



Between
the Intimate

Ilan Averbuch and the Monumental



BY MARK DANIEL COHEN

Every art form conveys a specific sense of human nature, and there is a bond between sculpture and the surging sensation of monumentality, of our belief in our own grandeur. But the monumental does not merely, perhaps not even primarily, demarcate human pride, the feeling of our importance to a universe that needs to be reminded by our works that we are here. It also asserts our defiance of the passage of time, our rejection of a power that belittles us and our ambitions, that puts us in our place, that relegates us to 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 inherently obeys 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.

Our time, however, 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, we have become too postmodern, too ironic and self-critical, too self-aware of ourselves as creatures of history rather than champions of its defeat. We have also suffered a century of disillusionments. The 20th century was the great experiment in utopian visions, thought to complete and perfect the human story—to achieve an “end to history.” We know now that it all came to naught, and with the advent of the 21st century, we find ourselves in a time of continual shocks and constant change, with our political and economic structures in turmoil, the environment in peril, with nothing stable and nothing safe. Clearly, we are no longer inclined to celebrate our permanent place in the cosmos.

Opposite: *Self-Portrait*, 2008. Steel, lead, and glass, 13 x 15 x 11 ft. Above: *Landmark (the Crossing)*, 2008. Stone and steel, 24 x 24 x 22 ft. View of work installed at the Camelback Transit Center, Phoenix, AZ.



Tumbleweed, 2008. Stone and steel, 66 x 112 x 184 in.

The sculpture of Ilan Averbuch is an art for our time, for it is an art that confronts and contemplates the incredibility of the monumental vision, the evacuation of any possible belief in our own magnificence. On the one hand, Averbuch's sculptures demonstrate the impulse to monumentality: he has created numerous public commissions conceived on an architectural scale—in fact, if measured by realized works, over his 30-year-long career, Averbuch has become one of the most successful public

sculptors of our time. Unlike many of his more prominent contemporaries, he works in the traditional materials of endurance: metal and stone, materials suggestive of permanence.

However, there are numerous mitigating factors to monumentality in Averbuch's work. Along with metal and stone, he uses wood and glass—organic and fragile materials. His conceptions are contemplative, ironic, and historically aware rather than histrionic and annunciatory. His public

commissions are physically imposing, yet they are designed to integrate with their environment rather than dominate it. They employ personal and idiosyncratic symbols, a system of signs neither public nor culturally shared but intimately individual. Rather than turning outward, Averbuch's works turn inward, toward inner rumination and critiques of their subject matter. They do not celebrate, they investigate. Or, more precisely, they exist at the intersection of the public and the personal, the monumental and the intimate. Averbuch has noted this himself: "All my works are a dialogue between the intimate and the monumental. They are monumental, but with a question mark."

The question mark applies to the very point of monumentality, to the sense of permanence and endurance through future time: "I have a desire for the large, but I am aware of the temporary, of the moment in time." Although Averbuch employs the materials of endurance, he uses repurposed stone acquired from previous applications. Often chosen to display the ravages of time, the stones are fragments, ruins buried by the ages and held in place to maintain the size of his structures. They bear the marks of previous generations—"to which I add my marks"—a practice that speaks to Averbuch's background as an Israeli who came to America some 30 years ago. His sculpture has the aura, the visual feel, of indigenous Middle Eastern architecture. Often built out of materials recycled from other structures, it is as if his works were monuments constructed out of the substance of fallen monuments. They recall the insight of Shelley's "Ozymandias," with its colossal statue of an ancient, forgotten king who once ruled all that he surveyed. But now, only the broken remnants of the statue can be found: "Nothing beside remains. Round the decay / Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare / The lone and level sands stretch far away."



The Loneliness of Queen Hatshepsut, 2008. Stone, wood, and steel, 10 x 12 x 4 ft.

COURTESY THE ARTIST

Being, 2000–08. Stone, steel, and wood, 71 x 68 x 68 in.

Standing at the intersection of the intimate and the monumental, Averbuch works as comfortably and naturally in indoor sculpture as in public commissions. The power of his work in both modes was displayed in his 2008 exhibition at the Nancy Hoffman Gallery in New York, “Ilan Averbuch: Intimate Monuments.” The show was divided among the three first-floor rooms and extended to an outdoor space. A clear vector carried the visitor from the heart of the sculptor’s interior space, perhaps the center of his imaginative world, to a public work set outside the gallery proper—as if along a bridge connecting works from two worlds.

The first room centered on the massive *Self-Portrait* (2008), which presented a concise and inspired statement of Averbuch’s methods and themes. Panes of frosted glass, arranged as a conic section, rise like a tree from a cylindrical metal base, held in place by an enormous, off-balance lead frame with one corner seeming to jut into the floor. The image within the frame is fragility set within hard substance, with the glass panes displaying the shadow of their metal armature like a skeleton showing through the skin—the limpid, translucent delicacy of glass enclosed in and upheld by the endurance of metal. The work resembles a cameo conceived on a looming scale, but the portrait—the precious image that we traditionally display on walls and hold in lockets—would normally be set in a gold frame. Here, the fragile intimacy is undercut with a frame of lead, a gray, dull, and poisonous metal. It is a portrait of the artist—“Ilan” is Hebrew for “tree”—as conceived by the artist, and specifically the self-portrait of a sculptor. The image bursts its frame, cutting into and through it on one side—it is physically real, extending beyond the protected space and into our world. What pierces the frame is not just an abstracted organic image of a tree, but a fountain, a geyser, an upward surging of energy, of



creative imagination, the thrust and enthusiasm—the *élan*—of the creator: it is the sheer urgency to create, to make something that breaks through its limits to become real.

The second room was filled with large works demonstrating Averbuch’s distinctive stylistic range. *Tumbleweed* (2008), which was accompanied by a maquette for *Tumbleweed with Balloon* (2006–08), inverts the fanning form from *Self-Portrait*. Its downward spread is executed in stone fragments; the nearly weightless plant that rides prairie winds is transformed into dense rock and chained to the wall, immo-

bile. In *The Loneliness of Queen Hatshepsut* (2008), concentric sets of stone garlands strung on steel cables hang from a wooden pole and rest on a wooden table with a wooden chair alongside it. The ancient Egyptian female pharaoh, famous for her many building projects, is changed into the tree image again, offering up her stone fragments for the future—her great works doomed to ruin, like the statue of Ozymandias.

Perhaps *Being* (2000–08) most forcefully demonstrated Averbuch’s questioning of monumentality. Lifted on a wooden pedestal, it displays a steel airplane cockpit



The Dress, the Voice, and the Bachelor’s Coat, 2005. Stone, steel, and wood, 8 x 24 x 8 ft.



Left: *Landmark*, 2008. Steel and stone, 18 x 37 x 11 ft. Below: *End of the Line*, 2008. Stone, 8 x 4 x length of the station. Views of multi-part work at South Tacoma Station, Tacoma, WA.



standing on its point, rooted in, burying itself into, a stone book. It is an image of disaster, and Averbuch has said that the image was suggested to him by a photograph showing the cockpit of the plane that crashed in Lockerbie, Scotland, being lifted by a crane. The surface of Averbuch's cockpit is inscribed with raised text from Baudelaire's "The Albatross." The poem speaks of a captured albatross that cannot take flight again; it limps as it walks, its spectacular wings so large that it must drag them behind. In Averbuch's work, the words are set like fragments, drawn apparently at random from the poem. They cannot be read coherently; what we see is like an overheard private conversation between the sculptor and the poet—a rumination, portions of an inner dialogue, an intimate, inward act portrayed on a public work of

art. This is a tragic vision of a beautiful bird brought down to earth and lost to the skies, of magnificence undone, of aspirations shattered, pulled down like the victims of senseless violence, open to tragedy like all of us, and most particularly, like the artist: "The poet resembles this prince of cloud and sky / Who frequents the tempest and laughs at the bowman; / When exiled on the earth, the butt of hoots and jeers, / His giant wings prevent him from walking."

The three forms in *The Dress, the Voice, and the Bachelor's Coat* (2005) are drawn from *The Large Glass*, and the sculpture represents Averbuch contending with Duchamp, and more specifically, with the very idea of theoretical art, or more properly, conceptual art—the art of the idea, art as an idea. This is another statement of Averbuch's dedication to sculpture, to

the art of the physically real. "I want to activate space," he has said of this work, "to occupy it, to physically engage it—to make objects in space and bring art to the physical world, to make art that is more than just an image."

The bringing of his art into the world is most powerfully and intricately demonstrated, of course, in Averbuch's public commissions, and in his manner of integrating them into their sites, a quality that can be found in numerous works from throughout his career. For *Landmark* (2008), part of a project at the South Tacoma Station in Tacoma, Washington, Averbuch found himself in dialogue with the city's architecture, which is marked by the use of rolling arches—the original train station (now the U.S. Court House) has them, as does the history museum. Averbuch turned the form of the arches upside down to fashion two Cor-ten steel wheels, each one crossed by a stone band constructed out of stones from old bridges in the area. A black granite line leads from the sculpture into the station, like a railroad line leading travelers on their journeys.

In *Avanim Vetseiadim (Stones and Steps)* (2008), at Gezer Park, in Leawood, Kansas, a stone ladder reaches for the sky. But it is positioned in a pond, so that its reflection in the water stretches downward. Aspiration reverses itself, yet it presses toward the unreachable in both directions, toward the sky and toward the immaterial reflection. The horizon line is evaporated, the ground dispelled, and the visible point of gravity, of the dragging to earth, is erased. The integration of earth and sky, the duplication of each in the other, is the embodiment of anti-gravity, the absence of a clear sense of up and down, which has been, since Malevich, the artistic conception of transport beyond the degrading materiality of the quotidian world, beyond the weight of mortality. Despite the ambiguity of its reaching, *Avanim Vetseiadim* configures an aspiration for something beyond the material, beyond the merely visible, the earthly, the tragic.

The Dove Tower and Steps to the Bottom of a Pyramid, 2004. Stone, 22 x 39 x 48 ft. View of work at the University of Connecticut, Storrs.

The symbolism of anti-gravity continues in *The Dove Tower and Steps to the Bottom of a Pyramid* (2004), at the University of Connecticut, Storrs. The two-part work consists of an inverted stone dove tower, standing at an angle, and a stepped stone well that descends into the lawn in front of the Information Technologies Engineering building. Its combination of opposing valencies, of opposite tensions and implications, finally reaches to the heavens. The visibly unstable, upside-down tower, constructed only a few years after 9/11, is reminiscent of the destroyed towers of the World Trade Center, but the dove is a symbol of peace, as well as the bird that flew back to Noah with signs of emerging land, of deliverance. The pyramid runs in the wrong direction, but it is also taken from the stepped wells of India, in which one descends into the earth to obtain water, to locate the source of life. From the bottom of the sculpture's inverted pyramid, one cannot see the university, or the lawn, or the earth—only the sky is evident.

Dove Tower achieves an inversion of its tragic implications, an effect that can also be seen in *Divided World* (2000), in Lavon, in Galilee, Israel—home to one of the most difficult and interminable conflicts of the modern world. The work contains two stone stairways, mirror images of each other but running in opposite directions and running in parallel—they do not meet. Between them extend two arches, each one rising from a stairway and stretching toward the other—but they do not meet. Two boulders hang from chains at the ends of the arches, and they do meet, but more like fists than clasping hands.

While the overall form of the work was inspired by the observatories at Jantar Mantar in India, this is no image of reaching toward the stars. *Divided World* speaks of broken dreams and continually lost

Divided World, 2000. Stone, cast iron, steel, and water, 20 x 22.5 x 24 ft. View of work installed in Lavon, Israel.



possibilities, but it also speaks of something more. As one walks around the sculpture, changing perspective, the stairways seem to join and the arches seem to blend into one. The movement of the forms as one circles the work is not only like the closing of doors, but also like the fusion of parts into a single conception, into a joining together of oppositions. A close look at the two boulders reveals that the point of contact is slight and delicate, barely there. For all their hard mass, they touch gently, like the brushing of a hand across a cheek, like a breath gliding along the hairs of the skin—like a kiss.

Here is the final result of Averbuch's rejection of sculpture's monumental function, of his ironic approach to our urge to assert our own grandeur. His artistic conception undercuts the darkness of the tragedies it admits, piercing the despair of

the dark vision. His oppositional symbolism is a form of realism, of seeing things in all their complexity, and part of that complexity is open chance, the chance that always exists. Like the tree image in *Self-Portrait* that is also a symbol of surging creative imagination, there is an inexhaustible possibility in Averbuch's artistic vision. For, in the end, there is a monumentality in Averbuch's work after all, a grand conception, one as realistic as it is magnificent. In the sculpture of Ilan Averbuch, the monumental aspiration is the perpetual possibility of hope.

Mark Daniel Cohen, Assistant Dean and Controller of the Media and Communications Division of the European Graduate School, writes regularly on art in New York City and contributes to a wide range of publications.

