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Women Watching Terra

Translated by Rada Zdjelar

I have known Sonu Aggarwal since July 2015 – more precisely, that is when I first met her, during her participation in the 34th International Terracotta Sculpture Symposium (*Terra*) in Kikinda (Serbia). Immediately I was drawn to her. Not only because she comes from the country I love and visit often, but also because Sonu Aggarwal is a sculptor by profession and vocation. A specific gender perspective of this artist exercising her art in a discipline traditionally reserved for men – she lives and works in Jammu, the city of the northernmost state of India, Jammu and Kashmir – was a true discovery.

Furthermore, I was attracted by her sovereign mastery of the building material (raw clay). Indeed, the whole working process of the terracotta sculpture consists in building, which requires an immense physical skill and strength. During the Symposium, from day to day, Sonu Aggarwal has worked devotedly on her sculptures, accumulating and processing impressions, exchanges and discussions with colleagues in order to realise her ideas.

For an artist, the symposia on sculpture and working in the public space may be the most propitious working platform. This is precisely the case of Sonu Aggarwal: immersion in practice and local context enables the artist to conceive the idea, execute it and get its immediate verification simultaneously. The possibility to work without disturbance, in interaction and collaboration with master artists, other sculptors and the public during the creative process – such a privileged situation can be defined as realisation of “the artist immersed in people”, as a space for reflection on changes of one owns production, on perception and presentation of the work of art, it brings a new understanding of the context in which art is being created.

And that was the contribution of the *Terra* environment to Sonu Aggarwal’s sculptures born in Kikinda: shapes imposed on the softness of the raw clay, forces of gravity fought by buoyancy of the material. The result – something biological, tactile, a presence more of spiritual than physical order.

For her sculpture *Women Watching Terra* the author will say that „it generates a feeling of flying as well as of strength. The elongated head makes her proud“. Gender, she continues, emerges as relevant only in the finished sculpture, red after firing. Fire brings „the enlightenment“. Regardless of the fact that the sculpture was not yet finished at the time – the drying process before firing took six months – in its monumental modesty it already stood out from other works created during the Symposium.

Elongated, slender, proud female figure shows the summary traits of the soft Indian facial features with schematic big accentuated eyes. As opposed to the customary frontal representation of the face, here we find a “typification“, apparently, following the author, a more appropriate way to express the essential, universal dimensions of the existence imprinted by small, but significant variations of individual destinies of women. While the head is executed in portrayal mode, the body is differentiated regarding the shape and the degree of elaboration. Vertical mass, almost a column, with only slightly indicated curvatures, stands in contrast to well defined lines of arms pressed against the body pulsating with a series of bulbous folds, basic shapes of breasts modified and multiplied in dynamic spatial curves. This minimalistic language relying on volume, surface, shape, matter, absence of colour and repetition, this reduction of human figure echoes with voiceless femininity. In these few thematic lines the artist depicts the entire range of the life cycle of a woman (“inside perspective”) – pride and daintiness of maidenhood, warmth of motherhood, woman’s strength, drama of her history.

At the opposite end of her esthetical spectrum, Sonu Aggarwal presents a serial abstract composition consisting of basic rounded shapes. Here we are confronted with asymmetrical monolithic volumes with the superposition of smaller, individual or paired curvilinear shapes streaming horizontally or vertically. In this series special mention is owed to the reclining figure sprawling from horizontal to vertical and ending with the raised head. This massive statue does not only remind us of an exotic totem, it emanates a votive energy, and – perhaps even more than *Women Watching Terra* – reveals a very personal “handwriting” of the artist, a script permeated with macrocosm of the Indian world view. The script we can read in an almost archaic stylisation, in the simultaneous softness and saturation of shape, in tactility of surfaces, in the triumph of energy over material, in the preference for typification and generalisation as modalities more apt to express the targeted universal themes.

Contemplating the works that Sonu Aggarwal left to *Terra* as a whole and not taking into account variations of their formal and symbolic values, one can say that they are as far from figurative representation as they are far from an abstract composition. What presents itself to our (mind’s) eye are the anthropomorphic ensembles tailored to the measure of human thoughts, human proportions, and striving for human truth.

Thus, Sonu Aggarwal’s sculptures should be regarded as open ended entities which fully come into existence only relationally, within a particular display for the exhibition as the result of an intellectual reflection on their undiscovered potential. In other words, the pieces displayed individually or in groups may reveal themselves within a pair, in relation between different dimensions or in relation between content and material. Sonu Aggarwal’s sculptures follow multidirectional strategy, they are a place of difference and contradiction, products of conceptual and discursive thought processes of the artist. What we deal with here is a conceptual shift in perception of sculpture, it is not only about the

iconography, material, linearity, or a mere *assemblage* of components. Here we deal with simultaneous and multispatial interlinking of the acts, capturing the whole variety of reflections on the status of the artistic form and relations which a work of art can have with the observer depending on space, manner of display, and category of time.

Sonu Aggarwal's sculptures coincide with her interest in artistic phenomena from historical perspective, Western as well as Indian, remaining mostly within the modernity and organised around several main thematic axes. That is her way to remind us that modernism as a project is not yet finished. While one cannot deny the influence of the Indian culture, Sonu Aggarwal's approach cannot be qualified as classical or nostalgic. For her, the past is something living, productive, open to the future and to new meanings. Looking back on her sources, the artist does not treat them academically, historically or theoretically, she thematises their essence without fetishizing them.

The recent Aggarwal's work goes beyond the usual delimitations between genres of sculpture. However, that does not mean she is preoccupied with keeping in step with the context of renewal of major modernist narratives or with general trends of any kind. What matters for Sonu Aggarwal is her own word on individual striving for perfection, her word on the struggle (survival) of individuals within the system, within society. Perhaps that is the reason why she is more preoccupied with pulsation and interpermeating of different means of expression and spheres of interest, with her way to "disturb the reality" of the spectator.

The positive reception of her first exhibitions in her homeland, her work with students at the Institute of Music and Fine Arts of the University of Jammu, a very dynamic local scene marked by clashes and coalescences of traditional and contemporary tendencies of experimental abstraction, her participation in numerous international symposia on sculpture – all these are the many facets of her experiences, which enriched her ever curious spirit, gave her the new insights in recent artistic production, enabled her to widen the scope of her research of styles, but never to the detriment of her specific expression. Perhaps that is why Sonu Aggarwal's sculptures have such a deep impact, leaving us with the impression of antiquity and novelty in the same time.

Written during 34th International Terracotta Sculpture Symposium in Kikinda, Serbia (2015) where Sonu Aggarwal was a participant.