

ALAIN KIRILI in conversation with SIMEK SHROPSHIRE

Simek Shropshire: You came to New York City in the 1960s after seeing David Smith's *Cubi* series at the Musée Rodin (in Paris). During that time, Abstract Expressionism and an emphasis on the geometric dominated the art scene in New York, specifically in the medium of sculpture. How did your work differ and draw influence from the aesthetics that were typical of the period?

Alain Kirili: In 1965, when I came to the United States, I was very young and had not begun my sculptural practice. My first sculpture was not created until 1972.

I have a great love for Abstract Expressionism because abstraction is very fleshy and emotional. David Smith intellectually touched me because he insisted on the fact that he was born a Protestant and that his environment was a Puritan landscape. He even gave that title [*Puritan Landscape*] to one of his sculptures. I was surprised when first viewing his art because that Protestant tradition did not exist in my home country of France. However, I understood that you couldn't be puritanical and do a complex, emotional, and fleshy work of art. Willem de Kooning, who was also Protestant, said that because of flesh, oil painting was invented. It was kind of extraordinary for me to see artists who transgressed their backgrounds to be visual artists, and introduced voluptuousness and sensuality to their art. That was my impression, that it was a heroic practice.

For the period of 1965, what I mainly discovered about the United States is that it is, first of all, a reformed country. And, how can you be an artist in a reformed country? It's a challenge. It was a time when I learned a lot because, coming from my background in France, to be an artist is an honor. That is something that panicked me when I started to live here, the idea of work. Art is more of an activity.

SS: Or a gesture, even.

AK: Yes, a gesture. There is a term in French, *en pure perte*, which means an activity that is totally useless. Art is noble when it is useless; it's the great idea of the Western world, of the south of Europe. It's a form of sexual activity and that energy is not about being functional.

The beauty of New York is a functional one with its verticalities after verticalities, such as with the skyscraper. From an urban point of view, there is a stimulation that comes from losing space and place. Place is in quantity in Italy and France; it is useless and is for the prestige. What emerges from this uselessness and prestige is the sense of beauty, of emptiness. It was a great discovery for me to harness that step-by-step. In Western art, there are two traditions—the Protestant and Nordic one, and the Italian, Spanish and French one in the South—which are extremely different.

SS: It's interesting to hear you refer to these traditions as functional versus non-functional.

AK: Yes, functional and non-functional.

I progressively discovered that the leadership of art was overtaken by the United States at one point. It began with Abstract Expressionism. Something that concerned me, because I was more mature at that time in the 1970s, was Minimalism and conceptual art.

The secret to conceptual art and Minimalism is that they are extremely puritanical. It's not about functionality there, but more about a formalism where sex is out of question. I discovered a very famous statement by Carl Andre, which was, "I put Priapus on the floor and I am a Communist." At that time, I was 22 or 24 years old and I couldn't accept that. I felt that, while Andre is a great artist, I would never accept that we put Priapus on the floor because the dignity of sculpture is to be vertical, in the round, and tactile. I really felt, "Wow, that's something." I decided that I would devote my life to

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restoring verticality because I saw disintegration in the verticality of the monolith. The monolith should be vertical.

I went back to the basic definition of sculpture: "What is sculpture?" I started with this idea that sculpture is statuary. That word comes from the Latin word *stare*, which means "standing up." I felt that that was a perfect definition. What happens when the statue is erected vertically is that the viewer does something that we can't explain very well: they walk around it. That is a great mystery of the human being. It happened in India with the *yoni* and *linga*, it happened with the *Pieta* of Michelangelo.

Verticality has the ability to stabilize. In many ways, with the show at Susan Inglett Gallery, I wanted to offer feelings of appeasement and presence. The whole idea is that verticality can be something other than anthropomorphic or tectonic. But, what is it? My answer comes out as presence. What we have here in [*Who's Afraid of Verticality?*] is presence that is positive and elevates. I am very interested in art that can elevate. There is also the subtle sense of diversity in tactility. There are various tactile signs and a rich diversity of textures within the works. In addition to verticality, the base is important.

SS: I was going to ask you about the bases, particularly in regard to *Adam III* and *Forge*. With *Adam III*, the base is made out of Hydrocal, and with *Forge*, it is made out of coal. Often, sculptors will consider the base as being separate from the actual sculpture. What cultivated your interest in forging bases from materials that are different from those that comprise the verticals? In what ways do you utilize the base, not as an extension of the sculpture, but as one with it?

AK: That's a very good question, thank you. The base should be as important as the vertical. I took a trip to India, where I discovered that the base, the *yoni*, is symbolic of the female sex in Hindu iconography. There is also the conceptual phallic element, which is called the *linga*. When brought together, the *linga* and the *yoni* represent [the deity] Shiva.

SS: Could you expand upon the influences of these sculptural elements in your work?

AK: [Before traveling to India] I created some sculptures with "live" bases and a symbolic force. The vertical and the base are equal as symbolic energies. However, I was mesmerized when I took my first trip to India and saw that, in Hindu iconography, the base is never a support. It has a symbolic sexual function.

To make a long story short, I really understood that, in my point of view, India is the Italy of Asia. There is no better country in Europe than Italy, and the same goes for India in Asia. India is extremely rich in terms of art, food, music, and how women dress with their saris. India is not afraid of art. Art is with you everywhere: in the street, and on and in the temple. You may have a temple with thousands of sculptures; it contains a multiplication of art. I saw in the street and in the temple the *yonilinga*, so I started to photograph them in quantity. I was amazed. I came back, at the time, to Paris and went to the Musée Guimet. They directed me to the Victoria and Albert Museum in London because of Britain's [colonialist] ties to India. When I went [to the Victoria and Albert Museum], they welcomed me and said, "We'll take you to the basement. You know, the *yonilinga* is not very interesting, they all are the same." And I said, "Oh, for me, they are all interesting." Later, I wrote a piece on the *yonilinga* for *Art in America*.

You see, here's a bronze one on the table [over there].

SS: Are they usually covered in flowers?

AK: Yes, it's a liturgical object and yogurt, milk, or honey will be put on it. The liquid will flow down the *linga*, go into the *yoni*, and then flow out of the *yoni*. It has a very rich tradition. It's like in the Catholic tradition of the Eucharist, where the bread and wine is the incarnation of Jesus Christ. In India, the smell of incense and the singing [that accompanies the ceremony] shows that the *yonilinga* is

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worshipped by a billion people. When I came back from India, I felt reinforced that abstraction may mean nothing of presentation, but that it does not exclude gesture, emotion—

SS: And sensuality.

AK: Yes, sensuality.

We have here [in *Who's Afraid of Verticality?*] a mini-selection, a small selection of works that span over twenty years. *Tellem II* is from 2000 and shows diversity of gesture, which is manifested through hammering. The work here is not fabricated, so each individual layer is unique. However, it's not about fabrication, but more about the texture and use of tools. For instance, with *Adam*, the base is done by hand and the vertical is done with tools. You have a dialogue between two crucial elements: tactility and texture.

SS: It's interesting that there's interplay between the mechanical and the human. Central to your work is the evocation of the body, and this facet is what initially drew me to the bases of your sculptures. Do you consider the materials [of the bases] as flesh to the verticals?

AK: Could be, could be. Why not? It has that symbolic function that we spoke about earlier.

SS: Do you consider the base and the vertical as individual parts of a whole, or do you consider them together as one?

AK: Together. I consider that the base and the vertical are one. They need each other.

SS: *Tellem II* reminds me of your *Kings* sculpture series from the 1980s, particularly because of the way that the aluminum is layered and sectioned in the latter. I wanted to ask you about how verticality has been central to your work and if you intend for continuity to always underline your practice?

AK: Yes, I have a really a deep conviction that I want to serve verticality. I think that's probably what I admire about the biographies of David Smith and [Alberto] Giacometti. Both of them came from very austere upbringings and it is touching that it took almost their whole lives to finally release a *joie de vivre* ["joy of life"] in verticality. These energies became free with the famous *Femme de Venise* for Giacometti and the *Cubi* for Smith. David Smith had a rather torturous iconography for a long period and he overcame it with time. The *Cubi* are a triumph for him and for society. They're full of endcaps, which reflect light, and have a sense of convincing monumentality. He passed away too young. Giacometti also passed away too young, but, toward the end of his life, he did all those very tall women and they were monumental.

There is a triumph of monumentality and it shows us that you need to be perseverant to really express the conviction of *stare*. What stands up is crucial for the world in which we live.

SS: During the Minimalist movement of the 1960s and 1970s, art was looked at as something that did not necessarily involve art historical tradition. How did you, as an individual coming from France and aligning with tradition, grapple with the art community members who viewed sculpture and art in that way?

AK: I should say that I did like and respect artists, like Carl Andre. And, Dan Flavin because he had a sense of light in monumentality and verticality—

SS: Linearity, as well.

AK: Yes. I felt that there was a radicalism of Carl Andre that was extremely courageous. He always said that he put the *Endless Column* on the floor. But, of course, for me, I love when the column is

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standing up. I have lived very close to Brancusi's studio [in Paris]; I really feel the spiritual quality of the *Endless Column* because it goes into the Earth and into the sky. That's something I felt was of great beauty.

The artist that was very close [to me] in terms of sculpture was Louise Bourgeois because she spoke French and so did I. Louise did a show at Peridot Gallery around 1947 with verticals that were all phalluses. So, she was very much—

SS: Ahead of her time.

AK: But, we were very different and it was really extraordinary. She respected my work. I was one of the rare artists that did vertical sculptures in that period, so she had an affinity for it. However, she said, "Alain, I am confrontational with the work. You are competing with the work, so we are very different." I should confess that during that period of conceptual art, Louise was courageously alone in questioning sexuality in art. I am especially struck by a beautiful conversation that we published in *Arts Magazine* thanks to Barry Schwabsky.

SS: Could you speak about each work that will feature in *Who's Afraid of Verticality?* and how they function together?

AK: What tied the wall piece and the group of floor sculptures, the "forest," is a sense of elevation and a drive for diversity, a subtle diversity. That's the goal of the show: to create a "forest," to create a dialogue with a higher relief. The higher relief is also a celebration of life and that's the commonality between the "forest" and the wall sculpture, which is titled "Ascension." It's all about *joie de vivre*, a love for life.

SS: What prompted you to refer to the grouping as a "forest"? Because, it's also been referred to as a "vertical garden."

AK: It's almost an homage to Giacometti, who often constructed groups of verticals together and created a sculpture titled *Forest*. The idea of a forest is rooted in a happiness found in the multiplication of signs within a three-dimensional space.

SS: Throughout your career, your practice has been concerned with the symbolic values of basic forms, particularly with signs and glyphs that inform the shapes of your sculptures. I'm thinking, specifically, of your *Commandment* series. Does language function in your practice at all, or is it predominantly rooted in symbols and signs?

AK: It's a secret language, for sure. I respect secrets in art. I am not a linguist and I am, first of all, an artist. As an artist, I think we always have a secret and it's very important to realize that. There is also a secret of the studio. There is a famous series of lithographs titled *La Suite Vollard* by Picasso that shows him in his studio. That was something that Picasso appreciated: that the artist's life in the studio should not be the knowledge of anybody else.