

BOWMAN SCULPTURE

EMILY YOUNG

at Bowman Sculpture

(21 November 2019 - 7 February 2020)

The Face of the Earth

by Magnus Rena

Stone is an ancient medium. We were sharpening flint and hacking at boulders long before we uttered our first words. Emily Young's sculptures are part of this genealogy of archaic stonework. Contoured with heavy brows and rigid features, her carved stone heads resemble pagan idols and Etruscan deities. But their ancient, richly coloured complexions speak of a lifecycle older than humanity. They are the product of an immense geological continuum: encounters between eternity and today, between the monumental slowness of plate tectonics and the immediacy of chisel on stone.



Wind Head, Mountain Clastic Rock, 2013

'Can any sculpture truly defy time?' asks Richard Fortey, a palaeontologist. The sheer durability of Young's work hints at an answer. Through its mottled colouring, its streaks of chalk and marbled veins, we are peering into a prehistoric time. Geologists can detect temperature and pressure changes from millennia ago by analysing the veins and striations of rock formations, tracing the dates of ancient ice ages and global warming. Stone becomes a witness to environmental change. Each contour is an index of its lifespan like

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a wrinkle in its skin. Young gives facial expression to these enduring witnesses. Take the serene presence of *Persipne* (2015). Above closed eyes, polished limestone cuts away to two chalky-red concavities. Stone is made cerebral, and memory, physically etched into its head, is given form. Forged deep below the earth's surface and now poised in a stony slumber, you wonder whether these are visualisations of nature's subconscious. They are balancing acts between dream and consciousness, landscape and body, vision and touch.



Persipne, Dolomitic Limestone, 2015

But these androgynous faces carry both sexes of sight. They are made to be gazed upon as well as to gaze. In the softly lit gallery space of Bowman Sculpture, Young's work takes on a meditative, almost hypnotic quality. Each jagged, incomplete form appears to evolve as you walk round it. Static, fixed expressions shift and morph with the movements of the viewer. Life breathes life into stone. From the front, *Wind Head* (2013) is broad and open, lodged amidst a turbulent, diagonal streak of rock. Its left eye is visible and constant, projecting a gaze more mature and penetrating than the gentle grooves and innocent eyes of *Contemplative Head* (2017). In profile however, *Wind Head* is transformed into a blind, pensive form,

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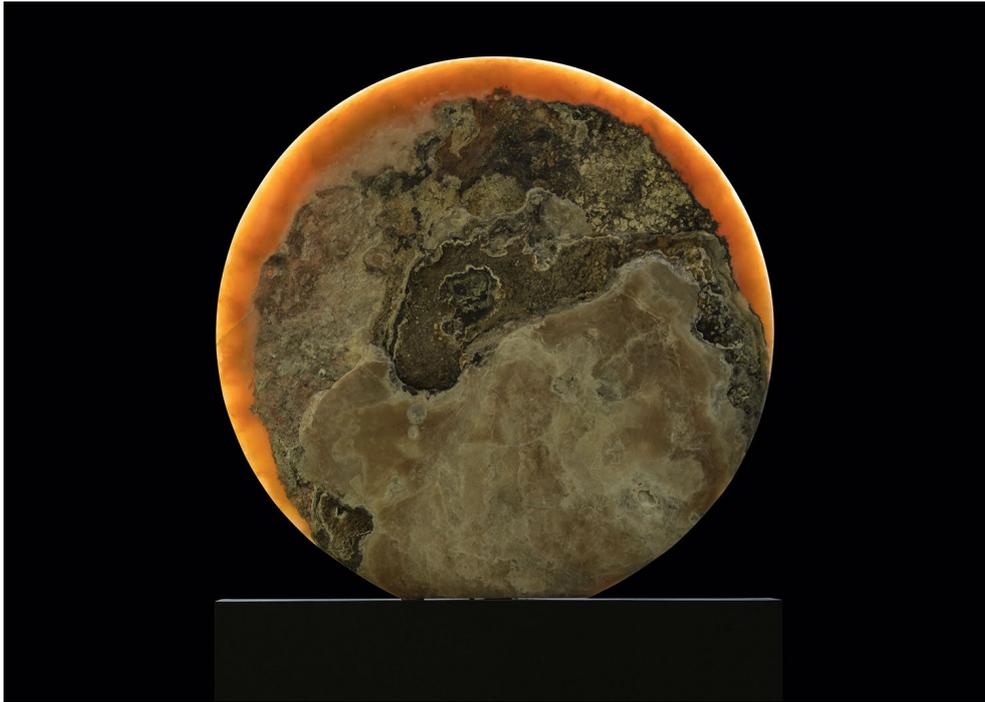
its gaze eclipsed, and the brow's downward tilt strengthened. Weight and texture are emphasised in the juxtaposition between crisp, curved silhouette and raw stone behind. It is unclear, if at all, where figure becomes rock.



Wind Head, Mountain Clastic Rock, 2013

Young's crafting of stone bears an organic, maternal quality. Since she began sculpting in the 1980s, free carving has been her chosen method, a process using no maquettes or preparatory drawings. Each head, face, and torso gain gradual definition as they emerge from rugged blocks, independent of any corresponding design. Form is released from nature, not so much creating but revealing the 'shapes hidden inside the uncarved stone.' (Richard Fortey, 'Introduction' in *Time in the Stone: A Light Touch & A Long View* (London: Tacit Hill Editions, 2007), p.11) With its softened contours and pale, peachy translucency, *Little Golden Head* (2019) seems embryonic, caressed from rock. Contrast that to the severe linearity of *Wind Head*, suspended between rough-hewn stone and crisp facial features. You can feel the chisel's blade and the coarseness of the rock. The random jaggedness of surface, a textural kind of *objet trouvé*, is the materialisation of a wild and unrestrained torrent of wind – the most elusive of the elements. Meanwhile her *Solar Disc* series suggests a more cosmological, life-bearing symbolism: the sun, an egg, a cell. We are dealing here with the origins of the everlasting. According to Young: 'it is not an image of man, but an image of the provenance of man.'

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Solar Disc III, Onyx, 2018

Despite their monumentality, they still recognise the fragility of things: the tendency of sculptures to erode and fade. Outdoors and underwater, they mature into mythical, weathered features of the landscape. In one direction they are memories of an ancient past; in the other they offer projections into a threatened, unknowable future. Just off the Tuscan coast, an immense stone head lies on the seabed. It snags fishing nets as they comb the seafloor, protecting the marine environment terrorised by illegal trawling. And not far away, carved into a mossy rockface above the Zanca river, rests a huge face of Cautha, the Etruscan goddess of dawn. Young undertook the project as a protest against the increasing number of power stations cropping around Monte Amiata, a region which the Etruscans considered sacred. She understands how inseparable humanity is from its surroundings. 'We are creatures made on and of this planet.' Just as faces emerge, formed from stone, we are formed from the earth. Her work is the result of a deeply felt responsibility for locating, representing and maintaining this continuity.

For contemporary art, nothing could be further from the speed of technology, the frantic hustle of today. It is easy to think that Young, sequestered in her studio in a converted Tuscan monastery, is withdrawing from the world. She is not. Her sculptures are reverential acts towards its preservation. Standing before them in the low light, you feel their timelessness. You sense how long they have sat here, and how many comings and goings will pass across the face of the earth while they remain.

Magnus Rena, 2020