates me, it helps me. Granite comes from afar, it is a volcanic material that is not used to fast change and requires slow processing and this gives me time to reflect and find out what I really want, when to intervene and when to stop. Slowness helps me, the granite is very compact, very hard, it cannot be changed quickly. Granite is very proud, when in ancient times it was used to represent the divine, in my opinion it was very successful. In Egypt the sculptures of the gods emanate a compact energy, less sweet, very present.

LB - Your color is therefore black, a rarity and an anomaly compared to white. Why black? Glossy or matte? What is the story behind this choice?

AA - Yes, black is linked to light but the stone is not polished, for me it is just a way of defining shapes. That black during processing is gray, then it transforms to polished mirrors and reflects everything around. I prefer not to go there, I prefer to stop earlier, organize a different process to obtain the opacity that manages to contain the internal energy of the granite: once it begins to mirror the outside it tends to get lost and become extroverted.

LB - Another very significant relationship is with architecture. How do your most important works relate to the urban context? Have you ever carried out public interventions?

AA - I'm for independent sculpture, I think most public works are more "work" and less art. Sculpture takes risks when we ask too much, for me the most important relationship of sculpture is with itself, any other element is secondary. The urban context can therefore be conditioning, you have to find the right combination which is rare, so I am very selective. Sculpture with all its creative possibilities can easily be reduced to being just a statue, overloading a sculpture with other roles doesn't interest me. I prefer to operate independently of architecture, the human dimensions of the sculptures offer the possibility of being close to the experience while public works must be faced in a premeditated manner, with a risk calculated from the outset. The beauty of sculpture is that you can play. I tackle several sketches, in plaster, clay, paper, wax, until I get an idea that I really believe in and then, when I switch to granite, I really want to stay with it a long time, the play turns into an act of faith in the work.

LB - The style of monumental sculpture is quite foreign to you, therefore.

AA - I always return there, to ancient Egypt. I grew up surrounded by gigantic figures representing gods, we think of the monumental to pay homage to an important personality who makes us feel smaller. Instead I prefer the human dimensions. I invite people to touch the sculpture, there is no aspiration to the divine for which it is thought that it should not be touched, as happens to a painting, instead the granite is very human, normal. We instinctively tend to touch it.

LB - Is there a relationship between your works, nature, landscape?

AA - When we say nature here in Europe I think they visualize a rich and abundantly green landscape. Coming from Egypt, when I say nature, in my mind I see the vast emptiness of the desert. It was in the desert where there seems to be nothing, that's where I learned to see. Being in the desert is like facing nothingness, a feeling that I recall every time in front of an empty canvas. Or an invitation to face the unknown in front of a stone, which represents nothing more than a stone. The question arises as to which sculpture can relate to the earth, as the earth relates to the galaxy and the galaxy relates to the universe. I dedicate a longer period of time to discovering what I really want to do or what the stone might suggest. For me it's more like sharing my time, or part of my life, with the stone. I hope and try to reach a kind of

mutual agreement, where neither the stone nor I impose on the other. Simply put, it's not just about me and what I want to do, I see stone or granite as part of nature, like me, finding a way to live together rather than using each other. Granite existed before human beings. Interfering in its life, I believe, is a great responsibility. It would be very shortsighted and self-centered to approach such a part of nature just thinking about what I want to do.

LB - Sometimes when faced with a formally perfect sculpture like yours, I think that nature has carved them badly, so much so that man intervenes to make them better.

AA - I wouldn't dare to say so much. Nature carves a stone with water, wind and time, but without intention or purpose, so it remains nature. For me, sculpture is the result of an encounter between the human and a material, and with human intervention — we call it art yet it is not always better. Having the need to follow our instinctive desire to do, we do, not to improve but above all to live and exist, because for some of us it is really a way of being.

LB - The obsession with time, with absolute finishing, because the artist, for better or worse, tends to want to be perfect, while nature does not pose this theme, on the contrary, if it gets angry, it rebels, sends down a tsunami and destroys everything and everything falls back into chaos.

AA - In the last century, already in the nineteenth century, the artists were furious and rebellious, against all limits, to be able to work with more freedom. But step by step the artist has obtained almost absolute freedom, until s/he also arrived to the freedom of not doing or delegating: a case that cannot happen to a poet, for example. Now it seems to me a time to oppose the schematic model of the rebel artist, against the obsession with demonstrating one's freedom. We see many works focused on the destructive act, but for no reason. Of course, after the tsunami comes calm and reconstruction.

I think that today the artist tries to rediscover his vocation, and it takes time. For me the process of sanding and polishing is to cancel out the working marks, my traces, my ego, myself, until it becomes an independent entity.

LB - Why do you choose that one and not the other one?

AA - I don't know, I'm not conceptual, unlike many Western artists, it's not the mental capacity that moves me.

LB - We are still talking about ancient culture, where the artifact has more relevance than the author. Therefore, does art express a civil, social and collective thought beyond the abilities of the individual?

AA- I believe that art is an instinctive need. Prehistoric humans, like children, instinctively related to colors, lines, shapes, images, and during development we go through a utilitarian path, where art is strived to serve a thought, power, or faith. In Egypt when I was a student at the Academy of Fine Arts I did not know any artist who lived from his work, today instead there is a real obsession with becoming stars in art as well as in society, which shows you the way to

chase success. I feel good when I am myself, which has nothing to do with the other, if I receive compliments I appreciate them but I don't work to please someone, to seek consent.

LB - Your work is very poetic and silent, yet you are committed to social and cultural battles for the protection of the environment, such as the defense of trees in Pietrasanta. Is the role of the artist still important in the social sphere? Or rather, can poetry, beauty and denunciation be kept together?

AA - If you had asked me a month ago I would have answered absolutely no.

LB: Why absolutely no, a month ago?

AA - Because I tend to isolate myself and stay in my world; I believe that an artist, even if closed in his studio, already has his own social space. I do not think that the activist is a suitable role for the artist. Whoever paints, sculpts, sings, writes poems, has enough things to do as an activist for the whole of humanity, not just for a cause. But in this case of Pietrasanta something has taken place that I did not expect, in the face of the ignorance of who is not aware of the treasure, the value, the cultural heritage, the tradition. Before coming to Italy I had thought of going to Los Angeles, I was there for two months and I see here that the administration would like to transform Pietrasanta into Los Angeles, asphaltting the soil, cutting down the trees. It is important to know and appreciate what we have, our country, our life, what we are surrounded by, because Pietrasanta would really have the opportunity to be a very special place. In Italy there is no museum of contemporary sculpture, in Matera there starts a limited space. Pietrasanta would have the right, the potential with all the contemporary artists who pass this way, to open a museum of sculpture to the world, starting with Michelangelo and going up to today. Pietrasanta has a fairy tale in her hands but she does not tell it, she has a legend but she is unaware of it and rather cuts down the trees, destroying herself.