

Laurence d'Ist

### **The Present Body**

Returning home from her studio, the journey was accompanied by the sensation of the body moving through the landscape, with the lightness that's characteristic of Awena Cozannet's sculptures; tactile and striking, they remain suspended in the mental space of our destinies.

Born in 1974, Awena Cozannet began working in sculpture after her studies in art school, modelling life-sized figures out in nature and inviting a Butô dancer to interact with them. Right from the start, her creative process has asserted the importance of hand-building as well as the performative dimension of her sculptures, which she photographs. Using rudimentary techniques, she explores questions that cross her mind when she encounters other cultures from around the world: Bangladesh, Pakistan, Burma, China, New Caledonia. During her many residencies in the 2000's, she observed, discussed and expressed what she saw: the different social contexts, women's place in society, the influence of religion, environmental factors and globalization, which disregards humanity for the sake of market values alone... When she was in Bangladesh, having realized that the body itself is a kind of raw material, she had the revelation that what she was seeking to express through the body exists outside of its literal representation. Using skeins of red silk, she created a sculpture as a tribute to women. Woven from bags used at construction sites that women transform into hats to protect themselves from the heavy loads that they carry upon their heads, *Look at you* (2003) is an inclined, tubular dress that appears as though it's about to start moving. Cozannet symbolically shares the burden of these women's labor, which is an inextricable part of their environment as is the splendor of their veils; more broadly, she symbolically shares their destiny. The sculpture becomes a performative metaphor for the life that we carry upon our shoulders, for how we make use of it and for the choices we make. The artist enters into a dialog with the realities that she observes by using materials that are relevant to the history and issues specific to the places she visits. In China, she sewed together sacks of cement in the shape of mountains that were carried by students for *Déplacer les montagnes* (*Moving the mountains*, 2012). The performance was inspired by a popular Chinese legend about the power of filiation which, symbolically, makes any project possible. Together, the group sheds light upon the utopia of collective strength, thus echoing the colossal transformations of the landscape that shake up the inhabitants' very existence.

### **The gaze sustains the voyage, the legs hold up the horizon**

In her studio, situated in Romans-sur-Isère in the Drôme, the hum of the sewing machine recalls that of the leather manufacturing workshops which were a part of the city's historic economic activity. To look for her raw materials, the artist goes to both artisanal and

industrial manufacturers. She recuperates unfinished materials and scraps of a wide variety of colors and textures that she then reworks by sewing and piecing them together. Her process is akin to modeling when she builds her sculptures from the bottom up, or when she gradually integrates shape into a framework, much like working with ceramic coils. She envelops empty space with a kind of clothing, inviting the absent body inside. Depending upon the series, movement is either real or simply suggested. Tightly wrapped around intimacy, these spaces are woven from energies, intertwined with histories and abundantly sewn with a root-like meshwork. Our gaze follows the directional lines of the captivating networks of ropes and padded straps. Twisted from tension, they outline and reveal the fluidity of the sculptural forms that defy the laws of gravity (*Marcher sur la tête / Walking on one's head*, 2018). There are also the photographic images printed on wool felt for the installation *Earth* (2010) that she created with the textile research center in Biella, Italy, and with the association that supports the production of wools in Europe. The textile works created in China for *Dix mille changements ne modifient jamais l'essence des choses* (*Ten thousand changes never modify the essence of things*), 2012, appear to be inflated with oxygen coming from tiny ligatures woven into smocking stitched fabric. Intensely blue, the pressed indigo, and the tumbled, knitted fabric (*Marcher sur l'eau / Walking on water*, 2009-2010), associate vibrant colors with materials meant for lifting and security. "The material guides the subject and the way that we look at the object", says the artist. Upon stem-like pedestals set directly on the ground, she's placed a succession of sculptural forms evoking fragments of landscape in shades of prairie green and iceberg blue. *Ce qui nous rassemble* (*What brings us together*), 2019, calls forth the mental boundaries of our geographic origins. Whether open or closed upon themselves, these sculptures suggest draperies that undulate, rising and falling together, swaying in their current, enduring the forces of gravity with apparent weightlessness. Suspended yet anchored to pedestals, their presence reproduces the endless inhaling and exhaling of all human beings; the viewer's breathing also gives rise to their inherent movement as he or she walks around them...

### **How to live together?**

By taking into consideration human complexity and by questioning our environment, the artist reenchants contemporary sculpture. Her work possesses the tactile warmth that permeates the recent history of textile art. In the 1960's, the polish artist Magdalena Abakanowicz created her "Abakans", sculptures woven from dyed sisal that unfold out into the surrounding space, transforming the traditional meaning of sculpture. Primary materials, namely wool, soil and stone become experiential opportunities in the form of sculptures that construct spaces for contemplation. Even when it's absent, the body remains at the heart of each work, and it can reappear at any time in figurative sculpture that fully embraces postmodernity in the present day. The advantage of forgetting was prophetically announced by Germaine Richier's premature death in 1959. As such, the body that's been revived in

figurative painting and sculpture today had in fact never disappeared from artists' studios. We can sense with joy Awena Cozannet's relationship to her predecessors. In other words, the body, whether or not it's actually present, is revealed through volume. Its proportions remain in tune with both nature and classical notions. By preventing the hand from executing its full and complete representation, the possibilities linked to suggesting its presence can take shape. A thorough knowledge of the body is therefore necessary to render it physically absent and central. Do you follow me? Cozannet possesses a sculptural approach to making her works, meaning that she conceives of them from the inside, from the very core of the material; *in fine*, her research strives towards lightening up as much as possible, as can be seen in the baroque and decorative metaphor of *Force Motrice* (2023). Created during a residency in Saint-Gervais in the Alps, the sculptures could be described as the meeting of external frame backpacks with the dematerialization of our lives on the *Cloud*, since the packs don't carry a "visible" load. Their welded frameworks, over-bags and harnesses provide food for thought by exploring meaning through form. The delicate lines of the sculptures evoke the magnitude of our existences strapped to our bodies, without which there can be no movement; and without motion there can be no personal development. Photographs of the work document the journey of a group of hikers. Dressed in white, each person carries a sculpture. Together, they inscribe the civilizing history of past and present journeys into the mountainous landscape. Transported by the image of these invisible burdens, the imagination momentarily leaves the earth to meet up with the futuristic atmosphere of snow-covered peaks. It's the first chapter of a project that calls forth other perspectives in other lands, with other people to embark on the journey...

Socially engaged and in charge of her own destiny, the artist approaches the viewer as a living being in motion. Her sculptures affirm the unique capability of her work to represent the body through thought. Nourished by abundance, but also witness to the pressures and issues raised by globalization, Awena Cozannet patiently sculpts the tiny gaps of the existence which make up our humanity; that is to say, she sculpts the Essential.

Translation Diana Quinby