The Artistic Wisdom of our Time:

The Qualification of Hope in the Sculpture of Ilan Averbuch

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I met a traveller from an antique land
Who said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert . . . Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them and the heart that fed:
And on the pedestal these words appear:
'My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!'
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.
—Percy Bysshe Shelley, "Ozymandias"

There is a natural bond between the art of sculpture and the surging sensation of monumentality. For the monumental is not merely, perhaps not even primarily, a demarcation of grandeur and pride, of our sense of our importance to a universe that needs to be reminded by our works that we are here. It is to a great extent an assertion of our defiance of the passage of time, our rejection of the power that belittles us and our ambitions, that puts us in our place—a limited position on the calendar and the clock. The monumental is the mark of our desire to know that something of us is retained, something of us endures. And sculpture is intrinsically obedient to this desire. It is made to last, traditionally fashioned of stone or metal—materials that do not degrade. It is natural that we would sculpt to establish our monuments, for sculpture is the innate artistic expression of our urge for permanence.

Ours is not a time for monumentality. We do not find ourselves constructing memorials to our endurance, to any measure of triumph over the flow of history. In part, it is because we have become too Postmodern, too self-aware of ourselves as creatures of history, rather than champions of its defeat. But to a greater extent, it is because of the century of disillusionments we have just suffered. The twentieth century was the great experiment in utopian visions, in efforts to end the continual drifting of civilization, to complete and perfect the human story—to achieve an "end to history." And we know now that it all came to naught. We seem no longer inclined to celebrate our permanent place in the cosmos.

Ilan Averbuch is a sculptor who has confronted, and in his work continues to reflect upon, the impossibility of the monumental vision. Averbuch's aesthetic concern is the aftermath of the disillusionment that has followed our utopian pursuits, that has come with the failure of our dreams. His works seem to be post-apocalyptic, not in the sense of being visions that arise after the end of civilization, but visions that arise after the end of unqualified hope, after the belief in unlimited possibility. The four sculptures exhibited at the Katonah Museum of Art all display with stunning power Averbuch's consistent theme: the eternal qualification of all aspiration. They are post-monumental works, which recognize that human history is little more than a struggle to survive, and human perfection can never be achieved.

The End of Utopia, situated in front of the Museum, sets the tone of Averbuch's artistic vision. The sculpture is an assemblage of wood, glass, and stone, over nine feet tall and suggesting a form that should have been taller still. Wood slats have been arranged to grid the shape of an aerial balloon, which is rooted in stone blocks that could never get off the ground. It has fallen over, resting its weary, worried head on the earth, like Shelley's shattered statue of Ozymandias, smashed into the broken pieces of hubris. Visible within the wood balloon is an enormous glass globe—a clarified and gleaming idea that cannot be lofted into the air, that cannot escape the weight of its housing, that is going nowhere. Our most ambitious thoughts are earth-bound. They will not lift us to the skies.

The three pieces in the Museum's Sculpture Garden invoke and expand the same recognition. *Narcissus and the Desire to Fly* illuminates a conflicted point of Greek mythology, which marks for us a conflicted element in human nature. Narcissus was not the boy who desired to fly—that was Icarus—but here, they and what they represent have been fused together. The sculpture is a pair of wooden wings, which stands on stone blocks, like a vintage airplane that no longer works. Hanging in the center, where the pilot would be, is an oval glass, comparable to the watery mirror of the pool in which Narcissus stared at his reflection and ultimately drowned attempting to reach the fleeting and illusory object of his fascination—himself. The work conflates two fundamental and opposing impulses: the urge to reach something beyond the limits of the earth, and the narcissistic love that pulls one into the depths of self-involvement.

The Forest, originally created for an art fair in Cologne, Germany, is a symbol of civilization itself, and its fate. The four columns in the work are made of glass and steel—materials of human manufacture—with handwritten text—marks of human culture—etched into the glass. The columns are topped by stone and wood figures of fruit and grain—wheat, a pomegranate, grapes, and a date palm—products of the earth, specifically of the land of the Bible. They are monumental, but placed so high that they are unreachable and rendered so heavy that they press against and contain the upward surge of the columns, of human ambition.

In the third sculpture, the form of a hand, existing as negative space, has been cut out of each of two enormous cast iron axe heads. Passing through the absent hands is a stone piece that resembles an olive branch. The implements of war and the symbol of peace are laced together. Each comes with the other; there is no final settling into either conflict or resolution. History will simply continue as it always has.

Averbuch's drawings—many of which are on exhibit for several weeks—are pertinent to his vision. He makes the drawings during the process of creating his

sculptures, initially to work out his ideas and to integrate the site-specific works into the settings they are to occupy. The drawings constitute what the artist has called “almost a diary.” There is an irony in them, an attitude at times almost sardonic. In *The Gate of Dresden,* for example, two towers on facing sidewalks are set upside-down; rather than rising to the sky, they seem to be burrowing into the ground, and with their round tops, they recall the bombing of the city in World War II. In *A Book of Stone and Steel,* an enormous tome, too heavy to lift, fans open to present two unreadable pages to the sky.

The downing of all ultimate hope, the dousing of the vision of the ideal, is abundantly clear in all these works, but there is something else here, as well   the continuing presence of a vector pointing upward. Hope may always be qualified, but it is also ineradicable. Just as there is always a Narcissus who pulls us downward with the descending pressure of self-love, there is always an Icarus who urges us to ascend. Just as there are always the axe heads of war, there is always the olive branch of peace. Both tendencies are present in our myths, in our civilization, in our deepest natures, and as every possibility leads to tragedy, so every failure leads to new growth. The hope that Averbuch shows us is a qualified thing, but it is also a mature aspiration, one touched by experience—a hope that knows how much it can expect. Ultimately, Averbuch’s art is not one of despair or even disillusionment—it is an art of maturity, one that sees us as neither angels nor devils, one that envisions us as neither doomed nor perfected, one that conceives us as suspended between heaven and earth. Averbuch is a sculptor who has moved beyond the monumental, but he has also moved beyond the degraded, beyond the insignificant, and that makes him a sculptor for the wisdom of our time.