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Interview | Douglas Abdell talks to Jean Wainwright about 'A Reconstructed Trap House'

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Douglas Abdell

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A conversation between Douglas Abdell and Jean Wainwright at AB-ANBAR Gallery.

JW: I want to begin with some of the earliest work that you are exhibiting in your current *Reconstructed Trap House* exhibition. Can tell me about the *Aekyadic* work? What was their evolution and how do they relate to your other bodies of work?

DA: In the last few months before I finished my studies in Sculpture at Syracuse University in 1970, I was preparing the machines to make moulds in the bronze foundry they had there, whilst also preparing myself to become a hermit. I was first working in Arkville in Upstate New York in a small house in the middle of the woods, where I made my *Yads* sculptures, which had some parts cast in Bronze, and from there I moved to South Strafford, Vermont to a deserted copper mine. It had these surrealistic orange tailings, and I had the enormous space to myself where I made my *Kryads*, which was the second stage of my evolution. They related to my *Yads*, but they were partly polished bronze and partly patternised in black. I realised with the *Kryads* that I wanted to make the entire sculptures black because I felt that black was the maximum expression of weight and I wanted to add the *vision* of weight; later, I interpreted this as *implosion*. I worked for many years in black because after the *Kryads* we get to the *Aekyad* which were completely black for many years. When I was living as a hermit during the day I was making sculptures and at night, and if I wasn't reading German Romantic literature or Thomas Mann, Herman Hesse, Rimbaud, Dostoevsky, Celine, the Existentialists – all those works that students read – I was doing my Pre – *Aekyad* drawings as preparations for my canvas's such as *Timeless Proportionality* (1975) and *Meditation piece* (1975). This is really the germination of the *Aekyad*'s. My drawings are very meticulous. Firstly, I work up the whole design as a pencil drawing on paper and then I put a large piece of tracing paper on it and made an outline of all the forms. Then, I copy it and have the canvas prepared and I put [the drawing] on top with carbon paper underneath to leave the outline and then I fill in all these images. So, one day, I had the idea that I would just take a certain area [of the drawing] and blow it up much bigger to connect the forms, and these forms became the first *Aekyad*'s, by giving my drawn forms a thickness that was averaging the forms on the frontal plane.

JW: What we see in those canvases is energy, we can see figures or symbols; the canvases appear almost kinetic.

DA: Absolutely, it was not planned that way, but they start moving when you focus on them. You have the dialectic, the ying-yang, positive negative, the masculine feminine.

JW: You also make *Aekyadic* drawings every day?

DA: Yes. For example, *A-D #261 My Pain #2* or *A-D #268* and *A-D #263 Vortex Looping* are all from 2021. I am dealing with the mechanics and aesthetics of *Aekyads* but these [forms] are freestyling, it is not a drawing for a sculpture, these drawings are floating, free from dealing with gravity. When I am doing them, I ask myself, 'where they are coming from?', and it's my central nervous system. I don't know if I am blessed or possessed. If I put a piece of paper on the table and I have my pencil and my eraser, my central nervous system sends signals down into my hands to the pencil and makes me start moving around the paper; these works come out in a trance, until the design is finally finished, then I fill it in in black paint: That is the work I need to do; it is an addiction and if I don't do my *Aekyadic* drawings, I don't have my equilibrium. Before the *Aekyadic* drawings I was designing complete *Aekyad* sculptures from the drawing to the Styrofoam, in 17 to 19 hours.



photo by Pedro Lima

JW: With the small *Aekyad* sculptures you give them titles such as *Aekyad # 95 Homage Brancusi* (2019). Is this acknowledging influences?

DA: I wanted to acknowledge amongst many of the sculptors that I love Brancusi's work, his life, his materials, and his dedication. But of course, I also like other sculptors such as Giacometti, who is completely different, or David Smith or Richard Serra, the way he deals with weight, lead and balance, or Carl Andre working on the floor. I wanted to make *my* mark. I always say that my sculptures are language, which is why I don't name them with words you can understand, I *respond* to them phonetically. So, for example, it got to the point where I wrote a book of *Kryad* poems in a phonetic language, I looked at my sculptures and wrote about them phonetically, trying to remember what was happening when I made them and speaking about them in a language and rhythm that approached their nature. Also, I almost always listen to music when I am drawing. Currently, I am listening to Trap Rap and Drill.

JW: In the 1970s people were exploring their boundaries their inner and outer space experimenting in a myriad of ways.

DA: It was such an advanced period, as a young person I thought, 'what a revolution', so much was evolving so quickly. I also had an unbelievable amount of physical strength, so I could lift my sculpture, and I had so much energy. I wanted to make so many sculptures but at the same time I am also with hippies, some of which were adopting Nihilism: I was the opposite of that philosophy, but I did acknowledge it as a respectable way to go, without the craziness of the establishment, but I looked at myself and I thought I really do want to *make* sculptures.

JW: Can we talk about the work you made in New York such as *Contact Arment Work* (1983) or *P. Santo power R* (1983)?

DA: Actually, when I went to New York in the 80's, I bought a loft in Soho to both live and work in. The Neo-expressionist 'thing' was happening and there was Clemente and Schnabel, and I got into that aesthetic. I just happened to arrive in NYC when Melle Mel, Grandmaster flash and KRS-One was happening. There were concerts with hip hop, with rap, and there was breakdancing and graffiti that had entered the axiom. The upper middle class is a closed circuit, and this is the one time that that you could enter into it and it was very refreshing. Before the 80's, I was not at all involved with graffiti street artists, it was only really when they became part of the art world. Some of the Graffiti artists knew my sculptures, such as my *Eaphae -Aekyad #2* (1979) and they would tell me that they could relate to them. I liked that and I liked their freedom and the fact that the art world opened up on a social level to new areas. Of all the Graffiti artists of that period I was closest to RAMM:ΣLL:ZΣΣ, we went to a lot of exhibitions, were involved in the nightlife of the city and listened to music, and of course I met Warhol. He had met me at the Factory but in 1977, he also put me on the back cover of Interview Magazine where he was doing a special issue of young people with projection who were going to explode, and Jodie Foster was on the front cover. I had been showing in New York since I was a student in 70-71 but it is different when you live there. I was reading a lot of philosophy and I wanted to reflect my environment because all the material for my sculptures such as *Otto Osso* (1984) or *Grand Vizer* (1984) were from a radius of five hundred metres from my loft between China Town and Little Italy. In China Town, there were 'sweat shop' factories, and I would find wooden boxes that were coming from Hong Kong, so I collected them, and I painted them and they became *Rosai Formula* (1983) or *P Santo Power R* 1983. I left the nails and added more, painting them, and becoming seduced by being a painter.



photo by Pedro Lima

JW: There is a multi-layered archaeology and stratification in these works, the relationships to the street, to art history and to your own cultural references.

DA: Yes, this was one of my objectives. For example, in *Eye Teeth 3* (1983), I am pulling this way and that way until I get to get some sort of equilibrium.

JW: How confident are you when you make your marks with these works? Do you overpaint and scrape off?

DA: I never have writers block or hesitation; I have destroyed very few works in my whole life. I remember when I was making work as a student at Syracuse University I was influenced by surrealism and then thought, 'What happens if one day I don't have any more ideas?' and resolved that I would just go to the studio and just stop working, but then it was never a problem. In fact, whenever I make work, I see other directions and aesthetics that come, that evolve. People call me a New York artist and that is why I give so much credit to New York City; I 'rep' the East Coast', I 'rep' New York City, and I 'rep' the Middle East.

JW: Can we talk about one of your larger works, for example *No River Work* (1983)?

DA: I found the wood on the street, and there was a Chinese Cinema near my studio, and I took the monsters from Chinese Horror Films. You can also see the river monster in the work, and I collaged words to make my own 'No River Work' phrase. I was reminded of those documentaries in the early 80's, such as on Sunday nights when the extreme angler and detective Jeremy Wade was investigating the 'monsters' in rivers and it got to the point where people did not want to work on the river because of this. The figures in the work are outlined so that they almost turn into calligraphy.

JW: When I look at these larger paintings, I can also see aspects from the biomorphic 40's and early Jackson Pollock when he is thinking about form and engaging with Carl Jung as his means of expression, both universal and individual.

DA: Yes, I do love Pollock, but I love art and have looked at so much of it, and if I am influenced by someone, I am not aware of it. It is osmosis, but the whole history of art really is like that.

JW: Your family background and culture appears to have influenced all your work particularly some of M=AGUA and Magreb-Punic works.

DA: So, I was born in the United States, my mother was Italian and my father Lebanese, but if you want to make a connection to my background, my grandfather was a stone carver, but he was more of a fantasist, so carving was a part of my genes. On my Italian side, my ancestors worked in construction, but both sides of my family were very American. At the weekends, we would drive from Boston 40 miles to have lunch with either the Lebanese side of my family or the Italian. My Lebanese grandfather was a very educated man who spoke both Arabic and English and when I was around six, I remember in the dining room there was a big, long table with his chair at the end. He would pick me up and put me on the table and he would look at me and talk to me about the history of the Phoenicians, my ancestors. My grandmother would come into the room and say, 'Joseph, why are you talking to him about all this stuff – we left the old country to come to America, to be American for a new life. Why are you putting these things into his head? I want him to be American!', but actually my grandfather won the battle because this eventually came into all my work.



photo by Pedro Lima

JW: Of course, we also have your work the *Intervalist Chair* (1986).

DA: Well that comes into my work Intervalism series, which is another philosophy that I use involving the breaking down of structures and creating an internal one, getting right into the middle to break up and reconstruct. I remember that I was looking at *Guernica* by Picasso and these structural philosophies really informed me with my *Aekyads*'s as well,

JW: We were talking earlier about stratification and the archaeological aspects of your work.

DA: As I said, my grandfather was always talking about the Phoenician's and it was something I knew I would deal with. It was at the point when I was at the last stage of the *Aekyads*. I was feeling worse and worse about what was happening in Lebanon, basically the Americans divide and conquer policy, destroying the Middle East. I had to do something, and my weapon happened to be at. I was travelling a lot to the Mediterranean to South Spain, Madrid, and Italy, to Morocco and Tunis, I was collecting books and I had all these images of Phoenician and Punic culture – the Phoenician was Lebanon and Punic was the cousins in Carthage, whose origins were in Lebanon and so there were a lot of similarities. All these symbols in my works such as *Sur 88* (2000) *Abd Sur 2001* or *Brk Sur 2000* exist, but the thing that will really mess up archaeologists is symbols from the Punic period put together with other symbols. I also studied architecture and engineering and if you look at these works, they also have an architectural presence, and you can see the balance. So, I would get a drawing and order the blocks that I needed, and I would also collect stones from around the quarries after they were closed. I then took the rough pieces, and I would work on one face, and that was the same for all the small pieces. I fell in love with working with the rough stone and I was thinking 'what the f***', I have become a Phoenician sculptor 2000 years later – I am making Phoenician sculptures now.

JW: Which size are you most comfortable with?

DA: It is whatever I am into mood for because when I confront the material, I must *conquer* it. So, with these works, you have stone from central Spain. The black stone in *Sur QRTM* (1994) is hard to work with as it is in the family of marble, but I needed to conquer it. I love to work with that material, I love it. I do full size drawings, then I work from the cut stone, and you only have one chance with sculpting. Where I make markings, I use a specific tool then polish it; I envisage the way I want them to be and that is way that they turn out.

JW: There are not just connections between the artworks in your exhibition but the connections between the viewer and your history, your awareness of life, the metaphoric imagined and the real.

DA: There are connections. So, for example, with my work *El Agua Tan Necesaria Como Peligrosa* (1998), there is a suitcase as part of the sculptural construction. It is closed but it is full of newspaper articles that I cut out every day for years from what was going on in the middle East and the Lebanese crisis, and when I had enough paper clippings, I would fill the suitcase. You can open it or leave it closed.

JW: It seems that in each of your bodies of work represented in the current exhibition, you have condensed geometry, culture, physics and politics into your sculptures and paintings.

DA: I cannot escape my realities and my past.

Douglas Abdell: Reconstructed Trap House was an exhibition curated by Morad Montazami, presented by AB-ANBAR Gallery at Cromwell Place 12-24 October 2021. Ab-anbar.com