

ALEXANDRA AKTORIES VENERATING WATER

Magali Tercero*



▲ *Liquid Obsidian.*



▲ *Reaching the Limit* (clay and glaze).

The sound of water, of unexpected smoothness and almost musical chords, has impregnated the talk with Alexandra Aktories. As I listen to the recording, a two-hour interview with this artist of water, as I think about it while I write, I begin to feel moved. I don't know why. Is it the criss-crossed sounds of the water coming from the many pieces of ceramics that inhabit her studio? Is it the forms —almost always curved— of her sculptures with water? At a certain point, Aktories goes to get some tea, and I stay behind, immersed in a silence crossed solely by this sound poem she has built from a precise, almost scientific intelligence. She has lived a certain area of her existence amidst numbers and architectural projections of buildings near the sea. And I would venture to say that even with the memory of water in her ears, this has led her to the magnificent task of sculpting ceramic containers for water.

“The idea was framing a trickle of water, something as minimalist as a self-contained trickle of water,” she says about her piece *Free Fall*. A concept that comes from India, *asana*, is essential to Aktories. To her, this is not a yoga pose, but a platform for the deities. In India, each deity is placed on an *asana* so that he or she does not touch the ground.

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Photos by Juan Nader Sayún.

“I think of art in water like someone who thinks about mobiles: Alexander Calder, for example, whose work retraced the traditional paradigms of static visual forms. Here, we were dealing with objects in movement, works that existed in time. While my sculptures don't have the same kind of movement as Calder's, activated by the air, they do contain movement and a feeling of temporality. They are pieces that require time and invite the viewer to contemplation: their apparent stationary nature falls apart when you are calm enough to see how the form submits itself to the course of the water.”



▲ *Eruption from the Depths*.



▲ Detail of *Road to the Heart*.

“I have a strong propensity toward the smooth, the soft, the round; simple, clear lines; that’s why I spend so much time on the process of ‘integrating’ the form (smoothing out the material). Here the hours go by imperceptibly and concentrating on the sense of touch makes it so that the only thing that exists is the present. Perhaps that’s why this is one of the moments of greatest enjoyment for me.”

Her sculptures —*Vigil, Water: The Gentle Breeze from Its Top, Emerge and Surprise*, to mention a few— give water its *asana*: “You venerate it; you love it. This piece is a platform for honoring a trickle of water.” Her words are exciting. Alexandra Aktories reveres nature with absolute dedication. She says simply, “I offer the sculpture to the water, and it contributes the magic. I feel this very profoundly. The sculptures are also an *asana* for venerating the water.” There’s something very spiritual about it.

Aktories says that she does ceramics to be able to work with water. From a very young age, she learned to make useful ceramics with her teacher Nemesio Hernández when she was studying philosophy at the National Autonomous University of Mexico. Later, she began to work with wood, a material she considers has noble qualities. She abandoned ceramics for many years until an intuition and a desire, at a time when she was working intensely with wood, led her to change directions: “It



▲ *Road to the Heart* (clay and glaze).

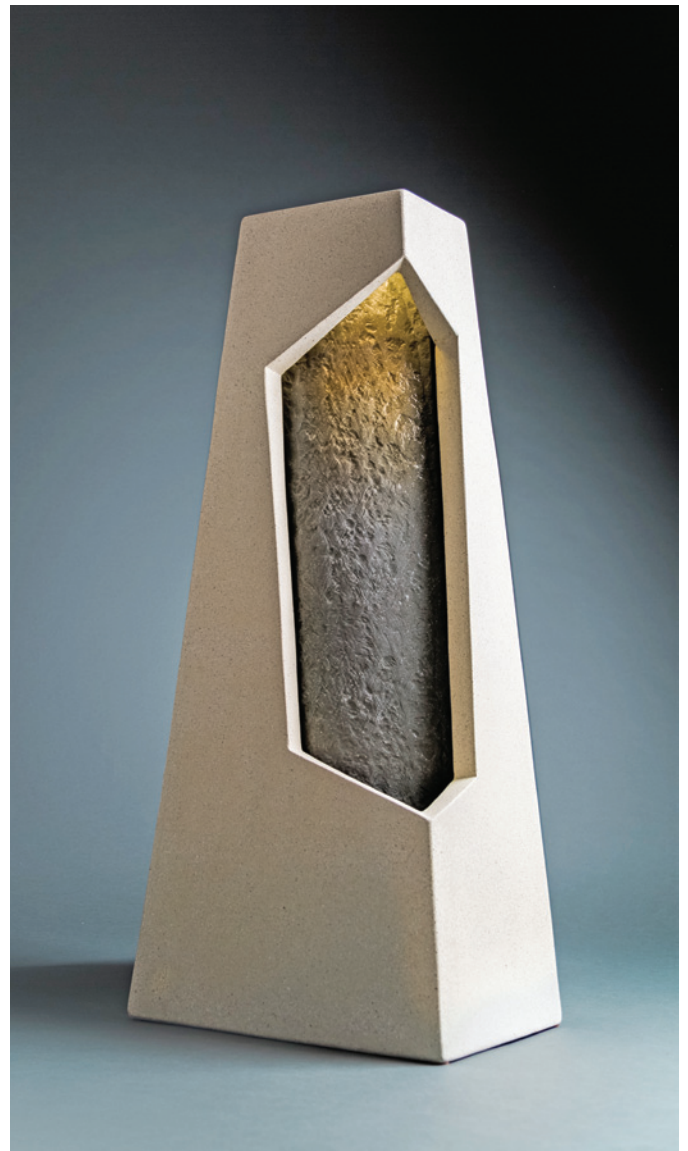


▲ *Emerge and Surprise* (clay, glaze, and stone).

was a compulsion. I said I want to do something with water; I want the water to cover the pieces.” And so, after thinking and thinking about water’s volumes and how it falls, she returned to ceramics. To be able to do something with water, she said, “I betrayed wood.” The water guided her because it required a container that wood could not offer. The artist had never worked with water, but she observed how it has different ways of falling and moving. “It’s like this little stream,” she explains, moving a piece. The sound changes according to the position. It is instantly transformed and produces fast-flowing music.

The interview takes place in her two workshops. One, tiny and perfectly organized, is in the Nápoles neighborhood where she is in residence; the second has been set up in her own home. After showing the pieces underway in the first atelier, Aktories goes to the other, spacious and bright, with a view of the garden. The works are placed so as to be heard, to manage the light, so their creator can study whether they are producing the effect she sought. “The first thing that occurred to me was to create stones out of clay. The process of conceiving of things until you make it in clay is very interesting.” In the face of this kind of concert of sounds, I ask her if she

“I very much like the idea that I’m making a ‘co-production.’ I don’t work alone. I have a partner. While the water cannot be present as I’m building the piece, every part of it is conceived to hold it and offer it the space so it can expand and play.”



▲ *Internal Strength* (ceramics, stone, and glaze).

“In this art, the kiln is an implacable critic; it judges any ill-considered technical move: too heavy, too humid, lack of union, extensions that are too wide; all that can open up a crack that’s unacceptable because water takes every opportunity to filter through.”



▲ *Refuge and Resonance* (clay, glaze, and stone).



▲ *Crossing the Mind Sideways*.

has considered making sound art. The answer is a joyful “yes,” tempered by the awareness that she does not yet feel prepared to do it.

The water can fall, it can gush, and then it does something that this writer had never imagined: it clings to the material. “You think that it’s going to gush, but it doesn’t. It slides on the surfaces clinging to them.” The process includes practice: this is the most mundane part. All water in movement needs a pump. The sculptor works with the golden ratio: “How would water move backwards? From where to where would it fall? Can it slide?” Other questions are practical: How do I ensure that the wire from the pump that requires electricity is not seen? She called the inner workings a cable trap: “It’s a little crazy of me to want everything to be invisible, it has to be seamless..” On the outside, her pieces are minimalist, as can be seen in the illustrations for this article, poetically clean-cut. On the inside, they are a tiny reflection of the industrial and architectural worlds. Form and function. Architects who have access to her work often ask if she is an architect by training. This amuses her. But there is some truth to it because every architect works the exterior of his/her buildings thinking of their function, making sure that everything imagined is expressed from the inside out.

Amidst the joy in this almost aquatic space (due to its sounds), a kind of illusion of the senses cre-

ated by the music of the water, more questions emerge: Is Aktories inspired by Arab fountains, by Japanese culture, or perhaps in the work by Kyoto Ota, a Japanese artist who has lived in Mexico for the last 40 years? I tell her about a piece of his that “froze itself” in a museum in the 1990s. Ota works in “inhabitable sculptures,” so called because the strips of wood allow light, air, and human beings themselves to move through them. As far as she knows, nobody she knows does anything similar.

She has recently begun to exhibit. For several years, the pleasure was in creating the pieces. Suddenly she felt the need to show them. That’s why she has had exhibitions. The most recent was “Tactile Water,” and she is preparing another now. “Water rules me,” she repeats. Right now, she’s repairing a piece owned by an architect. That possibility always exists because the subtle engineering of this work makes it possible. There are also curtains of water, whirlpools, textures that change the water’s course. I cannot resist the impulse to touch a slender, minimal waterfall that emerges from a piece with the smoothness of a stone polished by the sea. Alexandra Aktories likes my gesture. It’s about that, too. **MM**



▲ *Khufu* (clay and brass).

“I feel honored to work with an element as magical as water; in addition to purifying in the symbolic sense, water also has the properties of refreshing and fertilizing.”

▼ *Diluted Uprisings*.

