

Sculptor Armen Agop: ‘Simplicity is complex’

The Armenian-Egyptian artist is showing his minimalist basalt works at Art Dubai, which opens today

David Clement-Davies MARCH 29 2021

Pietrasanta, on Italy’s northern Tuscan coast, lies between the sea and the wild Apuan mountains, where marble has been quarried for more than 2,000 years. It is an epicentre of international sculptors: this “City of Art”, with its industrial zones, foundries, marble slicing yards and artisanal workshops, is still a magnet for artists working in every material.

The Armenian-Egyptian artist Armen Agop, 52, has set himself apart from the centuries of tradition. Most of his sculptural pieces are made not of the softer white Carrara marble of the region but of the hardest stones, imported basalt and black granite. “They are found in lower volcanic hills, from Sweden or Zimbabwe,” he tells me, when we meet at the Studio Giorgio Angeli, where he works, alongside prominent Japanese sculptor Kan Yasuda, among others.

He also encountered basalt in his native Egypt, during his childhood in Cairo, often in giant forms, in desert spaces. “I first learnt to see in the desert,” says Agop. “There, with the light, you begin to notice things, the shape of dunes or palm trees.”



Untitled 129 (2013) © Stefano Baroni

Agop's conceptual, semi-abstract, highly finished sculptures also reference his dual roots, as in his 2012 show *Double Identity*. They invoke perhaps a pharaonic funeral barge but rising to a polished nipple, rounded pebbles touched by a sensual in-fold, or single indented button. The granite is worked into black cones, or "folded" into Vietnamese style hats; half spheres that rise to poised points, with an "internal monumentality or gravity", as he describes it. His sculptures catch the light: a piece in Pietrasanta's Flora Bigai gallery is a beautiful bowled black basalt flying saucer, with a turning Sufic curl, inspired by the one-step spinning dance of the mystic whirling dervishes. A larger version is upended at his studio by a basalt monolith.

All Agop's forms are minimalistic, sensual, geometric, about contained energies and movements, and balance. Often kinetic shapes that ebb and flow in polished stone or bronze: in his "Touch" series, he invited viewers to activate works by touch, making them sway, challenging the usual veneration of artworks. In the achievement and play of his forms he evokes meditation, points of contemplation. "Simplicity is complex," he tells me. "Perhaps the isolations of the pandemic will help people come into my space."



Armen Agop in his studio in Pietrasanta, Italy © Patricia Franceschetti

The artist leads me towards his workshop, talking of an Armenian connection with nature and how he “first touched real greenery in Italy”. “Armenian artisans introduced grape forms that were incorporated into Islamic art. Mine are often inspired by nature,” he explains, “but with the Armenian concept of *koyadevel*, existence through time.”

We touch on the terrible subject of the Armenian genocide and his family’s subsequent escape to Egypt, where they “had a small factory making the button clips for military uniforms.” During a happy childhood he explored the contrasting values and beliefs of the two ancient cultures. In 1998, Agop won the Sculpture prize at the Autumn Salon in Cairo. He first came to Italy after winning Egypt’s Prix de Rome in 2000 at the age of 31. He has since won the Umberto Mastroianni Award and Presidential Medal of the Italian Republic. Of his journey into art, and to Europe, he says he was surprised by western values, talking of new or old age-old ideas of mind, body and spirit. “In Egypt no one expected to make a living through art,” he says.



Untitled Fountain (2012) in the Piazza Stazione, Barge, Italy © courtesy of the artist

During our conversation, many of his pronouncements come as a surprise. “I do not believe art evolves,” he says, flying in the face of the artistic history that has flowed through Pietrasanta. Yet he admits his work is only possible thanks to the diamond tools that emerged in the 1970s. “And we still don’t know how they carved those forms in Egypt.”

With his work about to go on show at the Art Dubai fair, with Meem gallery, he is concerned about the notion of art as a luxury good, and by the noise and commercial showmanship of the contemporary art scene. “I am a quiet artist,” he says.

“My first teacher in Cairo taught art as an act of devotion,” he explains, describing his work as “play and prayer”. A strand of Agop’s art involves dot paintings, created with the smallest nibbed pens, a kind of meditative act. “I’ve been impressed from the very beginning by his pursuit of purity and essentiality,” says gallerist Flora Bigai, who is planning a show of Agop’s work in May. “Despite their absolute modernity his forms are reminiscent of a connection to the past. Another interesting element is the use of light: almost all his forms are characterised by the presence of a ‘blade’, interacting with light in intriguing, fascinating ways.”



Untitled (2018), from the Transcontemporary series, sited at the Al Alamein Hotel, Egypt © courtesy of the artist

That play between past and future, as well as bridging different cultures, was captured in the term “Transcontemporary” which he invented for himself in 2015. In trying to cross cultural borders and create work that “rejects categorisation”, he declares he stands “in no tradition”.

Yet a tradition already salutes him. At Meem gallery in Dubai his work featured last year first in a multidisciplinary solo show, *Mantra*, which included drawings and dot paintings, then in *100 Years of Egyptian Sculpture*. Placed alongside works by the late Egyptian grandees Mahmoud Mokhtar and Adam Henein, it seemed to crown Agop as today’s leading contemporary Egyptian sculptor.

Apart from his many prizes, the artist has found success in places as disparate as Belgium and Singapore, Sweden and Japan: beyond a Sufic context, in a Zen one. As well as Pietrasanta, museums in Aswan and Florida hold his works; one is displayed with the Luciano Benetton foundation in Treviso in a converted prison cell — its own metaphor for breaking out, or just being free. Agop declares, “The only prison is myself.”



Untitled 117 (2013), from the Transcontemporary series © Francesco Pelosi

Our conversation ranges widely, across the return of representational sculpture out of the Islamic tradition, from legends of the Gods to the mystic poet Rumi and Mark Rothko. Talking to Agop, you come to understand his more apparently ego-driven declarations such as “I have nothing to say to anyone, I do not want to communicate,” or “my only job is to be myself”.

Pressed on why he is an artist, Agop says: “I just love to work. I cannot live for others.” A sculptor half wanting to be heard, half just wanting to work and be, he adds, “As children play, I just followed the urge, as human beings have created throughout time. I cannot imagine why anyone would stop.”

*Art Dubai, March 29-April 3, artdubai.ae
meemartgallery.com*