

Aron Demetz

Initiation rites

Dialogue between Alessandro Riva and Aron Demetz

Alessandro Riva: Your works very often take up situations and themes that centre upon childhood. This is why I'd like to start right there: how was your childhood? What kind of child was Aron Demetz?

Aron Demetz: First of all I should mention that I have always lived in Val Gardena. I was born there, I have always lived with my family, where I'm the eldest of four children. Therefore my childhood was made of many children, lots of fresh air, woods, meadows... My parents ran a small guest-house where we used to help when we were children. When I was eleven, I took up my first real job: I tended sheep. For five years, until I was sixteen, I spent my summers as a shepherd. Every year, at the end of the school year I went up into the mountains and I didn't come back until the end of August. It was a strange experience, at times very hard, which has indelibly marked my character. Three months all by myself, all alone with the sheep and my thoughts... it was a definitely highly educative experience, almost philosophical. Moments of forced loneliness, which I spent thinking and looking at nature, are so deeply impressed in my mind that sometimes I would have paid anything to go back.

A.R.: What did you miss most? That feeling of absolute freedom and loneliness or the direct relationship with nature?

A.D.: Actually both a little bit. But be aware that, living in Selva, I always had and I still have a very close relationship to nature anyway, even to such a great extent that for some time, when I was a boy, I wanted to become a forest ranger. Moreover, I always went climbing, too.

A.R.: And how did art finally fit in with this scenario?

A.D.: All began almost accidentally. When I was a small child I always said I wanted to become a sculptor, but then my ideas seemed to have changed. My mother always told me that I wouldn't be suited for working as a sculptor. Therefore, when I was 14, I decided to become a dental technician because I would have earned quite some money and there was none in Val Gardena at that time. This is why someone, I can't remember who, told me that, for a start, I should try to attend a school that would foster my dexterity. In this sense the Selva Art School was the perfect solution and so I decided to go for it as a start.

A.R.: Was there a tradition of art in your family?

A.D.: Not really. My mother's grandfather was a gifted sculptor. But apart from that, there rather was a natural familiarity with wood as a material itself. We namely are a family of lumberjacks.

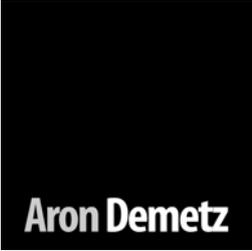
A.R.: A family of lumberjacks?

A.D.: Yes, we have always liked to go into the forests to lumber wood. Lumbering is a great sport.

A.R.: Is this why you have always been attracted by the idea of becoming a sculptor, already as a child?

A.D.: Here in the Gardena Valley it is quite a common thing. The relationship with wood is something you simply grow up with. Everybody has at least one relative working as a sculptor, the children run about in their workshops, they play there and watch the sculptors at work. It is part of everyday life.

A.R.: So you started attending the Selva Art School...



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A.D.: That's right, but at the beginning I didn't like it very much, I wasn't able to fit in, I was bored... I didn't see what I could get out of it. I used to work mechanically, I did what everybody else did, crucifixes, anatomical exercises: a foot, a hand, a head... and then the copies of the renaissance artists, always with wood. Boring, but from a technical point of view, very useful. The real turning point only occurred later, when I met a teacher that made me fall in love with the material. He made me understand that this was my real way. I began to make myself familiar with wood, I realised what I really could get out of it, besides the usual crucifixes, and so I started to seriously work on it. Then I got in contact with other artists of this area, such as Willy Verginer, at whose studio I used to work for some time, or Walter Moroder. I have kept in touch with both up to now, profiting from a very productive exchange of experiences and ideas.

A.R.: We could call you the patrons of art, the Val Gardena patrons of art... But let us quickly skim through the various stages of your education and training: after the Selva Art School, between 1997 and 1998, you spent a few years in Nuremberg at the Academy of Fine Arts. How did you feel there?

A.D.: Fine, it was a very positive experience even if I had to interrupt it prematurely because of family reasons and come back to Selva. There was a professor, Christian Höpfner, who taught me a lot about the human figure. At that time I was already very advanced on my way to the awareness of what I really wanted to research in sculpture: I already worked on the human figure, I had already made up my mind. It was a very intensive time, I learnt lots of new things, I approached and got enthusiastic about contemporary art, shortly, I broadened my horizon... it was there, where I really made my first steps in the contemporary art scene.

A.R.: Did you realise that the system of contemporary art in those years of the nineties wasn't really on your same wavelength... a research like yours risked to appear terribly old-fashioned, closed, local, if not even provincial...

A.D.: Yes, I was aware of the fact that everything seemed to go the opposite direction, but I have always known that I couldn't abandon the figurative art. I have always been fascinated by people, by what they think and what they have under their skin. The attraction towards the human behaviour and feelings made my choice be a natural consequence and it is, still today, highly spontaneous.

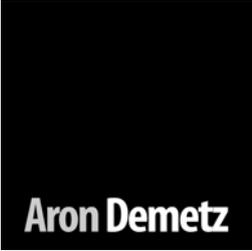
A.R.: At a certain point of time the theme of storytelling enters your work. But, where do you actually start when creating a sculpture?

A.D.: So far, I have always been inspired by very personal situations, things that have really happened to me or that have touched me in some way. Here's an example: in the sculpture I need company, the theme is friendship, but existential loneliness, too. You know how it is when you are looking for someone to stand by your side, a real friend, but then you don't completely trust anybody. You would like to find someone that is very similar to yourself, maybe you want another you: a cowardly thing, maybe, but in one way or another it has touched all of us...

A.R.: It is the period of adolescent narcissism. Maybe you acquired it while wandering about all alone up in the mountains... But in your sculptures, do you start out from an idea or from a picture?

A.D.: It depends. Most of the time from an idea. Sometimes though, with some sculptures, I first was inspired by a picture.

A.R.: And technically? How do you proceed? Do you have an idea in your mind and then you draw it before starting to sculpt?

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A.D.: Yes, first I draw sketch, then I make a plasticine model, I even make two or three before moving over to wood.

A.R.: Before you mentioned storytelling in your sculptures, but, to my mind, your works rather seem to work with symbolic elements. There are always some strange, almost alienating elements, they seem to be the keys with which you want to influence the "reading" of your works. A parrot, a frog, a teddy bear, a dead bird...

A.D.: On the one hand, I see them as narrative, or symbolic-narrative elements, on the other hand, as purely formal elements: just not to leave the human figure all alone.

A.R.: Let's try to give an example for how these "alienating" elements enter your sculptures. The frog, for example, in Or I'll kiss you

A.D.: It derives from an idea, or actually a flash of wit: the model that was posing so silently, timidly, a bit childlike, but with something sublime in her, made me think of the common pictures that fairytales evoke, with frogs and princes... therefore, the idea to associate her to a frog was almost natural.

A.R.: In many cases the strength of your sculptures really lies in this ambiguity, in the fact that one can't precisely interpret them or that one could give them more than one interpretation.

A.D.: Yes, this is what I think, too, because as soon as you immediately understand what is behind, the magic of a sculpture disappears, goes lost, becomes banal. This goes for me, the author, as well, as soon as a sculpture is too clear and linear, I lose all interest in sculpting it. On the contrary, I like it when it keeps a certain basic ambiguity.

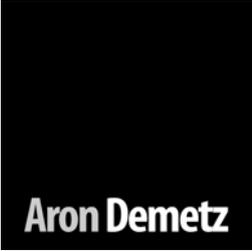
A.R.: In this sense, also your titles contribute a lot. They often seem to be incongruous with the sculptures.

A.D.: The titles are very important. Sometimes the title of a sculpture is already there before the actual work, shortly, the idea derives from the title. In other cases, the title is inspired by the finished sculpture. I sometimes use it to produce a little shift in the meaning of the sculpture and to make it less linear.

A.R.: To mention an example, I thought of Memory of the mother. The sculpture represents a little boy that is looking downwards, but, apparently, there is no reference to the mother that is mentioned in the title.

A.D.: Well, somehow it is there because the idea was to make a boy looking at his navel which is our direct - even if interrupted - connection with the maternal uterus. Of course this also symbolises looking deep inside oneself, deep into one's history and personality. The sculpture was born directly from the title, even before the actual idea.

A.R.: In fact, the title tells more about this sculpture, it opens new ways of interpretation of the work. The interesting thing in this sculpture is that besides this introspective idea of looking at one's navel, it also makes me think of a sense of punishment and guilt... I don't think it is just a coincidence that the position of the boy is the same as the one of punished schoolboys. There is a sense of sacrifice, guilt and sin suggested by this sculpture; there's also something that is linked to our childhood and childhood in general, especially in catholic countries where the idea of punishment and sin were, or maybe subliminally still are among the principles of education. And it is this ambiguity we mentioned before that allows to give the sculpture one direct interpretation and two or three more possible meanings...

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A.D.: Yes, I like this opening of meanings, it means that the sculpture “works”. On the contrary, when a sculpture is “closed” and has only one possible meaning it doesn’t work.

A.R.: I’ve noticed that this sculpture immediately creates a strong feeling of identification in the spectator: people recognise themselves as a child. If you had called it Navel, for example, everything would have appeared as banal, Memory of the mother, on the contrary, is a title that puts about many possible implications.

A.D.: I think it is important that a work doesn’t provide too much information right from the start and that it leaves some space for your personal interpretation. Then, a good sculpture will reveal itself, if we preserve the desire to keep looking at it.

A.R.: We have started our interview with your childhood, and, in fact, childhood is a very dominant theme in your works. However, the paradox is that your children are, on the one hand, very childlike, but on the other, they always have something very mature, somehow, they aren’t real children because they are so spiritualised. They seem to be strange child-adults.

A.D.: I think that children are obviously more sincere, “purer”, without too many “acquired” attitudes. They do not have many consolidated habits and they don’t try to conform. This is why they are the privileged and most natural subjects of a certain type of existential reflection. However, this mature expression allows to render them less real, to make them become sculptures and symbolic characters. Shortly, I think it gives them a certain power of expression.

A.R.: There’s another sculpture that represents a girl in her transition from childhood to adolescence: Good Morning Uncle Willy. Where does this title come from and which origin does this sculpture have?

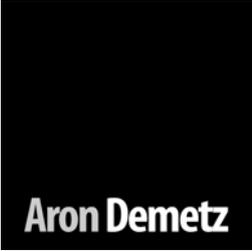
A.D.: This sculpture has a strange history. When I was in Nuremberg in 1998, two eleven-year-old girls had just been kidnapped, raped and killed. This created a strong state of uncertainty and everybody just spoke about this incident. This is why I decided to make a sculpture inspired by this crime. The daughter of an elder colleague student posed as a model and I portrait her the way she was: naked, inexpressive, with her hand in her lap. I think that the expressive strength of this sculpture lies in its pose: I put her in front of a huge mirror and in order to see her face, I had to bend into the mirror myself. At that point I could see my face reflected in the mirror and it seemed to ask: “What am I doing next to this young naked girl?” This is what every spectator might ask himself, too, when looking into the mirror. This discourse of constriction and embarrassment, my own and hers, the psychological pressure of the public opinion after the murder of the two young girls, I think all this has created a sculpture of great intensity.

A.R.: Therefore this feeling of embarrassment is not so much created by this pre-adolescent nakedness, but rather by her poor look, her lifeless face and the position of her hands. She really is a victim, a sacrificial victim. You very often use living models when realizing your sculptures, but you hardly ever make real portraits...

A.D.: When sculpting I always try to translate what I see in front of me and what I have in my mind. This is my way of sculpting. Therefore, the model is not really essential.

A.R.: And Oblivion, so eminent and mysterious. Which is its origin?

A.D.: It is a real portrait, but it wasn’t made on commission, I was driven by the wish to create a sculpture built on a very regular and harmonic face of a young woman with a rather closed and mysterious character. With the body, too, I just wanted to continue in a harmonic way, with this Japanese shape, this long neck and the lengthened silhouette... same goes for the colours: only a few, but very strong and contrastive...

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A.R.: Did you find the title at finished figure?

A.D.: Yes, the title was a bit accidental. Oblivion, forgetting. Maybe I was inspired by that introverted look...

A.R.: It is very interesting that this sculpture came into being rather accidentally, without a basic idea behind to sustain it. The dress and the general composition also seem to be only aesthetically substantiated and, finally, we find out that the title, too, was only spontaneously inspired by an accidental detail...in spite of this, it is one of the most appreciated among your sculptures, it is the one that has mostly been seen and it has circulated a lot as a picture, too. How do you explain that to yourself?

A.D.: Sometimes you can't describe what enters a sculpture, what sometimes happens in only one hour of work. You can work on a sculpture for weeks and you manage to produce nothing, then this perfect hour arrives in which you finally find something, you don't really know yourself, maybe it appears after a wrong cut which reveals a shift in the shape that creates a new harmony or a certain disharmony... those are magic moments and it is difficult to explain them. You find something in a shape, in a subject, and the sculpture is changed and, finally, it fatally "works".

A.R.: The girl in Sofa, has she come into being in the same way?

A.D.: As you know, this sculpture was originally conceived as an entire family in front of the telly, with remote control and everything. Following your advice, for the exhibition in Venice, I decided to make a lonely little girl, always sitting on a sofa, but I thought that if she was there all alone, she should not be sitting in front of a television. She should gaze into the emptiness, thoughtfully sitting there, maybe just for an instant. The huge sofa should underline her loneliness, she should appear small and forlorn, as a picture of loneliness itself.

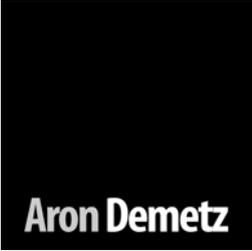
A.R.: I think this is one of the strongest sculptures you have ever made because it is very synthetic, without any distraction, no symbol, there's nothing, it is naked. The girl is all alone on top of this huge sofa - she can't even touch the floor with her feet, with this completely inexpressive face that is so adult like, but at the same time very childlike, too. The mystery that all your sculptures centre upon is this state of loneliness that you project already onto childhood. Maybe exactly this is the great new feature, this loneliness that we carry with us all life long, but you condense it already in childhood.

A.D.: Yes, even if it sometimes might appear not very realistic because especially children are the ones that have the least difficulty in communicating, speaking and being with other people.

A.R.: This is why your sculptures provoke this alienation because children normally don't express this kind of loneliness, but in reality...

A.D.: They are little adults, in this sense. They already know what we are going to be in the course of our life, with our shifts between melancholy and joy, loneliness and the desire to communicate with others.

A.R.: You have just finished working on a huge sculpture entitled Initiation. But maybe also what you have expressed with the little girl on the sofa is a sort of initiation rite. Maybe it is that moment in childhood where, for an instant, a little girl is more lucid than usually, more lucid than any adult. She is there all by herself and maybe she already sees her future, her loneliness, her own being in the adult world. Are you religious?



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A.D.: When I was a child I used to go to our parish very often, just think that in the course of my first five school years, I had to go to mass every day in the morning before school. But I can't tell whether I'm really religious, I don't exactly know. However, I think that deep down almost everybody has a certain religiosity.

A.R.: Because in your work there seems to be a certain religiosity of everyday life, a religiosity that is not directly expressed, but that is in the faces and in the attitude of your characters. Right now you are working at a sculpture that is in direct relation with religion. What's its origin?

A.D.: It is a procession and was inspired by the memory of all the processions that I've always witnessed since I was a child, here in our village or in our neighbour villages. In these processions people carry along Holy Mary statues and all villages of our valley are involved. Especially for children they are great festivals, maybe even magic rites. The sculpture has also been inspired by the little girls dressed all in white at their first communion, as if they were little girl-brides.

A.R.: And why have you decided to put another little girl in the centre of the procession, same as all the others, just a bit smaller?

A.D.: It was a difficult decision. At the beginning I wanted to insert a Holy Mary figure, but then I realised that the sculpture became banal, this is why I thought to put one of them into the centre, just a bit smaller, as if it were a symbol for themselves: because in fact, the procession is made for them, they are the real protagonists and they are a real initiation rite. They are one of these transitions between one age and the other, where you do something, but then you suddenly start asking yourself: what am I doing, actually?

A.R.: Maybe your initiation rite was wandering about all by yourself up in the mountains, tending sheep...

A.D.: Might be, I don't know. Nobody really knows that...