

Aron Demetz

**ARON DEMETZ**  
by Danilo Eccher

Wooden sculpture is not a medium widely represented on the contemporary art scene. From a linguistic as well as a narrative viewpoint, the practice has been marginalized to such an extent that it is hardly present in the most recent context. Undoubtedly there is a technical factor at work here, as the medium demands a great deal of time, something that is not very compatible with the frantic pace of the modern world; there is the prerequisite of a manual skill, seen as a limitation on expression, as a superfluous display of virtuosity; there is, again, the influence of a crudely popular and often banally superficial decorative tradition. These are certainly important elements in the shadow of mistrust cast over the possibility of sculpture in wood playing a significant role among contemporary languages. However, there are also, alongside these technical factors, more symbolic elements that introduce further suspicions today: in the first place, the direct relationship between wood and nature, not just from an obviously material point of view, but also on a more sophisticated and philosophical plane. With its grain, its colors, its scars and imperfections wood is the strongest symbol of the vitality of nature, of its flow, of the fortuity of its existence, of the unsullied purity of its appearance. Aspects, these, that were once exalted by romantic philosophy and played an incisive part in culture throughout the 19th century and the early years of the 20th, but which began to lose their substance in the second half of that century and have almost vanished in the new millennium. Not that the theme of the relationship with nature has lost its significance: it suffices to think of the work of Joseph Beuys, Robert Smithson, Walter De Maria and, more recently, Richard Long or Giuseppe Penone. And yet, such works convey an aura of nostalgia. They do not put forward a "natural model" from which to take inspiration, do not transmit the enthusiasm of a prospect for the future. On the contrary, they display a gloomy awareness of the risk of a loss, forcefully seizing hold of the classicism of a memory that appears on the point of dissolving and expressing the poetic heroism of a defense, of a jealous protection of a common asset that cannot be dispersed. The sense of nature has new faces on the screen of the present and the masks of the past are being taken off almost with indifference.

Then there is a third element, alongside the technical and symbolic factors, that to some extent conditions the presence of wooden sculpture on the contemporary scene, and that is the narrative aspect. It is hard for the representative framework of this medium to dominate the 'Gothic fever' that inevitably descends on these images: whatever the strategy of expression, whatever the choice of grammar, whatever the formal and compositional structure the artist may choose to adopt, the entire narration will have to bear comparison with the whiteness of Cranach, with the sufferings of Grünewald, with the carvings of Michael Pacher. Wooden sculpture cannot, and perhaps would not wish to, forget its Northern European origins, the ancient hardness of the carving, the static rigidity of its narrative expressivity. There is no doubt that all these elements distance the practice of sculpting in wood from a contemporary flow that appears frantically flexible, liquid, mutable and compulsively rapid, that creates direct, flat and dramatically gripping images, that consumes and metabolizes every experience, that seems thematically bulimic.

And yet there have been, in recent decades, important examples of artists who have tried their hand at sculpture in wood, commencing with Georg Baselitz, who has chosen not to shun his history, accentuating and aggravating the violence and hardness of a carving that seemed to have been abandoned, precisely because of this rigidity. Softer but no less rugged is the language of Stephan Balkenhol who, relying also on the complicity of bright coloring, develops a strangely stiff and suspended narration. The work of Aron Demetz can be placed in the same expressive horizon, even though, in his case, the formal plane is more connected with and bound by the narrative result.

From a strictly linguistic viewpoint, Aron Demetz's work is rooted in an extraordinary technical virtuosity that allows him to create a constant vibration of the material, a subtle shiver that caresses the grain of the wood to overcome the bumps of the knots and the imperfections of the cracks, that carves into the pith and relies on the venation of a complaisant and allied wood. It is a grammatical definition that, exploiting a surprising manual skill, hazards new linguistic panoramas, new juxtapositions, new declensions. This is how the wood is coated with a tepid color, silently disposed to underline a profile, a gaze, an almost imperceptible detail. The color, in

Aron Demetz

this case, has nothing of the superfluity of decoration. On the contrary, the color quiets down at any clamor, shrinks from a greedy gaze, withdraws into the discretion of a whisper. It is certainly possible to trace this back to the great tradition of painted sculpture, but it is above all in a new dimension of painting that Demetz's work finds its most correct location, in a chromatic climate that supports and consolidates the linguistic framework even more than it outlines the narrative setting. It is a complex kind of painting: apparently a light and feminine, delicately poetic wash, it is in reality a more sensual, shaded, subtly acid and intriguing color, like in the pastels of Pierre Klossowski, a color that is laid on the wood with elegance and naturalness but, at the same time, with discreet hints and secret ambiguities. It is the same formal intensity that can be recognized in the disquieting dripping of natural resin or beeswax, or again in the metallic coldness of silver and aluminum. Within this orthographic structure, the use of color reinforces the plastic expressivity of the wood: on the one hand it softens its line, on the other it emphasizes its recesses and irregularities.

In this way we can define the broad articulation of Demetz's handling of the material, ranging from the rough angularities of a violent and gestural expressiveness to more velvety and yielding forms, from the clean cut of the chainsaw to an obsessive and abrasive caress. The wood is presented as a living and complex material, sometimes resistant and hostile, at others sinuous and compliant; the artist varies his line in the same way: here aggressive and barbaric, there delicate and affectionate. It is a language that, while rooted in the alphabet of a familiar sculptural tradition, is able to formulate an extraordinarily flexible and ample grammar.

Yet it is above all on the plane of narrative that Aron Demetz's work reveals its full expressive potential and its rich gamut of poetry. What emerges here is a surprising literary dimension that silently takes possession of the figure, abandoning all interest in its wooden body, in the colors in which it is clad, in its graceful representativeness. The work seems to be shrouded in a poetic halo which appears completely detached from the linguistic research pursued by the artist. We are aware of a light step that takes the gaze beyond the image, beyond the figure, beyond the material and the color. Then the details of a face, a gesture, a hand emerge: the piercing eyes of a figure with a forlorn and lonely expression, the small detail of a broad forehead that leaves the hair to the role of a distant curtain, the tongue extended in the purifying act of communion, the fingers gathered in a gesture as familiar as it is mysterious. Fragments of an absolutely moving and absorbing tale, bewildered faces that are reminiscent of the secrecy of Felice Castrati's women or the gentle geometries of Osvaldo Licini, visionary murmurs of a figuration that transcends the image to tackle the deception of appearance, of mystery, of doubt. The same quivering look as the photographs of Hiroshi Sugimoto, where reality fades into an impalpable horizon, a soft architecture, an empty screen; the same vaporous narration of Aron Demetz, which spurns the certainty of a schematic and didactic account to confront the enigma of a barely hinted poetry, the mystery of an indefinite tabulation, the visionary character of a fragmented gaze. Not even repugnance and revulsion at the corrosive assaults of the drips of resin that cover and lacerate the wooden material can guide the gaze along a permanently defined interpretation; horror over a mutilated figure does not cover up the mystery of a narrative disquiet. Indeed, it is precisely the linguistic and compositional strain of the resin dripped onto the work that brings out, with further expressive force, the impossibility of a given truth, of a definite reality, of a reliable account. The fragility of the detail, the roughness of a gesture, the hieratic impermeability of a figure persists; as does the secret of a story untold, just hinted at, weakly sensed, the enigma of a narrative labyrinth that finds no solutions. And so we can recognize the centrality of the detail, the prominence of the fragment, the poetic truth of uncertainty and drift; our gaze turns back to the mystery of a protruding tongue, a half-closed mouth, a resting hand. Faces lost in a dissolved, faded reality, bewildered, empty gazes, dramatically disturbing in their focus on frightening questions and vain waits for answers: It is the narration of a timeless contemporaneity, an exploded topicality; it is the quest for a truth that is never given. As for the symbolic aspect, Aron Demetz tackles the theme of nature with the consciousness of moving through a territory filled with suggestions and evocations. Carving and working wood leaves him no escape from confrontation with the mystery of nature, with the emotions of the outside world and with the secrets of his own soul. But it also signifies accepting the presence of many actors, hearing many echoes, bearing the weight of many memories. It means knowing, facing up to, breathing his own cultural past. It means wrapping himself in Beuys's felts, walking in the woods with Long, watching a flash of lightning with De Maria, caressing a trunk

A black square containing the name "Aron Demetz" in white, sans-serif font.

**Aron Demetz**

of wood with Penone, collecting pollen with Laib. Above all, perhaps, it means building an igloo out of stones, decking out a table with fruit, writing the sequence of Fibonacci numbers on the tail of a crocodile with Mario Merz. Aron Demetz's resin, like Merz's bundles of sticks, represents an alchemical process of communion with nature, a sort of shamanic ritual in which the artist collects the natural liquid from wounds in the tree and then spreads it on the work and waits while the slow process of crystallization transforms the sculpture. Nature enters the work and molds it, settles on the narration and guides it, enfolds the figure and modifies it; it is the vital energy that emerges, that lets its own blood flow, that penetrates deeply into the soul. What language had in part stifled in its own grammatical discipline, the narration has liberated on the symbolic plane, giving the wooden material back its natural value, its evocative power, its vital essence. Wood acknowledges its naturalness. The choice of this material is never an accidental one. It is not the bronze that Demetz utilizes more rarely. Wood is the direct fruit of the Earth, it is the mark of a marriage with its own territory, it is feeling part of a landscape, it is the reference to a cosmic dimension that art, at times, is able to decipher. In this case it is not a question of a literal translation. Demetz does not utilize natural symbology in a direct and straightforward way. His art is not a theoretical manifesto. Rather it is, once again, the enigma of a labyrinthine route that makes use of the language of sculpture to conceal rather than to reveal, that sinks into obscure, uncertain, subtly elusive and mysterious narrations. Not a flaunted wood, then, like no clear symbology, but the engorgement of a subtly symbolic and delicately poetic narration.

The art of Aron Demetz is a poignant tale, an elegant whisper, a light step that insinuates itself into contemporary language, accepting the apparent marginality of its research, silently delineating its forms, whispering its story in solitude. A studied, sought after, deliberate obliquity, a laterality that attests to the force of an artistic poetics capable of living in balance, conscious of drift, acquainted with doubt and uncertainty; an art that can deal with the instability of contemporary thought.