

Marie Hélène Allain

Une pierre pour toi / A Stone for You

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Number 57, Fall 2001

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/9366ac>

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Publisher(s)

Le Centre de diffusion 3D

ISSN

0821-9222 (print)

1923-2551 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Cronin, R. (2001). Review of [Marie Hélène Allain: *Une pierre pour toi / A Stone for You*]. *Espace Sculpture*, (57), 38–39.

MARIE HÉLÈNE ALLAIN UNE PIERRE POUR TOI A Stone for You

RAY CRONIN

In an artistic career spanning 30 years, New Brunswick sculptor Marie Hélène Allain has built a reputation on rock-solid foundations. With over 20 solo shows, and more than 30 group exhibitions in Canada, Europe, Africa and the United States, Allain is one of the senior sculptors in Atlantic Canada. Her work is included in several public collections, including those of the Canada Council Art Bank and the Beaverbrook Art Gallery in Fredericton.

Yet, for all that activity, Allain remains only marginally known outside her native region. That's not uncommon, of course, especially for artists in the Maritimes and Newfoundland, and besides, Allain hasn't sought out that odd sort of fame bestowed by arbiters of taste in the art world's far-flung centres. Instead, she works in her studio in rural New Brunswick, fashioning a distinct world view in stone, wood and metal. She travels — to Italy, to France, to sculpture symposiums and to quarries across North America — but she never stays away too long from the culture — l'Acadie — and the landscape that sustains her art.¹

Any expectation that Allain would make art of a traditional devotional nature will be confounded by her sculpture. A high modernist, Allain makes abstract sculptures that deal with the landscape and our relationship to the world, rich with spirituality but stripped of any specific dogma. No illustrations, Allain's sculptures are things, pure and simple.

One can infer just what sort of thing her sculptures are from an exhibition currently on view at the New Brunswick Museum in Saint John. *Une pierre pour toi/A Stone for You* is an exhibition of twenty works, the oldest of which dates from 1993. It's a large show (too large in fact for the space granted, some editing was in order) and it is a diverse exhibition, incorporating sculptures that are stylistically and conceptually quite distinct one from another. What they share is an almost total eschewing of representation, a persistent poetics of material, and an evocation of the natural world.

Allain starts with the material, working out from stones towards metaphor. Her process is reminiscent of American poet William Carlos Williams' axiom: "No ideas but in things." That line is from the poem *A Sort of Song*, and this line precedes it: "through metaphor to reconcile the people and the stones."

In her artist statement Allain writes some-



thing with a similar hope:

Stone is the main vehicle for the meaning of each of my sculptures. The other adjacent materials always need stone for their raison d'être, and the stone itself often needs other materials to complete the meaning of a work, but in all cases it is the STONE that is the vital element in the meaning.

Allain uses stones as building blocks to create expressive, emotionally charged sculptures. In the twenty works that make up *Une pierre pour toi/A Stone for You*, Allain rarely engages in full-scale carving in the round. Instead she manipulates the surfaces of the stones — stones obviously chosen for exhibiting expressive potential, to heighten the anthropomorphic or other qualities she seeks. She often includes found objects — scraps of metal or wood, pebbles or other stones — incorporating them into overall compositions that often present the core stone as almost fluid. Rarely does she work with a single block of stone; instead, she combines several pieces, sometimes split from an original block, sometimes completely different stones, making an additive art out of the essentially reductive process of carving.

That seeming fluidity is perhaps most apparent in *Life Force*, a wood and limestone sculpture from 1996. Two stones sit one atop the other like two bones from a giant finger. The surfaces of the stones have been abraded, worn smooth as if by the action of water, and snaking through them are several wooden pieces, smooth tree branches scored with worm tracks. The massive solidity of the stones is undermined by the spiralling motion of the wood inserted through the rocks, forming a loose upward spiral, like a new shoot seeking out the light.

"Saxifrage is my flower that splits the rocks," Williams also wrote in *A Kind of Song*, and the metaphor of the green fuse that drives the flower (to paraphrase another poet, Dylan Thomas) as a kind of jackhammer is a familiar one for Allain. In the title work of the show, 1993's *A Stone for You*, she returns to the plant metaphor. In this work a large club-shaped piece of wood thrusts up out of two limestone rocks. The "club" end is uppermost and carved into it is a cup that holds another rock, the same brownish purple limestone of the base. These fit together such that the wood appears to have burst through the stone, splitting the rock. The rock in the wooden cup is rough on the top, but if the viewer lifts it up he will find that it is carved to fit snugly in the hollowed-out depression. It ends up looking like some sort of ancient tool, a hammer perhaps. The stones in this work have been polished, though not so much as to change the rough shape of the stone.

Allain rarely works with stone as merely material, as blocks, uncarved or otherwise. Instead these are rocks, shaped by chance and time, and she keeps much of that shape visible in her work. Her carving is often a smoothing, a certain caress of the material; she rarely forces it into a shape not already visible before she takes the hammer and chisel in her hands.

Of course, there are always exceptions to any rule. In *Mysterious Story* she does indeed

work with a block, albeit with what appears to be a broken piece originally destined for building material. This stone and metal work is constructed from four elements: three stones and one metal shaft. A gray granite block has been split and attached to the central metal bar in a kind of "z" shape, one block as the base, another halfway up the height of the sculpture. Topping it, about the size of a fist, a granite pebble hangs off a rusted metal rod that juts out from the central shaft. Allain uses a lot of oxidized iron in this show, deeply pitted metal that shows evidence of many months, if not years, outside. Much of it looks like the sort of castoff metal found on the scrap heaps of any farm — old pieces of machinery, axles, rods of various sorts, barrel hoops and more.

As the title hints, *Mysterious Story* has many readings. One could read it as a flower, for instance, the granite slabs as weighty leaves, the pebble a stamen. Perhaps it is a figure or a symbol in an unknown language. The artist doesn't pin it down, leaving the individual story-telling up to the viewer.

Another work that combines metal, large stones and pebbles is *Secrets of Time*, a work that dates from 1996. In this work a large, partially polished chunk of limestone sports three "growths" — iron shafts topped with flame-cut steel disks. There is an organic quality to the work, the inch-thick steel rods are bent and rusted, have taken on that almost leathery look of old metal. They look almost like giant toadstools, adding a whimsical quality to the sculpture.

The only monolithic stone work in the show is a piece called *To Dance its Freedom or After a Dream*. This large work (over 100 cm tall) is carved from a single piece of limestone, and it is the most anthropomorphic piece in the show. Torso-like, it has a central ridge running vertically like a spine. Allain's carving of it gives the sculpture a kind of twisting appearance, as if the piece is in constant movement. The "head" and "neck" of the torso never really resolve into a purely figurative form, resisting any representational fealty. As in *A Stone for You*, Allain has carved a sort of cup, offering here two rusted chain links. On opposing sides are attached two legs, iron pieces that look like they once adorned a cook stove. Allain has followed a series of flaws in the stone to create the "spinal column," and has left much of the rest of the surface as it was when taken from the original rock face.

Other works are less successful. *The Family*, a five-part sculpture of wood and stone, combines limestone shards and fully carved wooden bases. The bases continue shapes suggested by arrangements of the limestone bits, but the fact that they are painted to appear like sandstone undermines the material qualities of the pieces as a whole. In no other work does Allain paint the wood; she normally seems to revel in the aesthetic possibilities of the materials. Regrettably, she didn't trust the material in *The Family* to the extent that she did in works like *Life Force*, *To Mature*, or *A Stone for You*. Still others have a certain fussiness, an over-the-top quality that gets in the way of the material and the viewer's participation in the creation of meaning.

The most striking piece in the show is a large

limestone and granite assemblage called *Spectres of the Whale*. Three rough, wedge-shaped granite pieces sit in carved limestone bases, two lean against each other, the third stands alone. The 1.5-metre-tall granite wedges look like the flukes of a pair of whales, diving after breaching. Two more limestone pieces sit on the floor, serving to visually link the two parts of this sculpture. Allain has split the granite off to highlight the effect she was seeking, and the use of semi-polished limestone bases neatly sets the granite slabs off from the floor. Dynamic and engaging, *Spectres of the Whale* has a monumental quality that played off nicely against its own seeming randomness. Like a face on a cliff, the piece is the result of our imagination latching on to material and a careful hint, making meaning from the two.

Nature is a constant presence in *Une pierre pour toi/A Stone for You*, the site of the reconciliation "between people and the stones." Curator Peter Larocque writes of the show that: "Within the secret life of these stones, in the broadest sense, is the recurring theme of the intersection and interaction of human and natural forces." Allain asks the viewer to help make these works, depending on ready human willingness to make up stories about what we see. Metaphor is the means that we use to make sense of nature, to interact with it, to express what we can of the intersection of the world and ourselves. *Une pierre pour toi/A Stone for You* is a material meditation on reconciliation, that of people and stones, nature and humankind, being and nothing. Allain posits a world rife with meaning, a meaning created by an active apprehension of the world; in this world, new meaning creates new beings, what Allain calls in her statement "new life."

"For me, stone is a reminder of our distant roots, an evocation of the constancy, durability and patience of the silent work inherent in the most basic transformations," writes Allain. Where Williams' song was of reconciliation, Allain sings redemption songs, songs of new life and transformation. ■

Marie Hélène Allain
Une pierre pour toi/A Stone for You
The New Brunswick Museum
Saint John, NB
December 3, 2000–April 15, 2001

NOTE

1. Allain was born in the Acadian hamlet of Sainte-Marie-de-Kent, which lies north of Moncton on the eastern edge of the province. She still lives there, although it is more a case of a return than of never having left. Allain taught in the New Brunswick school system from 1959 until 1967, leaving teaching to go to Queen's University to begin her art training, a path which led on to Université de Moncton and Université du Québec à Montréal. She is also a nun, a member of *les Religieuses de Notre-Dame-du-Sacré-Cœur*. Allain followed a path similar to that of many women of her generation, joining religious orders and becoming teachers. For many young Acadians in rural New Brunswick in the late fifties, joining religious orders was hardly the exotic decision it may appear today. Thus, Allain lives and works in her home village, in a religious community that supports her art making.

MARIE HÉLÈNE ALLAIN,
Fort comme la vie - Life Force, 1996. Detail.
Limestone from Saint-Marc-des-Carrières,
wood. 161 x 41 x 46 cm.
Photo: Dolores Breau.