

INTRODUCTION

Kean University is pleased to host *Stone Sculpture in New Jersey*, an exhibition featuring the work of six talented New Jersey sculptors who work in stone: Ayami Aoyama, Robert T. Cooke, Harry Gordon, William A. Happel, Constantin Cotty Nazarie, and Christoph Spath. For an entire year, from August 2008 through August 2009, large granite and marble works grace our outdoor campus extending the reach of the gallery and exhibition program. The glue that holds this project together is not only the obvious, a common natural material and the large scale of artwork, but a web of coincidences and interconnections. These relationships demonstrate the complexity of influences that have created this wonderful exhibition and have come out of a region that is surprisingly fertile for artists working in stone.

Kean University is clearly part of this web of coincidences. Happel and Cooke are both Kean University alumni. Cooke went on to teach at Rutgers University where he was the Master of Fine Arts (M.F.A.) thesis advisor to Gordon. Gordon later worked for the Johnson Atelier, as did Spath and Nazarie. When Kean University built the new CAS building in 2003, a huge old willow tree needed to be removed from the building site. Keeping with the environmental and green standards employed in the design, the architects called on Gordon to make a site-specific sculpture using the gigantic tree trunks of the fated willow. This sculpture is now a permanent installation in the outdoor courtyard, visible from the front doors of the new CAS Art Gallery.

Although the New York art-world often casts an irritating shadow on even the most talented artists working in New Jersey, when it comes to large-scale stone art studios, Manhattan cannot compete. It is worth noting that by nature, large-scale stone requires such huge space and gigantic equipment that only the super privileged could even dream of doing it in an urban setting. However, beyond the Hudson River, artists have found space, equipment and inspiration to pursue their work in stone.

All of this activity and opportunity have attracted artists to this region. Nazarie came from Romania via Italy, and Aoyama came from Japan to learn and create in this rich environment for sculptors. Aoyama is now a permanent resident in the United States. Presently she also works for Spath at the Digital Stone Project.

The *Stone Sculpture in New Jersey* exhibition would not have happened as it did without our guest curator, Ricardo Barros, author of *FACING SCULPTURE: A Portfolio of Portraits, Sculpture and Related Ideas*. This book features a comprehensive series of extraordinary black and white photographs investigating an intimate and dramatic profile of sculptors. Forty of these photographs are on display concurrently at Kean University in the CAS Art Gallery from September 4 through October 31, 2008. We are grateful for Ricardo Barros' insight and ability to bring together these talented artists who have generously loaned their large-scale stone sculptures to Kean University.

Neil Tetkowski
Director of University Galleries



Right: William A. Happel, *11411*, 2006
Barre Gray granite and dosimeteric glass, 76 x 17 x 14.5 in.



message to all passers-by. They do this on an intimate scale. Physical proximity is a prerequisite to the stele's effectiveness. Happel seizes upon the personal, informative qualities of the stele to convey a darker message in his sculpture *11411*. Primordial creatures initiate a progression of relief carvings that climb the stele and culminate with a portal of blue glass. This glass is a dosimeter that grows increasingly opaque as it absorbs nuclear radiation. The destructive incidents of Nagasaki, Hiroshima and Chernobyl, among others, were more than local catastrophes. They polluted our entire atmosphere with radioactivity. This dosimeter glass is no longer clear. From now on, it will only get darker. Happel embedded this damning evidence into granite so that his stele's cautionary message will be carried well into the future. One reading is, "We have witnessed nuclear destruction. Beware!" Happel's stele is inscribed on the front side only. This is another, subtle way in which he communicates with his audience. His second message reads, "Pass this monument without notice and its warning will be lost".

Christoph Spath hails from Germany, where he studied architecture before formally training in sculpture. He has held numerous teaching positions since immigrating to this country in 1982. He co-founded the Johnson Atelier Stone Division in 1996 and The Digital Stone Project seven years later. Fusing the aesthetics of art and architecture, Spath is



Christoph Spath, *Spring*, 2004, granite, glass, 120 x 60 x 30 in.

especially interested in structural forms that have been used for millennia. These include the monolith, the wheel, the column, and the portal. These structural elements are culturally rooted in function, whether practical or ritual, and their presence informs viewers that someone was here before them. No one would mistake Spath's sculpture for a natural formation. Their basic elements distill shapes into clean lines and simple geometry, an aesthetic consistent with the minimalist movement at the core of Spath's sensibility. Plates of glass, tightly embedded into the body of sculpture such as *Spring*, accentuate the contrast between natural and engineered materials. Through conspicuous acts of designed intervention, Spath is leaving a distinct trace of his passage through this world.

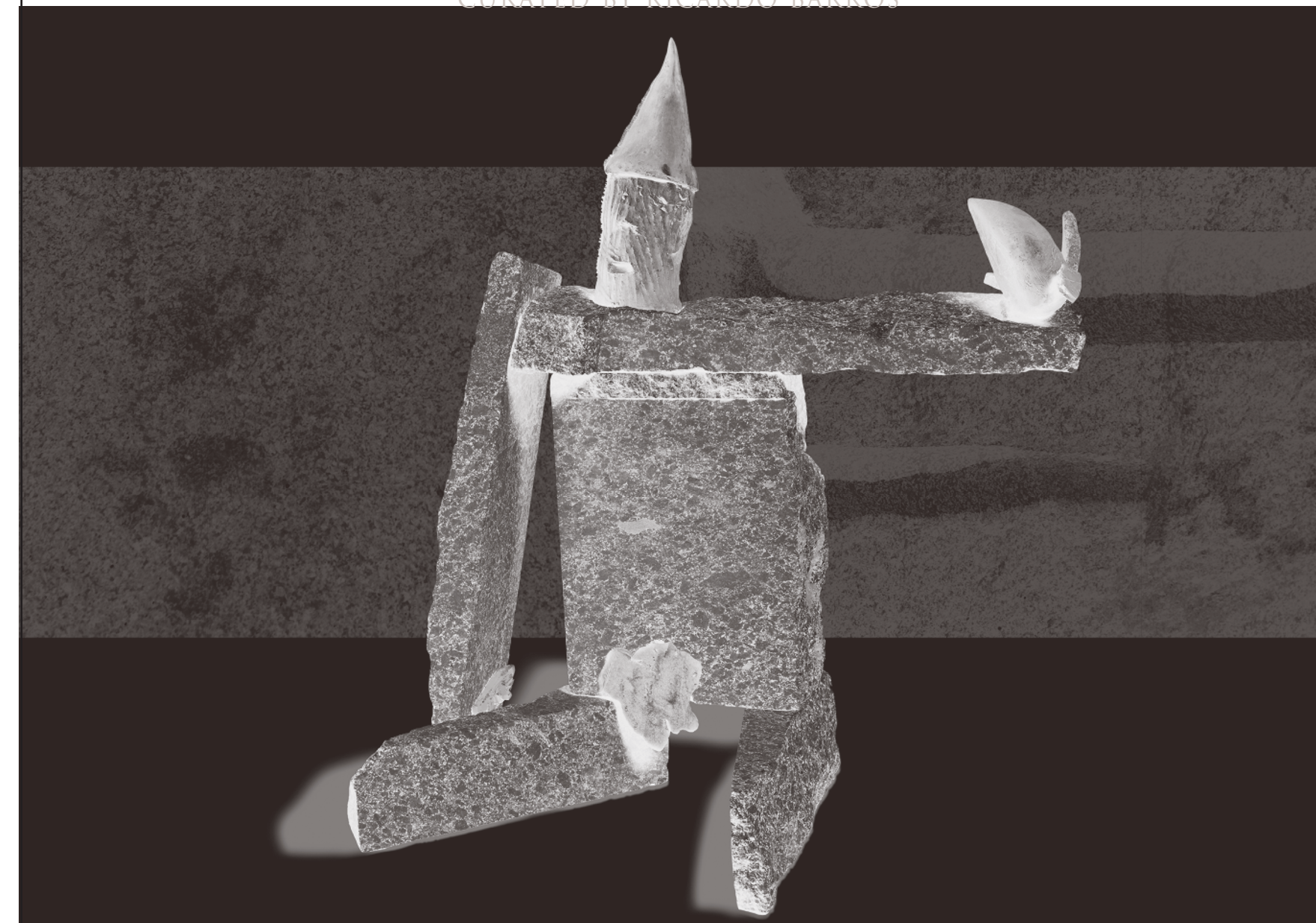
These six sculptors quarry very different ideas. Some carve to create form, others carve to reveal it. Some do not carve at all but assemble stone with other elements. Some work abstractly, others touch upon the figurative. Some are inspired by ancient cultures, others by contemporary society. And yet, despite all of these differences, they all share at least two common denominators.

All six invite an intense pressure into their lives that compels them to create, and they relish the heat of inspiration.

In geology, metamorphic forces act upon one thing and make it into something else. These sculptors hold stone in their hands and transform it into art.

STONE SCULPTURE IN NEW JERSEY

CURATED BY RICARDO BARROS



KEAN UNIVERSITY

Cover: Robert T. Cooke, *Philip's Blue Battleship*, 2008, granite, bronze, iron, and ceramic, 55 x 38 x 24 in.

STONE SCULPTURE IN NEW JERSEY

RICARDO BARROS, CURATOR AND PHOTOGRAPHER

Stone is not a geologic term. It is a generic word that makes no distinction among the various compositions of rock, nor does it hint at the geologic processes that led to the rock's formation. One of these processes involves metamorphism, a melting and recrystallization of the rock's constituent materials. For the northern third of New Jersey, a region bounded by Kean University on its lower edge, the predominant geologic processes were metamorphic. The crush of tectonic plates produced an intense pressure and heat that changed the very nature of the indigenous material. Rocks here were physically transformed. Shale became schist, granite became gneiss and limestone became marble. The stone here, in northern New Jersey, started out as one thing and became something else.

Sculpture is a broad term that reveals little about the artwork it refers to. It says nothing about the artist's material, and even less about the nature of the artist's expression. The word sculpture merely alerts us that, in some way, an artist has interacted with volume and shape.

Residing at the gray-ish intersection of stone and sculpture are the six artists in this exhibition. Since they are all sculptors, working in New Jersey, and they know each other's work, one might tend to think of them as an artistic movement. But this is not the case. In fact, what is striking about these artists is the uniqueness of each of their visions and their very different approaches to sculpture.

Ayami Aoyama, a professional sculptor at the Digital Stone Project, began her artistic career in Japan as a painter. Upon traveling to Italy, in 1995, her eyes were opened to sculpture through Renaissance art. She was moved both by the works' beauty and by an appreciation for its endurance. She started sculpting the following year, in New York, where repeated visits to the Isamu Noguchi museum made an indelible impression upon her aesthetic. Resonating with the wisdom of a Japanese proverb, "Eight million gods dwell in everything", she invests herself in eloquent works of understated form. She

shapes stone to convey a sense of gentleness, serenity, humility and balance. Her marble *Madonna*, in this exhibition, exudes a sense of comforting envelopment. She carves just enough to illuminate her concept, but not so much as to disturb the spirits residing within the rock.



Ayami Aoyama, *Madonna*, 2008, marble, 72 x 24 x 48 in.



Harry Gordon, *Enki*, 2008, granite, 108 x 120 x 90 in.

Like the Zen gardens of her native Japan, Aoyama's works are born to nurture contemplation.

Robert T. Cooke is a lifelong artist, educator, and a Kean University alumnus. (At the time, the school was known as Newark State College.) He is Professor Emeritus at Rutgers University, Mason Gross School of Art. His artistic influences are rooted in multi-disciplinary interests, ranging from poetry to women's athletics in education. The act of creative cross-pollination, borrowing an idea from one context and introducing it into another, permeates Cooke's approach to art. His is an inclusive, additive process. He thinks of his stone sculpture, for example, as three-dimensional collage. Each new component brings to the assemblage its own visual cues. Every latest addition refines the cumulative narrative and lends strength to the momentum already established. His intent is for the finished piece to be a catalyst for free

association, rather than an instrument narrowing the field of possible interpretations. His sculptures play with scale, social and psychological triggers and, most importantly, a sense of humor. He produces anthropomorphic works, like *Philip's Blue Battleship*, that tweak our expectations while simultaneously exposing our frailty.

Constantin Cotty Nazarie's first love was painting, a discipline he formally studied in his native Romania. This led to an early career restoring frescos using traditional methods. He moved to Italy, where he started to carve marble. In 2001 he relocated to New Jersey. Nazarie moved through the Johnson Atelier to the Digital Stone Project and now manages Artisan Stone Works. Most of Nazarie's stone sculptures are bold, graceful, swooping, abstract celebrations of form. They are lovingly crafted to depict movement, echoes of movement, beauty in natural materials, and a sense of aesthetic composure.

Nazarie's sculpture is not reticent; it takes full command of the space it occupies. For his large work in this show, Nazarie chose to address a troubling, socio-political theme: the decay of reason in contemporary culture. *Enough* is uncharacteristic of his previous work. In it he reconceptualizes the totem, where emblematic figures stand upon each other's shoulders and reach for the sky. In the present political climate, according to Nazarie, it is we, a comatose public, who are subject to stacking. Our collective apathy layers us into an ever more compressed, columnar heap. Rather than rising with the force of those who lift us, we push down upon them as still others press down upon us from above.

Harry Gordon has devoted virtually his entire life to the field of sculpture. Beyond creating his own works, he curates two sculpture collections and spends much of his time transporting and installing the works of other artists. He was the principal installer at the Johnson Atelier before he opened his own sculpture installation business in 2000. Gordon moved through an early, figurative phase and quickly gravitated to monumental, abstract works. These sculptures range up to twenty feet high and ten tons in weight. His preferred media are rough-hewn trees and large slabs of granite. In working with either wood or stone, he is careful not to over-polish the piece, usually preserving much of the natural texture and roughness as a direct link back to his source material's origins. Gordon carefully positions and pins each of the massive elements of his composition. Sometimes these compositions assume a post and lintel configuration; other times cantilevered forms suggest an arch. Interlocking pieces invite the viewer to inspect the structure more closely. Gordon's monumental sculptures convey a sense of weight and mass. Most of them are behemoths at rest. In others, like *Enki*, leaning components suggest movement.

William A. Happel is also a Kean University alumnus. His preferred bio, "BA Newark State College; MFA Southern Illinois University; advanced studies, Illinois State University", is as brief as his sculpture is cryptic. Happel

carves stone into stele, vertical monuments that have been used in both the Old and New Worlds to mark territorial boundaries as well as to commemorate significant events. Inscriptions on the face of these monuments serve a practical function. They continuously broadcast their



Constantin Cotty Nazarie, *Enough*, 2008, Georgia marble, 92 x 26 x 19 in.