

Kouros Gallery Exhibition Catalogue - Los Millares - 2008

Helen A. Harrison, Director, Pollock-Krasner House and Study Center

In 2007, Marianne Weil spent the month of May as an artist in residence at the Fundación Valparaíso in Almería, on the south coast of Spain. The foundation provides a studio where an artist can work without distractions and interruptions, but that was not its only attraction for her. About ten miles to the north is Los Millares, a Chalcolithic settlement dating back five millennia to the transition from Neolithic to Bronze Age culture. This remarkable five-acre citadel, with its extensive system of stone defenses, more than 80 stone-lined tombs, and a copper foundry and workshop (hence the term chalcolithic, from the Greek roots for copper and stone) is said to be the oldest such site in Europe.

Weil has been visiting prehistoric sites for more than ten years, studying the cairns, dolmens, standing stones, burial mounds and other remnants of ancient European life. These places fascinate her on several levels, one of which is the evidence of human workmanship—the inventive use of natural materials to create forms that are both useful and beautiful. They may also have a spiritual dimension, for even when the specific function of an artifact is lost, there can be a strong sense that it was made for some ritual purpose. At Los Millares, she found a locale that had been heavily militarized—a multi-tiered bastion with guard towers and arrow slits in its walls—but in which the elaborate burials indicate a vibrant spiritual tradition.

Weil feels a kinship with the prehistoric masons who shaped their surroundings for defense and domestication, for practical needs and for worship. Their utilitarian projects are inherently sculptural; even as ruins, their works' sophistication is evident. But Weil is not interested in trying to re-imagine or replicate such prototypes. Instead, she uses them as springboards for her imagination, extrapolating from them the way an improvisational musician takes a theme and expands upon it until it becomes his or her own creation.

I once wrote that Weil's sculpture inhabits "the grey area between the organic and the mineral realms," and she continues to explore that territory in her current work. From the configuration of a walled enclosure at Los Millares, for example, she developed a biomorphic form that recalls an archaic fertility figure. Unlike a stone carver or clay modeler, she works directly in wax, an organic material, which contributes to the sensuousness and textural richness of her unique bronzes. Her surfaces are scored, pitted and gouged like those of excavated artifacts—or perhaps tree bark and seed pods—and often have openings that allow the interior and exterior textures to play off against each other. Their patinas glow like warm earth, with coppery overtones that relate to their Los Millares ancestry. But their shapes suggest plants and other living things, including the human body, enlivened by the

marks of the artist's own fingers, deliberately left as evidence of her direct engagement with her material.

This magical melding of the biological and the geological that captivated me more than a decade ago is still one of Weil's guiding principles. Although made of metallic bronze, her objects seem animated, spirited, and full of energy. Like the totems and fetishes of ancient cultures, they stand for something beyond themselves, even as they represent a contemporary vocabulary of formal exploration and invention.

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