

Against sentimentality Back

By Jeppe Ilkjær

”One should be able to roll a sculpture down a mountainside, and when it lands, only what is vital should remain.” Interview with the Danish sculptor Claus Ørntoft, who is currently exhibiting three granite sculptures in Norway.

It is the perfect place for absorption. It is around a kilometre to the nearest neighbour. On all sides of the retired smallholding there are fields and on the horizon you can see the blue water of the North Sea. And then there is that little detail about the place that few people connect with absorption: no matter how much noise you make, no-one can hear you. But Claus Ørntoft does.

Claus Ørntoft is one of Denmark’s most important contemporary sculptors. His art unites a superb technical know-how and a unique style, which bears witness to both his curiosity and his awareness of tradition. Ever since he was a young student at the Royal Academy of Art and cycled around to old Danish villages to learn from the Romanesque stonemasons, he has been fascinated by church art.

And then he lives and breathes granite, which is the material that most of his over thirty sculptures are made out of. The friendly face with the smiling eyes and grey stubble does not reveal the secret, but the rough hands reveal many years of slow and laborious work with the granite. It is not small stones that he carves into, and the work of getting into the core is something that can be heard.

A strange power to fascinate

“I have worked with blocks of about 8 tons for some years,” says Claus Ørntoft. “I don’t know why. Then we have been up to 10 – 15 tons. I like to work in large sizes. I have just made a sculpture for Kristianssand, which unfortunately ended up getting smashed by a floating crane. It was 50 tons at the start, but had been reduced to 11 tons. I really enjoyed working with that size. It was strange. It felt very natural to be working with the large proportions.”

In the courtyard there are finished sculptures side by side with raw granite blocks, where rough coloured chalk stripes indicate a carefully thought out plan. Today Claus Ørntoft gets most of his sculptures roughly sculpted in China, but it has not always been like this.

“For the first twenty years I insisted on a very ascetic way of working. I worked directly into the granite, and I loved it. I worked with models in half size, so that I had them as a rough sketch and idea. I wanted the process directly into the stone so that I could integrate the character of the granite into the piece.”

You don’t get that if the stone just functions as a tracing of the model in clay. “I could give the stonemasons in Beijing a kringle (a pretzel shaped cake) and ask them to make an exact copy of it with sugar and everything. Then it would be immortalised in granite. I think about granite as fire and water, and it has the same powerful allure, and it can be so much more than other materials like marble. For me, it attains a slightly perfumed bathroom atmosphere, if one doesn’t have a very direct relationship with the material. The granite has precisely this strangely fascinating power. The power lies within the stone.”

I don't care about the surface

This does not mean that there is an overriding truth in granite. Claus Ørntoft thinks that the moment lies somewhere else. He tells with an earnest seriousness, whilst he helps to form the words with his hands, so that they fit. This is important.

“When I have worked out a proposal for a sculpture, I can see that I have to use a granite block that is this broad and this tall. I feel that I know granite so well now, that when I am modelling in clay, I can think in granite. I know what granite can manage on an expressive level. If the sculpture is going to be long and thin, then it should be made in bronze or fibreglass. If the sculpture is to be made in granite, then it requires a certain volume.”

Claus Ørntoft does not look for blocks with veins in a specific direction or particularly 'flaming' granites, when he starts to work on a sculpture. “I want a granite that is completely free of that kind of thing. Then it is just the character of the granite that counts. That is why I have loved blue Rønne granite for so many years, because it has a certain coolness, it doesn't try to charm its way in. It is muted and understated, and then it has this wonderfully beautiful glow to it, when it is in the right light.”

And it is precisely this light that plays a big role for Claus Ørntoft. “Granite is a living material. If you take granite indoors, I think that it loses something. When it is outside, the material lives. In one particular light, it can look different to how it looks in a different light. I work with the volume, when it rains or is overcast- When the sun shines and the stone dries, I work more on lines and shadows. In this way the granite is varied, it lives. It will have the larger volumes and be more traditional in a certain light than another kind.”

At the end of the day, Claus is waging a crusade against sentimentality. “The sentimental for me, consists of working cosmetically with the stone. One can easily stumble into a preoccupation with the material, where it is all about the cosmetic and the surface. This is the danger of working with the old, noble materials like bronze, marble and granite, which are weighted by history. My sculptures should preferably be seen at a distance, because I lay emphasis on the core. I look at the surface. It just has to bend to the requirements which there are to the core and the lines in the sculpture. I don't care, in principle, about the marks on the surface.”

The core is the core

In the living room there is a single white human figure that Claus made whilst he was at the Academy. He quickly discovered what really mattered. “To start off with I was very interested in the surface. But I quickly became more and more interested in the core.”

He jokingly describes himself as a bit of a European relic. “The core was dissolved hundreds of years ago when Giacometti, amongst others, broke it down. I work with the core like the ancient Greeks. You should be able to roll a sculpture down a mountainside and when it lands, only what is vital should remain. This was how Michelangelo summarised Classical sculpture.”

When he works, Claus tries to follow this rule of thumb. This is why the work on a sculpture never only happens close up with a hammer and chisel, but also from a distance, with the eyes. “The dynamics within the stone, that is the core. This is the basic principle of Greek sculpture. It takes its starting point in the core. So in that way, I work in a Classical way with sculpture. This is why I say that I work with sculpture from a distance. The sculpture has to be seen from a distance of 10-20 metres, because it dissolves into itself when you come too close up to it, where it is just large marks.

I want the core of the sculpture.”

It is what is inside the sculpture that is important. It is the dynamic, which is in the centre of the sculpture, that Claus Ørntoft is trying to find. “I have a feeling that the core has something to do with absorption. The core and contemplation go hand in hand. It is about searching for credibility and truth. That is what it is all about for me. It shouldn't be too easy.”

Claus Ørntoft is exhibiting the sculptures “Introverted Stranding II” and Bugvendt in Studenterlunden and “Whirl” in front of Stortinget in Oslo. The exhibition is arranged by The Norwegian Sculptural Society.

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