

Ever in Open: the Work of Jaya Schuerch

by Cherry Smyth

'It's so much more a thing of pliancy, persuasion,

Where space might cup itself around a planet

Like your palm around a stone,

Where you, yourself the planet (...)

Might wake to feel it enfold your weight

And know there is, in fact, no falling.'

Explaining Relativity, Rebecca Elson 1

Jaya Schuerch's studio in Pietrasanta is tucked up against the marble mountains near Carrara. Stoneyards, stacked with rough oblong blocks, line the roads. Marble is parked everywhere, like treasures no-one notices anymore. There is a noise of machinery drilling and wetting the sliced stone. In what is known as the 'cradle of carving', understanding volume and mass is in the blood. Huge blocks of marble were once slid down the mountain slopes, using the freely available force of gravity as transportation. Here locals have a saying: '*il peso non dorme mai*', ('weight never sleeps'). Questioning weight and gravity comes with the territory.

Jaya Schuerch's latest series of outdoor sculptures in granite and marble tackle the mystery of gravity head-on. 'Gravity for me is about density,' she explains. 'There is really no difference between the air and granite, except that granite is denser. Gravity focuses and concentrates matter, which is what art should do.'

While the sculptor's earlier pieces largely expressed figurative, organic forms in marble, this new work applies the language of architectural forms to make gravity and other unseen forces, like attraction, visible. If the previous work echoed the sensuality and scale of Brancusi or Hepworth, recently, Schuerch is more in dialogue with sculptors like Serra 2. The work is broader thematically, asserting itself in the world with mature authority. Here technical challenges are seen being resolved. The introduction of cables and rods also marks a development in Schuerch's practice. 'Cables are important as the force of the work. The thirty-two strings in "Knocking on Heaven's Door" are the piece. The stones are there to hold the strings, not the other way around.'

If Schuerch's previous sculptures were about the interaction between object and viewer, here the interaction occurs within the object itself as well. This has the

effect of illustrating the tensions of relationship between subject and object, between sculptor and earth and between earth and universe. 'What is heaven?' the granite pillars of 'Knocking on Heaven's Door' seem to ask. At night, the lit sculpture seems to emerge from the ground in a dramatic statement. The mass of strings glisten and blur like a visible, tangible gas or a mass of molecules. The sculpture carves up the sky beyond it, making the 'V' shape of air central to its aesthetic whole. An empty space we know not to be empty. A held space. The 'V' inverts and plays off against the giant 'V' shapes of the legs of the bridge cranes that populate this landscape, giving it the look of a vast inland shipyard. Is pressure holding the two pillars together or forcing them apart? The column of air between them hums like the air between two magnets about to clang together or bounce apart, like desire can shiver with revulsion underneath, and jealousy reinforce attachment. The piece seems to waver between astonishment and control.

Schuerch has left the drill holes present on the surface of the granite, which march skywards like rungs on a ladder, invoking mythological tropes of gaining access to spiritual knowledge. From two sides, the piece resembles a building whose entrance you don't see at once. Then the opening, 'opening ever in open', (*aufgehend immer im Aufgetan*)³, the rough hewn folds of outer skin-like rock, giving way to the gift inside: the smooth inner walls of the split. While Rachel Whiteread fills in the 'negative space' to create her sculptures of presence, Schuerch allows a wire or stainless steel rod to do it, as though metal could cut through the insubstantiality and reveal scientific presence to us.

'4-Split' captures the paradox of the verb 'to cleave'. Once again, a kinetic movement has been arrested - closure and disclosure work deliciously with and against each other. The granite pieces may fall away in wedges, describing symmetry, but also stand together with the solemnity and balance of a Neolithic portal dolmen. Defense and surrender are suggested by the inner core, revealed and about to be concealed.

'Vertrauen' freezes the domino effect on the verge of collapse. Here is movement from innocence to knowledge before the completion of the fall. It has the remarkable effect of refracting the granite as though we are looking at it through another medium, as if unseen forces, like dark matter, are acting on it, making it behave like rubber. Sculptors have always made stone seem pliable, but Schuerch takes this pliability into a new dimension.

The pieces exude a teasing humour too, as if the artist enjoys the conundrum she has set herself. 'If we can't fully understand the pull of gravity, which is part of everything we do, how can we understand the universe?' she wonders. In 'Jeu Africain', the marble rings hang on steel rods between two granite blocks, recalling a child's climbing frame. You are invited to move one and thus shift the meaning of the entire piece. The quarry marks and number code remain visible on the granite, again keeping the connection between the earth and the stone very tangible. This is not sculpture as pretty, commodified ornament. It is

sculpture asking large questions of what fights with us. As Rilke said, 'What is extraordinary and eternal does not *want* to be bent by us.'

In many ways, 'Split with Drop' seems to express the most vulnerability. The marble pendant and the granite frame are both interdependent and interconnected, the steel cable holding them like a bloodline. The pinkish, bald marble hangs like a fish without fins, an organ taken out of the body, like a delicate offspring. One obdurate emotional characteristic shields and transforms the next. It is perhaps the most unsettling piece because it seems to speak and that speech is about conflict, risk, how to be naked and still survive.

If stone depends on earth and artist on stone and the forces within the earth, then we are all ceaselessly mutable. Things fall apart and are put together again, forging another kind of unity. Schuerch's new forms dramatise the process of collapse and cohesion, and how art can negotiate the verge, intellectually and emotionally.

1. Rebecca Elson, *A Responsibility to Awe*, Carcanet, Manchester, 2001
2. Richard Serra, American Minimalist sculptor, born 1939
3. Lloyd Haft, *Abyss*, from *Where Does Old Light Go?*, Attempto Verlag, Tübingen, 2002

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