

# **THINKING LIKE A MOUNTAIN**

*"Thinking Like a Mountain"*

Amanda de la Garza

2021, p. 14-19 — Thinking Like a Mountain

# Thinking Like a Mountain

Amanda de la Garza

Stone is the bedrock, the foundation of thought. Layers upon layers of powder and particles comprised of minute crystals and sand—debris from the earth and galaxies. In nature, stones are amnesic; they are not confined by human time. In their listless, immobile state, they register the existence of relationships between things present, between what is alive and what is latent. In poetry and art history, the rock is a recurrent motif, a trope, precisely because it is timeless and everlasting. They are an accumulation composed of sediments of time and matter that refuse to be an artifact for memory, that physically resist other living bodies and different natural forces.

I take great pleasure in musing over the aesthetic quality of stones, but not as a conceptual exercise: the most obvious example is the juxtaposition of a rock and the artistic context, whereby the latter is imbued with symbols stemming from the original field context. Instead, I prefer to meditate on the features that stones and works of art have in common. An art piece is perceived as a setting and as a self-contained and self-sustaining space, whose nucleus is indiscernible, and which can be surrounded, observed, contemplated, but not necessarily penetrated. From this perspective, in my work as curator, I am routinely guided by this metaphor and by the question of how to get closer to an object that is new, different, enigmatic—a sentence that is in itself an enigma. The idea is to proceed without hesitation, but certainly with some distance, and observe until your eyes hurt. To a large extent, this was the path we followed for the exhibition—Jose Dávila as artist, myself as curator. Our point of departure was a dialogue that spanned almost two years, a conversation that sought to explore various ways of demonstrating the connections between the questions and experiences etched into Dávila's work. This motivated us to reflect on three aspects conjointly: the relationship between abstraction and materiality, the artistic references Dávila uses in his work, and the imperceptible processes behind his production.

Among the plethora of topics that have surfaced during our numerous exchanges, we share a fascination for rocks. Many of the concepts behind the exposition entitled *Thinking Like a Mountain*—on display in 2019 and 2020 at Museo Amparo—were born out of these reflections, not to mention the way in which the stones forge relationships and interactions within the artist's work. The exhibition wasn't so much about building a story around stones or nature, as establishing a focal point on which to hinge a concrete and material reflection, starting from the ground up in philosophical and aesthetic terms. On occasion, the stones materialize as an image, a force, an intrinsic power that allows us to return time and again to the realigning of artworks, objects, things, and of course, thought.

The virtue of stones lies in their abstract, solitary existence. They become a way of inhabiting the world of relationships and the concrete. In his book *Les Pierres* (Stones), Roger Caillois talks about the indiscernible association between stones and the imagination. Images of human realities refract as they penetrate the compact layers of mineral formations, like granite, amethyst, marble, along with thousands of stories carved into the plates of rock. Stones are proof of the gravitational pull on objects, something we know from experience, intuition, and experimental comparison. We can guess the weight of a rock and we can also envision ourselves struggling to move it. Dávila's work asks us to ponder over the fragility of the relationships between the different materials—glass, metal,

stone, concrete—each one conveying a distinct meaning. In truth, it is through the relationships expressed between the objects that their physical features and vital qualities come to the surface. Similarly, it is through the creation of artificial contexts that the powers of the materials can emerge: these contexts require an observer in order to exist, since he or she provides meaning through his or her perception and lived experience. This, however, is not only achieved by way of observation, but through the physical experience, since the body becomes a means of perception and proprioception. When a body comes up against a metal beam, it feels small, and the ensuing anxiety can upset the equilibrium of something that seems outside the day to day—the fragility of the present moment. Also at play are the mental images born of experience. An example is the effort required to move a stone, an undertaking that depends on intention, while the act itself entails volition and the use of energy to displace an inert mass that can potentially supersede us in size and volume. The futile endeavor of grappling with a rock is the beginning of the process of realignment, devastation, and the construction of a new form using an object that defies us at every moment—and doesn't bode well. Dávila's work consistently exposes this volatility, the mental image of this enterprise, which promises the harmony of a new equilibrium, a momentary suspension of forces that control the state of objects and living beings as basic materials subject to the laws of physics.

Another pillar of the *Thinking Like a Mountain* show was the concept of research, not as a way of revealing the inner workings of Dávila's studio activities but as a means to unveil his intentions, attitudes and principles. Each piece was created for the purpose of sustaining a spatial connection with the elongated halls of this renovated colonial edifice, the Museo Amparo, without making explicit reference to it. Here, the notion of space operated in an abstract way, far removed from the typical "white cube" where the architectural elements used within a museum hall are meant to create contrast with the principles and sense of resistance inherent in works of art. The exhibition was composed of three stages—on which I will expand in due course—which subsequently gave rise to the layout of the exhibit. These stages explored the ways in which Jose Dávila examines the materials from a sculptural standpoint, the methods developed by the artist along with the solutions and variants he has established throughout his career. It wasn't a site-specific exhibit *per se*, nor was it a reference to Pueblan geography, or even to its quarries or mines. In my view, it was none other than a reflection on the landscape. However, not in terms of genre or historical context, but a landscape seen as a horizon that can be abstract yet also take on an aesthetic function capable of rendering itself to the imagination, which can only occur when there is a sensitive understanding and phenomenological relationship with everything that pertains to nature and to human invention, such as concrete, steel, and glass. In essence, the exhibit was about two contending views that are verging on antithetical, but complementary.

What's more, the exhibition sought to explore the artist's in-studio practices, without exposing, of course, the black thread of his findings and processes. The works that were exhibited at Museo Amparo speak about a balance that is, one might say, askew. By virtue of the sculptures' latent state, the spectator is given the opportunity for deep reflection, a moment of engaged observation. But what does a studio practice mean vis-à-vis Dávila's body of work? Clearly his oeuvre is not based on a single, immalleable interpretation. To begin with, the materials he uses have an enduring quality and are defined by two basic factors: patience and chance. In the studio, chance requires a dedicated space in which the elements can mingle in order to create an object whose configuration slowly emerges through a process of mutual affinities. As one of the artist's main guiding principles, chance allows the objects to generate spontaneous relationships

after prolonged periods of interaction. Sometimes these relationships are the product of a concrete action, a roll of the dice or a change in perspective, but they cannot arise from a handling that is abrupt or mechanical.

As a pivotal ingredient in Dávila's work, chance unites materials, hard work, and meticulous observation, from the natural cracks in the rocks to the overall picture of the ensemble. Most importantly, he focuses on the invisible relationships between form, object, and weight, a reflection that is fueled by concepts from Minimalism and Neo-Concrete Art. Notwithstanding, his work is not based on quotes, but on production and on the building of a solid work method and guiding principles, which include the following three aspects.

## Researching the Materials

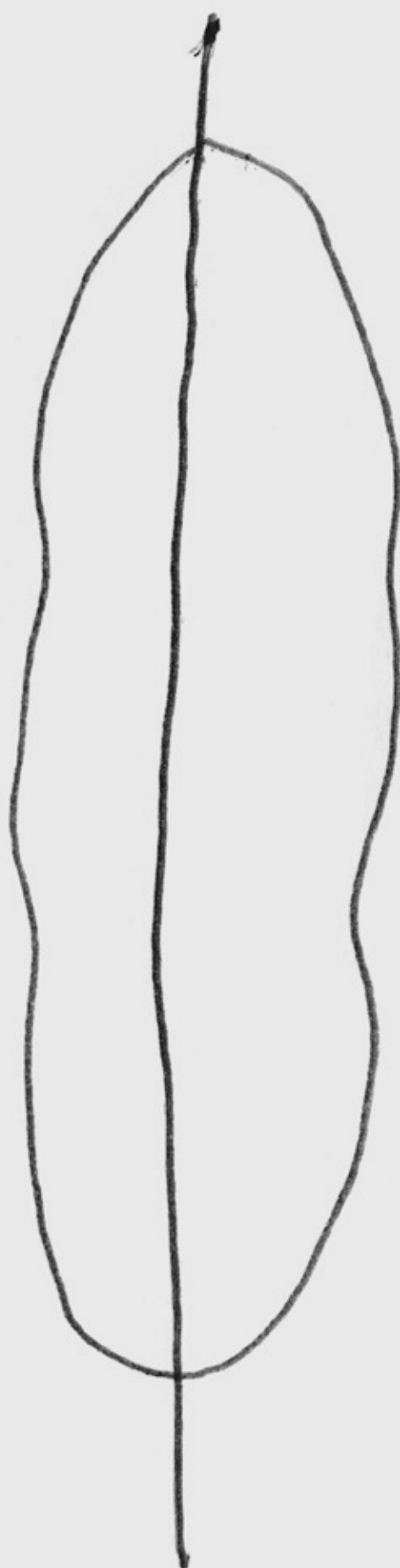
*Thinking Like a Mountain* is the product of an artistic investigation based on well-established work principles, which, in turn, encompass the types of relationships that can exist between objects: equilibrium, suspension, coupling, progressive resistance, transparency, negation, dependence, and volition. The materials selected by the artist dictate how to proceed when examining the physical state of the stone or glass. Their state becomes visible and defined through the interactions carried out in conjunction with the building materials, like cement and steel beams. These relationships, however, are constrained by the limits of the objects themselves and by their dependence on and struggle against gravity, while the spectator simultaneously produces and reflects on these relationships, based on consonance and dissonance.

## Realignment and Coexistence

Inside the studio, the materials interact with one another. They coexist with people and objects, and with the surrounding building. Its nature as a sculpture is latent given that objects either interact or spend long periods of time immobile, waiting to be mounted or put to use—or turned into public objects, in this case. The artist's work in studio offers various correlations between time, dynamics, and realignment, determined by the principles of Dávila's creations, consequently engendering new objects and new relationships. Objects are autonomous and can possess a certain level of volition when there is resistance between them. The studio serves as the center of operations, where we find an ecosystem of objects, some introduced directly by human intervention, others appearing in the state in which they were found.

## Poetics of the Fragment

Every piece on display is composed of remnants and fragments. Some of the elements are independent units onto themselves, or conversely, fully dependent and can only exist in relation to other objects. In a system made up of fragments, the objects together constitute sculptural compositions, and potentially, rock landscapes that talk about all things human, and simultaneously mountains, rocks and crags. The eyes follow the fragments to find invisible stories about each object. If we stop to observe what is present or absent, we are able to make out a system of relationships that sustains each of the objects and their symbolic meaning. They are both material and metaphor.



*Thinking Like a Mountain* is about standing before a block of concrete. It is the endless search for a beginning and an end to that which surrounds us. Not circularly, but as a presence in space, within our field of vision. The same occurs in our relationship with sculpture, a relationship that is at once close and distant. This interaction is subject to all types of interpretations in terms of perception and touch, since touch not only refers to what we can palpate, but what is registered within our field of perception and within our bodily intuition of the things that escape us. From this perspective, the phenomenological relationship that we have with a sculptural object is intricately connected to the relationship we have with the creation of a pictorial or sculptural space. As we are reminded by Juhani Pallasmaa, the Finnish architect who methodically researched the phenomenological approach in architecture, the hand thinks for itself. This means that the hand not only serves as a means of the sense of touch and but as a tool. Touch—together with its relationship with space—is what allows the world to incarnate the body, and simultaneously, what allows the body to mold the world. In Dávila's oeuvre, the spectator always appears in his or her phantasmatic and embodied presence, where the invisible threads of perception and desire are delicately interwoven.