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PILAR OVALLE

Place in Nature/ Nature in Place

BY JOHN K. GRANDE

Pilar Ovalle has developed a personal language of sculpture based on the tactile, multi-dimensional experience of wood as a medium. She is part of a young generation of Chilean sculptors who are now beginning to emerge on the international scene. Born in Santiago in 1970, Ovalle, who studied fine art at the Instituto de Arte Contemporaneo de Santiago, has recently shown her work at SculptureSite Gallery in San Francisco, the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes in Santiago, and the Oscar Niemeyer Museum in Curitiba, Brazil.

Her sculptures reference the ancient South American tradition of weaving, notably among the Mapuche of Chile, who used llama or guanaco wool until the Spanish arrived, then sheep's wool. Ovalle uses a less mutable material, wood, which she gathers along lake shores and in forests. The weathering of the found wood becomes part of the language of her sculpture and remains a presence in the final work. Ovalle treats wood gathering as a ritual, one that provides a context as well as source material for her pieces. Her recent show in Santiago, "Wenu Mamüll, Maderas de Cielo" ("Skywood"), included some works derived from tree forms and others with human and tree forms intertwined into anthropomorphic hybrids that suggest an identification with ancient myth. The sometimes fractured, sometimes undulating forms manifest a vernacular quality emblematic of their natural language. As in primitive art, these sculptures link nature and the ontological processes of life. Carved sections connect directly to wilder, untamed passages, suggesting a metaphorical journey.

María José Riveros Valle has referred to Ovalle's works as "portraits of nature." In *Tree 8* (2005), a tree shape emerges from within the carved and hollowed trunk of a tree, and in *Cabeza 6* (2004), the raw edges of nature merge with smooth, designed surfaces, the weathered found pieces seamlessly conjoined with painstakingly carved and sanded sections to build a dialogue on our place in nature. Like the Innu stone sculptor Lucy

Above: *Victoria*, 2007. Wood, 260 x .9 x .45 cm. Above, right: *Conexion al Cosmos*, 2006. Mixed woods, 56 x 32 x 22 in.

Tasseor Tutsweetok, who only partially works her stone, leaving some untouched, Ovalle lets the wood have its own voice, thereby including elements beyond the art itself.

Ovalle's process orchestrates found materials, but it also requires that she recognize what is already there, inherent in each piece of wood. The weathering, for instance, expresses unquantifiable spans of time. The sculptures are animated by Ovalle's vitality and by the sense that the act of making could carry a sacred message within its theatrical progression from conception to realization. In *Nido Oruga*, for instance, tiny wooden pegs join undulating, curvilinear, and smooth sections into an interwoven tangle that activates the imagination with its various grains, formal complexity, and the legacy of life still discernible in the forms.

We can readily see how Ovalle works, cutting, bending, and sanding. Some of the effects are akin to weaving, others to carving. We sense a focus on the sensual, on the animistic force of the ciruelillo, alerce, and raulí woods. Chilean sculptors went through a phase of working with organic materials, particularly wood, in a way that resembles the approach to stone shared by Hepworth, Moore, and even Brancusi. Works by Marcela Correa, Paola Vezzani, Marcela Romagnoli, Navarro, Jessica Torres, and Alejandra Ruddoff evidence a raw, uncut sense of nature's immediacy. The language engages nature as a vital force, always with a suggestion of figuration. Wood becomes the medium for transforming metaphorical and allegorical memories, even stories, but any narrative remains intangible, with an open-endedness suggestive of nature itself.

In Ovalle's SculptureSite show, a work from the "Boat" series (2005) floated in space, its carved and found wood elements existing as two layers in tandem. The boats, metaphors for life's journey, have stout, tight forms. A Nike-like sculpture made from roots, also on view in San Francisco, evokes the heroic, winged allegorical figures that often accompany war memorials or historical monuments. But Ovalle's figure is more mythical than historical, carrying a message about nature as a source of the spirit. Describing the transformative quality of her sculpture, Chilean writer Mario Fonseca states, "Upon reaching the other side, the first root becomes an angel. It has crossed the Earth; came down from the never-ending tree and penetrated the organic layer. Here it recovered strength and then continued across the fire of the nucleus, passing through transformed into a bare thread of cap, from here to finally ascend, with a last effort, to give birth to her wings."

Ovalle follows her own course, one that involves our place in a nature neither romanticized nor dramatized—nature as it is but with a human twist. Change is manifest in the texture and weathering, the contrasts between natural and artist-rendered forms. Ovalle works wood with a sensitivity to the medium, developing a dialogue about our relation to nature. The magic that emerges is naturally fluid, a reflection of nature's inherent diversity and procreative energy. Combined with milled, geometric elements, these untouched elements contribute to an interwoven reflection on the process of working

in wood. As Ovalle has commented: "As a Chilean sculptor working with wood from our native forests, I regard my work as inspired by nature as a whole in its struggle with un-natural progress as a whole. I offer a way of integrating both original matter and elaborated matter, aiming at a new harmony. In this sense, my work is of this time."

Combining the natural and the worked reverses the order of manufacture, and in so doing, makes us all the more aware of how nature reproduces itself, producing forms more diverse than those of manufactured products. Ovalle's sculptures become allegorical, but only in so much as they reference a culture still in tune with nature. Given the drive of artists toward the imagistic, filmic, and all things video, Ovalle offers an alternative direction for contemporary sculpture.

John K. Grande's most recent book is Dialogues in Diversity: Art from Marginal to Mainstream (Pari Publishing).

Clockwise from right: *Arbol Magico*, 2006. Raulí wood and willow twigs, 134 x 31.5 x 31.5 in. *Con Alas*, 2006. Mixed woods and found driftwood, 84 x 35 x 34 in. *Cabeza Encarnada*, 2006. Mixed woods and twigs, 86 x 70 x 145 cm.

