

EDUARDO OLBÉS

Matter and Form

"Space tells matter how to move; matter tells space how to curve."

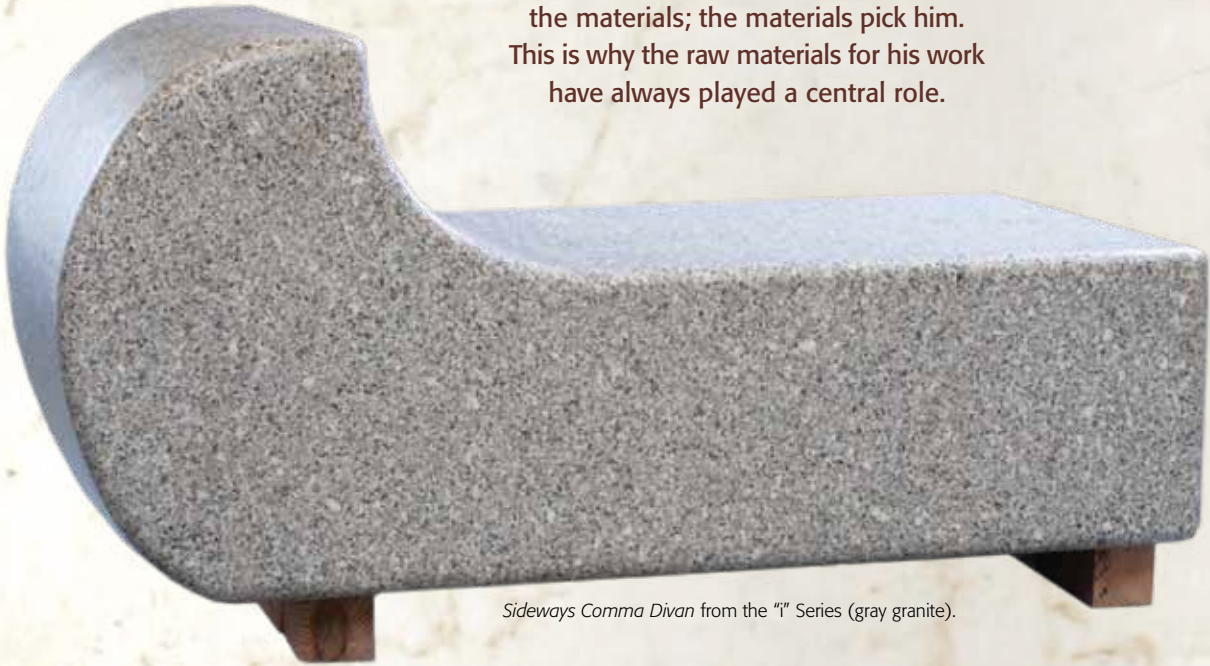
ALBERT EINSTEIN

Alexandra G. Aktories*



Benevolence Bench (travertine marble).

After more than 40 years carving wood and stone, Olbés knows that he does not pick the materials; the materials pick him. This is why the raw materials for his work have always played a central role.



Sideways Comma Divan from the "I" Series (gray granite).

A FILIPINO IN MEXICO

Seduced by Mexican stone, sculptor Eduardo Olbés (b. Manila, 1951) decided to stay in Mexico 37 years ago. He chose to live on the slopes of the legendary hill, the Tepozteco, in the town of Tepoztlán, Morelos, and set up his atelier, dubbed “La iguana de Oriente” (The Iguana of the East) there. “Other Filipino artists have often asked me why I continue working in Mexico instead of doing art in my country. And well, the pragmatic reason is that the Philippines is geologically a very young country and does not have the enormous wealth of stone that Mexico does,” says the artist.¹ Mexico is rich in stone deposits, including different varieties of marble, onyx, obsidian, basalt, and jade. And Mexico also has a long tradition in carving and working these materials.

In pre-Hispanic times, ancient Mexicans worked on everything from great stone monoliths like the colossal Olmec heads sculpted in volcanic basalt, to materials used to make small utensils and decorative objects, sculptures, and jewelry made of jade, obsidian, and other stones. The colonial per-

iod is known for the facades of private homes and public buildings covered in pink sandstone or porous *tezontile* and carved quarried rock, such as Mexico City’s cathedral and Iturbide’s Palace, among innumerable examples. These stone materials continue to be used for construction, art, and household utensils to this day. This is why sculptor Olbés found in Mexico an endless supply of raw materials for his work.

Added to this is the diversity of Mexican wood, the other material with which he combines his stone sculpture. Olbés uses wood from assorted tropical species, including *narra*, ebony, chicle tree wood, and *huaje* to anchor a marble table, create a centuries-old traditional bench, or carve the wings that will give flight to gigantic angels.

ORIGINS AND APPRENTICESHIP

The sculptor describes his first experiences carving everyday objects out of wood:

As a child, I spent long hours trying to make different things, like slingshots out of guava tree wood, harpoons for underwater fishing, traps to catch the giant rats that made off with my

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cousin's rabbits, wax knives. . . . There was nothing aesthetic about them; rather, they were fun, dangerous weapons. I never thought of this behavior as anything akin to art.

However, after more than 40 years carving wood and stone, Olbés knows that he does not pick the materials; the materials pick him. This is why the raw materials for his work have always played a central role.

His creative process began at the age of 20 when he was working as an apprentice in a cabinet-maker's workshop in Manila. He continued that learning process at university with British teacher P. Ruddick, a specialist in wood carving. Later, in Mexico, he became the assistant to Miguel Cortés at the EDA, what used to be the School of Design and Crafts in Mexico City. "Later, when I could no longer resist stone—I was just carried away by it—I went to Teotihuacan and met several obsidian carvers, and that's how I started carving stone in the Iguana de Oriente in '85."

Since then he has carved hundreds of tons of different stones—some notoriously difficult to work, like obsidian—in a variety of formats and sizes. Perhaps the biggest lesson he has learned is to know how to wait patiently and respectfully for the stone to give him an opportunity. He does not



Mexicans Crossing the Border in Sneakers (ash / breccia headdresses from Colima / feather masks / travertine sneakers).

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Angel Thinking of His Girlfriend (travertine marble, wings of molave wood).

begin on a stone piece until he feels ready. Without regard for time, he gives himself over to observation and waits until his art deserves a particular piece of stone. "I have a kind of deformation of the memory that allows me to remember stones and pieces of wood I saw decades ago. It's easy for me to remember their color, hardness, grain, figure, density, and tenacity. In fact, I still have the piece of jade my dad bought me for my birthday when I turned 13."

That respect is undoubtedly an expression of his deep admiration for nature. But it is also evidence of the complicity he establishes with the raw materials that give life to his sculptures: "Each stone requires its own manner, but we love almost all of them."

MAGNIFICENT PIECES, SMALL BEAUTIES

Eduardo Olbés does not complicate his life with discussions about what art is and what design is; who is an artist and who an artisan; for him, the truly essential thing is the process through which things are made and, of course, the materials. That is why he moves effortlessly from sculpture (in immensely significant large-format pieces) to utilitarian or decorative art (stone and wooden furniture, fountains, ornamental pieces, and even jewelry) that almost always have a basis in the millennia-old tradition of other cultures, such as Islamic art or the Ming tradition in China. The exhibit “Ming Evocation. Olbés Furniture,” recently at the Franz Mayer Museum, one of Mexico City’s most important venues for the decorative arts, showcased such a series.²



Lady of Sorrows #1 (granite, bone, bullet casings).

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Green Spiral Fountain with Iguana, 135 cm in diameter (green granite from Tierra Colorada).

PIECES WITH SOCIAL CONTENT

Although Olbés would not define his work as *engagé*, he is far from indifferent to what happens around him. The plight of migrants who risk their lives in hope of a better existence, the climate of violence that now exists in Mexico, injustice and horror have been driving forces behind the creation of two series of sculptures. “Mexicans Crossing the Border in Sneakers” (2008)³ was exhibited at Bajo el Balcón Gallery in Tepoztlán,⁴ and at the Borda Garden in Cuernavaca, under the premise, “There are two things that economic refugees never leave behind: their dignity and their sneakers.” This series includes large-format sculptures carved in stone, in which the migrants’ dignity is depicted in their faces, done delicately in feathers, and in their stone headdresses, firmly set on each of their heads. The migrants’ strength and the tough road they will have to travel to reach their dreams are symbolized by a pair of rough hunks of white stone alluding to sneakers, those resistant “tools” indispensable for undertaking a journey of this magnitude.

In this exhibition, the artist wants to exalt this group of people who are an extremely important part of the economy of Mexico and the United States, but are reviled and the victims of outrages in both countries.

“Drug Trafficking and Perverse Economic Equations” (2010) is another crucial exhibition through which Olbés reflects and raises his voice against the violence of the war on drugs and the murders of women in Ciudad Juárez.⁵ This show was hosted by the UNAM’s El Chopo University Museum and later at the “Farewell to Arms” show hosted by the Civic Alliance and the Washington Office for Latin America (WOLA) at Mexico City’s Memory and Tolerance Museum. Olbés explains how it came about and how he developed it:

At some point in the summer of 2008, ideas and feelings that had been accumulating for years about arms and drug trafficking—their ubiquity, scope, and interrelations—as well as the hideous news that was coming out of Ciudad Juárez, ripened like an infectious pustule until they flowered in an attack of repugnance and horror. The time had come to deal with these issues directly in visual art. It was then when I began to work on “Drug Trafficking” in my workshop. Every letter of this piece is formed by over a thousand pills, joints, capsules, tablets, syringes, and lozenges, all carved and polished by hand in 15 different colors and kinds of stone, by expert craftsmen at La Iguana de Oriente.⁶



Detail *Drug Trafficking* (granite and different kinds of marble carved on a galvanized metal plaque).



Aleph (obsidian and marble from Orizaba).



Moorish Angel, 220 cm tall, 1500 kg (white bego marble; wings of old wood from Marawi, Philippines).

A DREAM TO BE REALIZED

Since “it is not possible to think of Mexico without corn,”⁷ Eduardo, in collaboration with architect Jorge Mercado, has been following a dream for some time now: creating a Corn Park, based on the design of a ceremonial center of ancient Mexico, with different references to corn. This is a way of reinterpreting the ancient Mexican custom of giving thanks for the benefits of this food by worshiping the deities: “Our proposal is not a simple sculpture project, but a true offering.” With all certainty, in the hands of the Filipino sculptor, someday this project will stop being just a dream.

Whether utilitarian art or just sculpture, wood and stone are transformed and acquire their own significance through Olbés’s work. “If I ask myself what has brought me here, only one response occurs to me: beauty. Beauty lures me. It tells me things that make me listen, and it shows me things that make

me see. And what is more, beauty gives me the gift of wanting to keep listening, to keep seeing, to keep living.” **MM**

NOTES

¹ All quotes, unless otherwise specified, are from an interview by the author with the sculptor, in Tepoztlán, Morelos, May 13, 2012.

² See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZBWr9pQmaCg>. [Editor’s Note.]

³ See art from this gallery at www.youtube.com/watch?v=tZr7eGdP-FM and concretely, *Immigrants*, at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k5Fikb3vxXc&feature=relmfu>. [Editor’s Note.]

⁴ The gallery’s name is a play on words, alluding to the Malcolm Lowry novel, *Under the Volcano*, or *Bajo el Volcán* in Spanish. [Translator’s Note.]

⁵ See <http://www.cultura.unam.mx/?tp=articulo&id=1856&ac=mostrar&Itemid=208&ct=323>, and “Eduardo Olbés en El Chopo,” *Milenio* (Mexico City), October 9, 2010, <http://www.milenio.com/cdb/doc/impreso/8845527>. [Editor’s Note.]

⁶ Eduardo Olbés, brochure, El Chopo University Museum exhibition, September 22 to November 17, 2011.

⁷ The author is alluding here to a nationwide campaign carried out by corn producers in defense of Mexico’s hundreds of native species of maize, threatened by the introduction of genetically modified organisms. [Translator’s Note.]