

The Federico Silva Contemporary Sculpture Museum

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Federico Silva, *Death of the Road*, 1986
(polychromatic Xaltocan stone),
Federico Silva Museum Collection. ▶

Photos by Mauricio Degollado



San Luis Potosí's Federico Silva Contemporary Sculpture Museum is only three years old. For those who still have not visited it, the photographs and historical documentation of the neo-classical building show a seigniorial space, very thoughtfully adapted to its new function by Potosí-born architect Fernando Torre (in the seventeenth century, the land housed a Jesuit hospital and monastery torn down in the twentieth century to make way for a public school).¹ The excellent adaptation manages to evoke the atmosphere of a sanctuary through large, high-ceilinged rooms with ochre marble floors that allow visitors to stroll freely by columns of rose-colored stone—how fortunate that no one divided it up with any free-standing dividers! Federico Silva's imposing, hieratical sculptures look magnificent, not only because their monumental scale makes them blend with all their expressive force with the building, but also because complex lighting makes a play of shadows creating the secret atmosphere of a catacomb. "Sculpture does not exist if architecture does not give it dimensions," says Federico Silva.

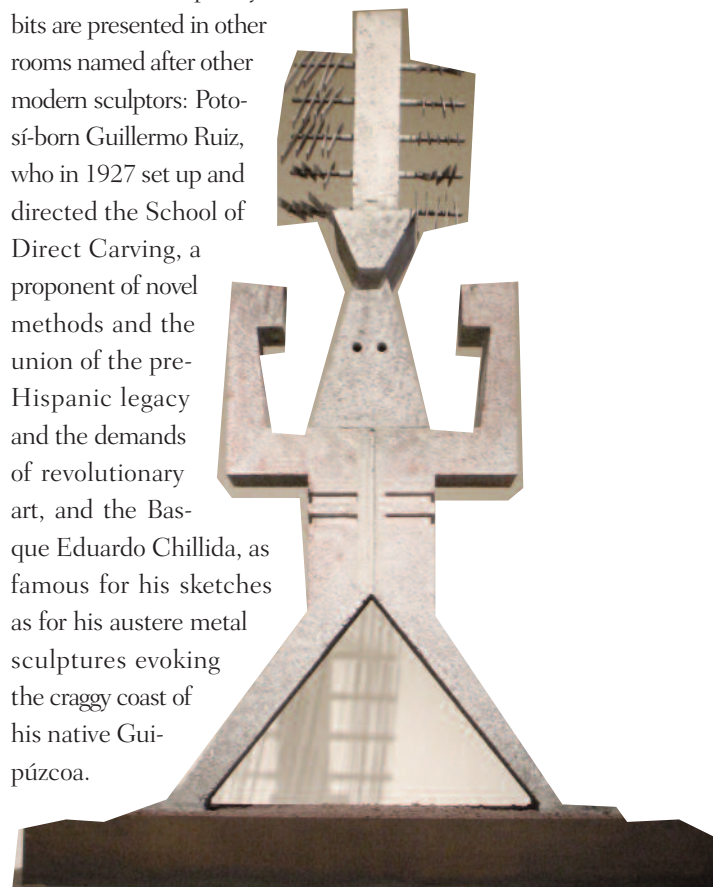
Now, why should he end up in San Luis Potosí if he was born in Mexico City's Tacuba district?² Everything seems to indicate that, aside from

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a political moment that favored the project, the symbolic value of its mines, industry and regional traditions influenced the decision. "The origin of the creative act," says Silva, "is to be found in the materials and in the belly of the earth,"³ even when that impulse responds to a social need, a humanist quest, an individual sensibility molded by collective thinking. According to Silva, sculpture is the telluric art *par excellence*, given that expression is achieved through earth, stone, metals and minerals—we could object that it is also done through plastic, industrial ready-made pieces and even organic and human waste, or with parts of the fiber of society, as Joseph Beuys says.

THE BUILDING AND THE COLLECTION

Two floors of the building itself and the San Juan de Dios Garden across from it are given over to Silva's work. Temporary exhibits are presented in other rooms named after other modern sculptors: Potosí-born Guillermo Ruiz, who in 1927 set up and directed the School of Direct Carving, a proponent of novel methods and the union of the pre-Hispanic legacy and the demands of revolutionary art, and the Basque Eduardo Chillida, as famous for his sketches as for his austere metal sculptures evoking the craggy coast of his native Guipúzcoa.



▲ Federico Silva, *The Lord of Lightning*, 1996 (Talmimilopa stone and iron), Federico Silva Museum Collection.



▲ The museum also houses temporary exhibits of work by other sculptors. Arno Avilés, *House of the Wind*, n.d. (jasper), Collection of Arno Avilés.

A beautiful panoramic terrace, an auditorium and areas for interactive educational services complete the facilities.

The collection, with museography by expert Jorge Guadarrama, offers anyone unfamiliar with Federico Silva's work a diversified panorama that starts in the early 1970s and includes the somewhat neglected early stages of his work.⁴ From that period come the long aluminum and wood mobiles (something between a bird and a supersonic plane); the beautiful geometric constructions of mirrors and wood; the toy-like structures with mechanisms and little motors... A slender, light, delicate aesthetic that, with the years and the use of stone, has given way to another caliber, to heavy volumes, to great altars, to imposing *alushes*, to unusual *tlaloques* and *chaneques*.⁵ In an interview with Angélica Abelleira in 1990, Federico said, "I admire Calder's work in large steel beams, but he lived in Detroit, the natural place to produce that kind of work. For me, stone is important because I associate it with weight. I don't like empty things. Also, stone has an internal pulse, and time is impressed upon it."⁶

We should not forget that pre-Columbian sculpture was made out of stone. This technique was decisive in Federico Silva's finding a road toward a formal language nourished mainly by the indigenous legacy, to whose ritual, ceremonial dimen-

sion he often adds a playful, humorous touch.

Curiously, nothing in the room dedicated to Silva's work alludes to his presence in the workers, union and anti-fascist struggle. He was assistant to David Alfaro Siqueiros when he painted the mural "New Democracy" in the Fine Arts Palace; the son-in-law of Vicente Lombardo Toledano; and friend of José Revueltas. He does "protest paintings" and murals with a political stance like the

one in the National Polytechnic Institute. But in him beats a genuine need to experiment, leading him to search for other things. A trip to Paris in the 1960s put him in touch with kinetic art, associated with physics and mechanics, optics and astronomy.⁷ Experimentation with art in movement would lead him to adopt volume. His first sculptures were "solar" objects with prisms, Fresnel lenses, mirrors, magnets, laser beams and bodies suspended in space; and mobiles that used solar and wind energy.

Beginning in the 1980s and the collective conception of the UNAM's Sculptural Space, a



Federico Silva, *Door to Paradise*, 2002 (polychromatic Tlalmimilolpa stone and iron), Federico Silva Museum Collection.

turning point in his career, for Silva, sculpture acquires another destiny, other values, another function: it is community-based, scientific, mystical and public, attributes that identify it with the art practiced by our forebears. In addition to a certain messianic accent, what is surprising are the references to the utopia of a total art that integrates with rigor and precision all the fields of knowledge, and —and this is very important— is concretely useful. For Silva, the artist fulfills a social function; he/she is a mix of worker and priest, of educator and mystic. “The artist cannot be amorphous, unexpected and surprising, distant or standoffish, insensitive and uninformed. He/she cannot stop being a kind of chronicler, like the essence and summary of his/her social, historical surroundings.”⁸ Preserving identity, translating an “essence” of what is Mexican into art —no matter how questionable the topic is— by look-



▲ Federico Silva, *Offering*, 2000 (Tlalmimilolpa stone), Federico Silva Museum Collection.

The confluence of cultural traits and aesthetic references marks the contribution of Federico Silva to modern Mexican sculpture.



The museum offers a diversified panorama of Federico Silva’s work.

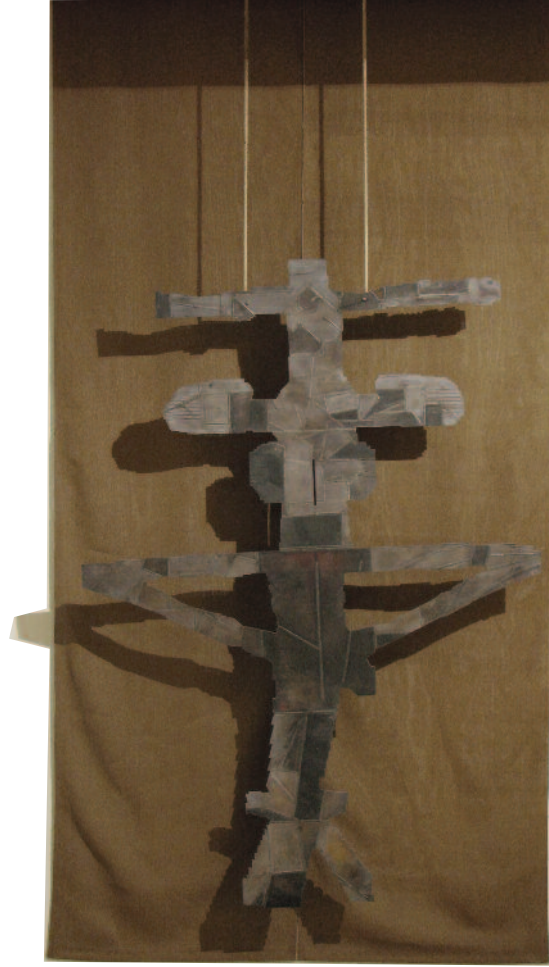
ing into our most ancient roots are priorities in Silva’s work.⁹ Through common traits of style and conception (the play of volumes, the simplification of form, cut-down figures, the use of flat, overlapping colors), building a bridge between the geometrical-abstract language developed by an entire generation of sculptors (his generation, that of the defenders of monumental geometric sculpture, the same creators of the UNAM’s Sculptural Space, Manuel Felguérez, Mathias Goeritz, Helen Escobedo, Sebastián, Hersúa), and the formal architecture and sculpture of ancient Mexico: it is this confluence of cultural traits and aesthetic references that marks the contribution of Federico Silva to modern Mexican sculpture.

Federico Silva trembles to think that his museum could become a mausoleum. This explains that in his role as “academic advisor and consultant,” he is aware of the need to develop a program of temporary exhibits of other colleagues (all kinds:

dead, living, established, up-and-coming, and from Latin America). The greatest success was last year's retrospective dedicated to Germán Cueto, an avant-garde innovator unlike any other in post-revolutionary Mexico, but who had been forgotten since his death in 1975. The shows of work by Juan Soriano, Manuel Felguéz, Gunther Gerzso and Vicente Rojo were more visible. In any case, all together they seem to be good box-office: they attract an average of 20,000 visitors a year.

UNIQUE IN MEXICO

The Federico Silva Museum is not the first to be founded based on the collection of a single artist (Tamayo and Cuevas have theirs in Mexico City; Felguéz in Zacatecas; and Toledo in Oaxaca). But there is no other museum dedicated exclusively to sculpture, making it the only one of its kind in Mexico. From the start, fortunate initia-



▲ Federico Silva, *Lord of the Thorns*, 2003 (iron plate), Federico Silva Museum Collection.



▲ Federico Silva, *Stela*, 1985 (Xaltocan stone), Federico Silva Museum Collection.

OTHER SERVICES

The museum offers courses, workshops and lectures for the general public and specialized groups. After viewing the exhibition, visitors can take a workshop where they apply what they have learned and can relive the experience by making a sculpture, putting together puzzles, etc. The museum also offers courses about pre-Hispanic cultures and contemporary sculpture, among other topics.

The museum's educational services aim to develop the public's appreciation of contemporary sculpture. Among students, it seeks to develop creative capacity through sculpting.

Extension activities mainly aim to foster a new attitude that will allow the visitor to enjoy the museum's spaces, Federico Silva's work and the temporary exhibits. The museum also sponsors student visits, student practice sessions and community service; didactic concerts; children's dance and theater performances; and an interactive program for children that gives them virtual contact with the sculptures that is both fun and pedagogical.

tives have characterized it, like the one that shows a real vocation for decentralization. “From the metaphorical point of view,” observed Regina Boels-terly the museum’s director, at its inauguration, “it can be considered a barrier to the culture from the north, meaning the United States.” In addition, culturally and socially, the Federico Silva Museum is a detonator: it takes up the standard of Potosí tradition (and even its lineage) in the field of artistic promotion, assuming the vocat~~M~~if disseminating contemporary visual arts.

NOTES

- ¹ See *Museo Federico Silva. Escultura contemporánea* (San Luis Potosí: Patronato del Museo Federico Silva, 2005).
- ² For information about the life of Federico Silva, see his best book: *México por Tacuba. Pasajes autobiográficos*, Memorias mexicanas Collection (Mexico City: Conaculta, 2000). It is an intimate portrait and chronicle of a time that reads like a novel. Another interesting source is his speech at his induction into the Academy of Arts in 1992.
- ³ “What does man seek in the belly of the earth, in volcanoes, mountains and mines? One: basic materials for daily subsistence; and two: elements to give symbolic value to in order to build a religious, cultural or metaphysical context. Stone, for example, reminds us to the notion of cohesion, the non-perishable and the eternal. At the same time, identifying

it with the mountains, trees and forests, it represents the cosmos as a whole. In primitive symbolism, stones can even give birth; they have the power to give life. The cornerstone of a sacred building is the rock on which the universe is founded, the cornerstone of the earth and the source of the water of life, which prevails over all subterranean powers. Unpolished stone is the *prima materia*, the feminine, and is associated with the masculine symbols of the chisel and all the cutting tools used to shape it”. Taken from a conversation of the author with the artist.

- ⁴ Initially, Federico Silva freely loaned his work to the museum for 20 years. However, in March 2006, it was legally donated to the people of San Luis Potosí.
- ⁵ *Alushes* are Mayan fairies who protect mountains and crops. In Náhuatl cosmogony, *tlaloques* are the four helpers of Tláloc, the god of rain; they represent the clouds and are situated at each of the four points of the compass. The struggle among them brings rain and thunder. On the coast of the Gulf of Mexico, *chaneques* are mischievous spirits or fairies. [Editor’s Note.]
- ⁶ *La Jornada* (Mexico City).
- ⁷ It was no great extravagance to become a kinetic artist in the 1960s: the last word in artistic quests—remember Vasarely’s enormous success—integrated new principles like time and mutation into object art, and combined a taste for the artifact, modulation of natural or electric light, a little engineering and very seductive visual effects. In addition, a whole group of abstract-geometric sculptors from Latin America (Carlos Cruz Diez, Jesús Rafael Soto and Julio LeParc, among others) had just migrated to Paris to join their ranks.
- ⁸ Adriana Moncada, “En este siglo, conquista del pensamiento abstracto en artes plásticas,” *Unomásuno* (Mexico City), December 13, 1991.
- ⁹ In one of his recent projects, Silva painted 5,000 square meters of a cave at the Huites, Sonora dam, with reminiscences of ancient cave paintings of Baja California to, as he said, “mark it with a historical continuity that constitutes

Museo Federico Silva Escultura Contemporánea

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Federico Silva, *Bat*, 1986 (stone), left. *Bat II*, 2000 (polychromatic iron), right. Federico Silva Museum Collection.