

FOREWORD to **LASZLO TAUBERT**, 2009

By Adam Brown and Andrea Zemel

My partner Adam Brown and I first came upon the works of Laszlo Taubert in 2006 at an art exhibition in Palm Beach, and were immediately struck by the power, vitality, and timelessness of his work. Though contemporary, his sculpture didn't seem to possess the angst-ridden vernacular typical of contemporary art. Reminiscent of the archaic Greek Kouros figures and their antecedents in ancient Egyptian statuary, Taubert's work is hauntingly epic in form. With titles like *Odysseus and Penelope*, or *King and Queen*, Taubert alludes to these references in his sculpture.

As an American artist and a New York art dealer doing business in Budapest just after the fall of communism, I am continually reminded of Hungary's cultural isolation and the re-initiation of Eastern Europe's dialogue with the West. Having received my own art training at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts and the University of Pennsylvania during the same time period, I was intrigued by the differences – as well as the similarities – that prevailed as a result of the political and cultural divide.

It is clear from my conversations with Laszlo (Laci to his friends) that the foundations of his training were the same as mine – the same as what has always been at the heart of all academic art training. However what struck me as widely divergent was his lack of exposure to the mainstream of 20th Century post war art during his formative period. From this perspective, one could see that Taubert constructed his own imagery based on the vibrant exuberance of the native Hungarian Modernism of the inter-war period – a home-grown aesthetic of simplicity and elegance, where the individual is merged with the industrial and urban ideal. Like a shipwrecked mariner surfacing from his isolation on some cloistered island, Taubert's work bears the flower of an intact and profoundly inspired lineage. Connective, integrating, and eminently elegant, his sculptures are remarkably fresh. Through them we are transported not only to a chapter of the interrupted narrative of 20th Century Hungarian art, but one is helplessly catapulted through time to those archaic temples of Delos where the marble Kouros figures of the eight century

inaugurated man's nascent sense of self as an urban creature. Though political turmoil was roiling about him, his work remains markedly serene.

Andrea Zemel

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Q: Tell me about where you studied?

A: The Hungarian University of Fine Arts is more than 100 years old – the original school was established in 1871. I studied there for seven years from 1985 until 1993. The first four sessions consisted of sculpture studies, and my master was a well-educated, exceptional artist with a classical, figural approach. The following three sessions focused on formal art training. In the third year, I began to develop my own style, which my master did not understand or think was valid. He joked at my work for some months. Once during his usual visit, I left the studio only to return after he had gone. He responded to my reaction with stunning empathy, stopped meddling in my work and began to speak to me like a colleague.

At the University, we received a well-rounded background in the arts, covering art history and anatomy focusing on methods and approach up to 1930 through 1940. The curriculum did not cover contemporary art. This kind of academicism was not typical of all students at the University, since there were younger professors whose methods differed. Also during this time there was the so-called “students revolt” that swept many academic masters out of the school and let in new, progressive, contemporary-minded masters into training.

In hindsight, I don't think that I missed out on much with the academic emphasis at school, because I got the kind of traditional training I could have received in Paris or Munich in 1890–1910. The avant-garde movements of the 20th Century, which took over the traditional approach in Europe much earlier, did not arrive at our art school in Budapest until the time of my graduation in the 1990's. It was so late, and only after

much re-evaluation would the old approach be left behind. But as the saying goes, the last could be the first. One way or another, it did not matter in my development. “Contemporary art” doesn’t exist for the artist; only “art” exists. Artists get inspiration, faith, animating fire or force not from contemporary processes. For an artist, art is born from the interaction of the world and the self.

Q: Did the communist political environment have any impact on the teaching methods at the School?

A: Considering the conservatism of the regime, there is no doubt that the social system affected teaching methods. On the other hand, the university experience could be characterized as “patinated”, a term Hungarians use to describe the period between the two world wars. I think it was kind of like a resort, in a time of raging communism. The ideology couldn’t get through the walls of the school. You see, the academic curriculum wasn’t a device to conserve classical values of art so much as a means to maintain the university’s autonomy and keep communism outside of the school.

Q: From your description, your academic training was quite traditional and didn’t follow the political dogma of the times. If the school was an oasis from the dogma of the communist system, was it unusual in this regard?

A: I don’t know if it was unusual or not, but it was consistent. All teachers were artists and though it could not have been easy, they tried to make the school politically independent. Compared to other universities, our school had to be a more liberal place, especially under the given political reality. The Epreskert, the so-called Strawberry Garden with its gigantic natural trees and old neoclassic studios in the centre of Budapest was in fact a real island for us. We could work whenever we wanted. There was never any restriction in our scheduling and we didn’t feel any political pressure. At that time, the school had a strong reputation. There was one place for every 20 to 30 applicants who wanted to attend.

Q: What were your most important influences at university?

A: The school was a phenomenon, and thanks to this character it was kind of an island. That dusty academic oasis meant freedom for us. At that point it was clear for me that after finishing my studies, I would flee the country. When I finally graduated, the political transformation occurred and I ended up staying in Budapest. I remained there because I was thankful for our freedom, freedom for everybody, and thought we all would be happy in our country. I'm not sure it was a good decision; I didn't think it over because the transformation had a such a strong emotional impact on me.

During my university years, everyone was able to choose the path they wanted to take. At the time, I was interested in old world sculptures – I wanted to absorb the timeless power these works possessed and apply it to my own work. This is how my first “idol sculptures” were created.

These pieces were very important to me. I never understood however, why some art critics simply stated that they looked Etruscan or Greek. A teacher from Pecs took the effort to analyze them and understand their true meaning – one night she crept up to one of the sculptures and broke off its “broom stick” phallus. She recognized and interpreted the discord in harmony. She realized that the statue's message involved helpless lust and male erotic vulnerability characterized as the body's imperative to reproduce; in other words - the impossible predicament of arousal and the male gender. To me this served as confirming feedback, since I also believe that this instinct is embedded in the stone. They were abstract nude forms matched with cylinder-shaped piston-like, estranged and impersonal sex organs. Beneath the soul there is a compulsive machine, constant motivation, the source of the problems in manhood. The sculptures encompass and juxtapose these themes in meaning, sexuality and the helplessness of man. These works also speak the secret language of sculpture, of abstraction and form, shading and light, and how this is achieved by some kind of harmony or discord.

Q; You mentioned that you had intended to leave the country after completing your education so as to flee the existing regime. How long after your studies did the regime fall?

A: At first I planned on going to Germany because I had family there, but then I thought of Paris. It was obvious to me that I didn't want to stay in Budapest, because my future there as an artist was hopeless. The arrogance, cynicism and insincerity of the government during that period was unbearable. I was an art student during a time of political change, where I had many friends, and we would always go out and party and have a good time, drinking and cavorting and talking about all kinds of things. It was during one of these irreverent nights that we formed the political party called FIDESZ, which to this day is a significant political party in Hungary. At the time, this was a dangerous undertaking for us, but the hope of change could be felt. At one point I had to secretly transport the founding documents of the party, and when my parents found out about it they were terrified. They told me to stay out of it, that I could be imprisoned. Aliz, neighbor of ours, often watched soccer games with my father, since my mother was not a fan of the game. She really understood my political views. During the 1956 revolution, the communists had killed her sweetheart for his political actions. It was nice to talk with her about politics, and we both knew that something big was about to happen. She joined the party but at the same time worried about me. Later on, after the fall of the government, Aliz worked in the SZDSZ political party as a representative. Since I contributed to the cause, I didn't even think about leaving, especially when it seemed that communism would finally come to an end. However, following the political change I lost all interest in politics.

Q: You describe the regime change as an emotional time for you – this transition to a more open political system. What can you describe about these changes and how they affected your life at the time? Did this have any bearing on the content of your work?

A: The shifting of political systems was a hopeful and idealistic event for me. I was sure the change would be for the best, and that Hungary would become a good place to live. When I began practicing my profession, I was sure everything would work out since the basic requirement, freedom, was given. My assumptions proved true until I realized that I was broke, and that there was not market for contemporary sculpture.

Not just for me, but for everyone. There was nothing, not even a network of galleries or trade in contemporary art. For 15 years the sculptors, especially those newly graduated, were forced into a vacuum. Everyone tried to make a living in some way and remain sculptors, but unfortunately many didn't make it. I tried to make a living in other fields, but somehow life always brought me back to sculpting. When I lost all hope in my work, something always brought me back. In the end, I was able to balance things out since I was not willing to suffer defeat – not because I was so tough, but because making art was what kept me alive. Such people exist, these kinds of artists – I am sure I am one of them.

The fall of communism did not bring any change to my artwork, but I don't think politics could affect it in any way in the first place. For me, art and politics run on different planes. Art is not timely in the transitory meaning of the word - and politics and history are ephemeral when compared with the eternally human subject of art.

Q: When and how did you have your first exposure to ancient Greek or Egyptian statuary?

A: My first experience with the imagery was an old, large-scale black and white slide of the "Charioteer" which was impregnated on glass. It was preserved by my mother, and when I came across it, I couldn't get the picture out of my mind. I kept it in the hidden drawer of my desk and I used to take it out to look at it in secret.

Q: What made you feel you had to "keep it in secret"? Were there taboos about keeping such imagery?

A: At the age of 13, I wasn't sure of what I wanted from life. My mother was an artist and wished for her son to follow in her path. As a first step, this would have required joining the drawing group in elementary school, but I didn't want to attend. For some reason, my friends and I always found something awkward about going to drawing classes. It was an unpleasant experience. This is probably because, as children, we were mischievous; we liked to throw knives and scare old ladies. We were the bad kids in the neighborhood while the good kids attended those classes. So no matter

how hard my mother tried to persuade me, she could not get me to go to drawing group. When I found the image of The Charioteer, that changed the situation, I realized my affinity to it. I could feel it's importance to me and returning to it now and again became important. So on a personal level, my preoccupation with this imagery was a taboo. I was sure that my friends would laugh at me. Finally, once or twice I attended the drawing group and shortly after enrolled in the "little" art school, a kind of high school of art.

Q: I assume that you studied traditional figure sculpture and casting methods. When did you make your first bronzes? When did you start working in marble?

A: The university had its own bronze casting-house with a welding and chasing workshop, where foremen helped students learn these technologies. There was a lapidary workshop too. I was always interested in carving so I gave it a try. My first carving was a life-size statue in stone. I liked the process very much as the sculpture slowly revealed itself to me. Of course I couldn't finish it, and presumably it was too tough a nut to crack at the first go. Later, after I had finished my studies, I got into the master's program at Villány, a hilly part of Hungary. It was three years in a monastic-like school. We lived on the hill in a nice classical villa situated in a vineyard. All of us, qualified sculptors who wanted to work with stone, got our own studios. There were huge blocks of marble, tools, chisels; we had everything we needed and focused only on our work. Even a cook was there who prepared our meals. It was a state school, we started the session in September and finished in June. Throughout the winter, we used to carve in the snow and did nothing else. I think that was a golden age for everyone who was there.

We acquired a technique of carving by cracking blocks of stone to find the hidden form within the rock. Splitting the blocks in two was a delightful feeling. We drilled holes along a line in the stone to determine the split seam, and started to force it open with wedges. Usually there were several of us who wanted to take part as we struck with our hammers. The stone sounded a little bit higher, blow by blow, step by step, and by the end it almost cried out, then suddenly fell apart with a deep sigh.

Splitting the stone in two is very mysterious and unique, opening something

millions of years old and causing something new to be born. It felt like a big responsibility but was great fun too. It is a kind of Creation.

I produced the sculpture *A Pair of Ships* that became a pair by splitting in two a huge block of marble from the Siberian marshes. It took a long time to make but I enjoyed every minute of doing it. Perhaps that's why I never wanted to finish. I had been working with it for two years. Of course, you can't see all the hard work put into it, but placing the cubes of marble here and there was marvelous. It was a delicious joy for me, as if I was only three years old, and by no means did I want the process to end.

Q: I am intrigued that your figures have no arms or heads. This makes them feel very monumental and architectural; however there is an aspect of individual identity that is eliminated. How did you arrive at the decision to make your forms like this? How do you relate the body to architecture?

A: It was always important for me to establish a feeling of timelessness among my sculptures, so that they always carry with them a taste of infinity. You have to compress the universe into the piece you are working on, so that it can radiate this essence of timelessness. It was important for me to establish connections among my idol works that helped answer questions of manhood and identity. In sculpture, expression becomes passive or "helpless". For me, the absence of head or hands determines the sculpture's "possibilities" - helping to define its sexuality, vulnerability, and "helplessness" by emphasizing its sensuality. The impersonality of the work is essential to the meaning. Man has always wanted to create gods. Likewise, I am also searching for what can not be found. Through the work, I attempt to approach the infinite, in the same breath, I am aware that such a place exists beyond the world and only in the imagination.... So in a sense, what is said is that there is no enlightenment, and at the end of the journey, all that is left is joy. "Journey" here being the operative word, because that is what is at stake. In other words, the sculpture is an expression of the question of existence. I am searching for God, or he is searching for me.

My most recent body of work, which will be exhibited in New York are not lonely

and discordant like the “idols”, but rather are impersonal and monumental, integrated in a connective harmony. They are conceived as couples and balanced individuals... there is also a family. I envisioned these sculptures as urban gods. The figures are compressed in architectural silhouettes derived from the intersecting planes that highlight the figure’s refinement, yet slice through them. It is as if we were displaying the living bodies as houses; here a sensual naval, there a breast, or here a grouping of toes - each arrayed on various structures and edifices such as a blown up firing wall in Moscow. The houses that I photograph are sculptures as well, images which I redefine and provide with bodies. Size and scale contribute to their monumentality, they become like foreign and impersonal urban gods – a new kind of explanation for the unknown.

Buildings are human extentions - as much “us” as our skin, our clothes, and last but not least, our souls. Buildings, like people, are sculptural entities containing labyrinths of inner compartments and portals both real and imaginary. Rooms represent the secrets of our souls and of our personhood, windows our capacity to communicate, while doors represent all our possibilities. I consider buildings in the urban landscape as sculptural icons that mirror our own existence. The ready-made world we live in simply penetrates our minds and lingers as a stimulative impulse, but then is seemingly lost. This could kill the emotions which guide human existence.

I hope that the work will convey to the audience a sense of the wholeness of the world. They create in me a sense of surprise with all their possibilities and they give me insights on new paths. and make me happy for the reason that they may have opened up a new door in the history of art.