



Between Earth and Sky

Anita Glesta

BY CAROL SCHWARZMAN

One could say that the history of humankind has unfolded between earth and sky, because sitting, standing, lying down—moving or static—the human body takes up space; it informs and activates any environment, physically as well as socially and spiritually. The quality of that experience, how it functions, and the story behind it are of primary concern in Anita Glesta’s work. She is interested in the scale of the human body in relation to both natural and cultural landscapes, the need for intimacy and the land, and the notion that a public presence of human form denotes community, serving as temporal continuity and the source of storytelling. Her projects presuppose that such proto-narratives can inspire viewers to interact with issues of authenticity, awareness, denial, and, ultimately, integrity. For Glesta, “being human in the landscape” and the body’s rhythm on any path it might follow initiate a need to establish interactions with provocative environments.

Census, 2008. Ceramic tile, pavers, and earth, 7-acre site. Aerial view and 2 details of work at the Federal Census Bureau Building, Suitland, MD.





Bed, Bath, Bird, 1998. Recycled bricks, view of work at Sydney Park, Sydney, Australia.

employing irony as a means of reconciling extremes. As the novelist and poet Rodney Hall has commented, at the time of invasion, Europeans and Aboriginals functioned at “opposite poles of cultural development...the energetic and ruthlessly courageous Europeans, driven by the clock and notions of progress...and acquisition,” confronted an Aboriginal culture “based around vast languages committed to memory and the ceremonial observations of a metaphysical system derived from the prevalence of spirits animating every aspect of land and air in a timeless continuum.” While Glesta may play with aspects of irony, her real aim is to support Hall’s challenge to the “idea that one can only accept the stories one tells about oneself.”

Yurong Water Gardens, commissioned by the Sydney City Council and built in downtown Sydney in 2000, offers further inducement to enter into a relationship with the land. A site-specific piece that functions, like *Bed, Bath, Bird*, as a conduit joining sky, body, and ground, the metaphor here refers to the Yurong Creek that once flowed naturally on the site. Transformed into a puzzle-like course, it leads gently down a hill, transitioning from the natural to the cultural. Giant blocks of sandstone—again evoking the

Yurong Water Gardens, 2000. Sandstone and water, 2 views of 3-acre site in Sydney, Australia.

It is impossible to discuss Glesta’s inquiry without taking into consideration the fact that she has called three continents home during the course of her life. Born in New York City, she spent part of her teenage years in Spain, living outside of Bilbao during the 1970s. She has since lived, worked, and taught within the New York art community. From 1994 to 1999, she lived in Sydney, Australia. During this time, in both New York and Sydney, her sculptural interventions moved out of the gallery and into the urban and suburban outdoors. Differing cultural perceptions and relationships to nature began to emerge as she built interventions in diverse landscapes within vastly different countries.

In 1998, she created *Bed, Bath, Bird* in Sydney Park, adjacent to the site of an abandoned brick kiln. Kilns were among the first and longest-lasting edifices con-

structed within any new European settlement. In Australia, convicts manned the kilns and made the bricks. While recognizing the convict experience, Glesta’s sculpture, in its Minimalist simplicity, expands its range to sum up a clash of belief systems about the land and nature.

Consisting of three dug-out, brick-lined furrows scaled to imply the human body, *Bed, Bath, Bird*’s sensual, cobbled surfaces read as fleshy, soft, and beckoning: an invitation to experience according to the viewer’s fancy—to lie down and feel the earth (however mediated by manmade materials), to acknowledge the world and its non-human inhabitants, or perhaps ironically to “take the mickey out of” the idea of washing away any problems that Europeans may have introduced into the order of things in this *terra nullius*. Australians of all backgrounds are no strangers to



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ancient landscape, as well as the convict history of quarrying and building—act as monolithic denizens of a liminal world hovering between spirit and verifiable, solid corporeality, allowing the viewer to cross back and forth. This spiritual garden references a host of creation myths—from the Old Testament Eden to the indigenous Australian Dreamtime. Glesta purposefully used the Eora name “Yurong,” which is not only the creek’s name in the language of the local tribe, but also a place name in contemporary Sydney. Such amalgamations and fusions of opposites stem from Glesta’s struggle to synergize conflicting narratives. In *Yurong Water Gardens*, which is subtitled *The Source*, she practices within an austere, Zen-like visual canon: her choice and use of materials express connections to a collective origin much older than storytelling.

In more recent works, Glesta has allied the creation of place, a constant focal point of her explorations, with specific historical events, as well as an increasingly fluid projection of self and personality. The sense that she has taken the voyage herself establishes authenticity—her indoor and outdoor installations are not mere tableaux or backdrops; instead, they are functioning environments rich with encouragement to explore and experience multiple readings.

Glesta moved back to Manhattan a year before 9/11. *Pedazos (In Pieces)* (2003) marked her response to that day’s events. Built in the open-air courtyard of Brooklyn’s Black and White Gallery, *Pedazos* consisted mainly of a substratum formed by several hundred uniquely cast concrete tablets, strewn on the ground and accompanied by three ramps, each leading skyward. The uneven paving equivocated between wholeness and disintegration, and because the tablets were not stabilized by mortar, they shifted and crunched suggestively underfoot. Lament resin ovoids were interspersed among the tablets, some stained red, some containing wriggling threads. Glesta has spoken about this installation in terms of dualities and

Pedazos, 2003. Cast concrete, resin, and mixed media, installation view and detail.

HERB GINGOLD





Gernika/Guernica: Desde el Cielo, Hasta el Fondo (Hell Castings from Heaven), 2007. Motion-activated sound sculptures, fabricated steel, cast bronze, multi-channel video installation, and mixed media. Views of work at White Box, NY, and Chase Manhattan Plaza, NY.

dialectic. First there is a meeting of material opposites: the concrete is inert, non-reflective, and opaque, while the cast, pigmented resin is transparent and visually active. Another confrontation occurs between the literal and the abstract, again, through the choice and use of materials. Much like Eva Hesse, with her process-oriented, material-based mode of working, Glesta approaches

materials as things in themselves and investigates the properties and syntax of each substance “to seek answers from the material itself.” She evokes Hesse’s dramatic sense of the body and its frailty through the repetitive resin shapes. But unlike Hesse, who hid any allusion to time within the process of making, Glesta embraces the narrative implications of her created situations and hints at their redemptive value. Ascending the furthest ramp in *Pedazos*, participants could view the sky through a clear resin slab inlaid with feathers and blood. Thus, the “utopian aspects of art” are fulfilled, and art’s “often-evoked ‘autonomy’ ...remains a utopia while it informs the desire to experientially visualize the *unio mystica* of opposites in space.”

Gernika/Guernica: Desde el Cielo, Hasta el Fondo (Hell Castings from Heaven) (2007) continues the themes of destruction, loss, and resurrection, sifting them through metaphor and *cinéma vérité* to consider similarities of experience that, across time, inform and make up history. First presented as a multimedia installation at White Box in Chelsea—with an outdoor component at Chase Manhattan Plaza curated by the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council—*Gernika* brings together video, fabricated sculptural elements, text, and sound. In creating a multi-sensory, theatrical assemblage without proscenium, Glesta conflates the 1937 bombing of the Basque town of Gernika with her own experience of 9/11. *Gernika* debuted in April 2007—concurrent with the 70th anniversary of the town’s destruction by the Nazis. Two

months later, in June 2007, Glesta’s outdoor installation of eight bronze sculptures resembling 1930s box radios, topped with body parts or forms echoing Picasso’s *Guernica*, was transmitting movement-activated storytelling from survivors of the bombing in Spain. The obliteration of life in the town of Gernika was retold within a five-minute walk of where the Twin Towers once stood. Subsequent iterations of the work have been installed at the National Museum of Anthropology and Art in La Paz, Bolivia, and at the Instituto Cervantes in Belgrade, where they found new resonances; in the future, *Gernika* is scheduled to make appearances in Argentina, Sydney, and Spain.

Originally, Glesta began this project in an effort to investigate her personal response to 9/11. While considering how to make art best suited to memorializing tragedy, she felt compelled to send an e-mail to <www.gernika.com>. The following day, she received a response from Maria Oinaguren, director of the Remembering Gernika Peace Research Centre, a Basque organization committed to building peace proposals worldwide. At Oinaguren’s behest, Glesta traveled to Spain more than 20 times over a period of five years to interview survivors on camera as they told their stories.

A comparison can be made between Glesta’s *Gernika* and Picasso’s *Guernica*: each work, however embedded within the art practice of its day, employs movement and simultaneity as persuasive formal qualities. And while *Guernica* conveys chaos—powerfully silent and physically frozen—it remains to this day the icon used to symbolize the atrocities of war. For this reason, Glesta includes a small reproduction of Picasso’s painting in *Gernika*, and she has used it as a talking point during survivor interviews. By using synchronous sources of image and sound, Glesta’s *Gernika* thrusts the viewer into an assembled virtual reality of “fact” and “fiction.” (She recalls that during the opening, viewers did not walk through the projected video river of blood and floating paper on the floor, jumping over it instead.) In *Gernika*, 75 minutes of projected video footage of survivor interviews

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spoken in Spanish, with English subtitles, present each survivor’s memory as a “sacred truth”—and Glesta refers to their stories as such in her catalogue essay. Both Glesta and Picasso chose to balance truth and strategic formal illusion to reach an outcome that blasts us with the value of our delicate hold on a relatively tranquil present. This does not so much offer a taste of *schadenfreude* as it registers the uncomfortable—yet fruitful—complexities of making and viewing serious art that partakes of the real world.

Census was commissioned in 2003 by the GSA Art in Architecture Program and completed last year on the grounds of the new Federal Census Building near Washington, DC. Glesta began the project with an inquiry into the role played by numbers and counting in systematizing the growth of civilizations—and their concomitant requirements to organize, define, and limit. Georges Ifrah’s book *The Universal History of Numbers* inspired her to transform numerals from abstract representations back into their “original function as a system to promote, stimulate, and/or record human interaction.” With the assistance of Turf Landscape Architects and artist Noel Copeland, Glesta created a series of occupiable forms and spaces along a path called the Census Walk. Oversized integers built of bricks, stretching in, out, and up from the walk, become meeting places for people to sit and chat. Illustrated, tiled slabs nestle among green plantings and grass. These grids depict screen-printed photographs of hundreds of faceless, nameless, generic human figures dressed in T-shirts and jeans, arms akimbo, confronting the viewer. The figures are overprinted with integers running endlessly, repetitively, from 0 to 9. A brick bench in the shape of the numeral 1 sits between two halves of an earthwork referencing Native American burial mounds. On each earthen hemisphere, hand-painted tiles chart numerals from Native American corporeal, or hand-based, numerical systems. Arabic, Chinese, and other numerical systems cover walls throughout the walk. The synthesis of image, language, and text is graphic and immediate in its ability to communicate diversity.

ATINA CITRUC

Expulsion, 2009. 2 views of multi-channel video installation.

Although the process of census-taking can be traced back to the Romans, here it’s Walt Whitman who springs to mind, with his celebratory cataloguing of types, nationalities, emotions, and responses to American multiplicities: “Of every hew and caste am I, of every rank and religion, / A farmer, mechanic, artist, gentlemen, sailor, quaker, / Prisoner, fancy-man, rowdy, lawyer, physician, priest.” As in Whitman’s poetry, an element of dissent runs through *Census*: the core of its non-compliance reclaims the truly messy hodgepodge that is American history and places it directly in view of a hefty bureaucratic juggernaut. In *Census*, Glesta seizes on the well-meaning intentions of public art and clarifies them into active participation in the Commons, or the Village Green. The right to peaceable assembly, she implies, applies as much to a lunch-time schmooze as it does to a community’s responsibility to discuss who it is and where it is headed. In a post-Whitman world, Glesta acknowledges the potential of stagnation and apathy in huge populations. Ultimately, her stoic and playful approach encourages viewers to sit and convene in conversation and people-watching, along the same lines as Whitman’s peripatetic observations. The generosity of spirit shared by the 19th-century poet and the 21st-century artist is transcendental, unbound by any particular era or place, and rooted in the knowledge found in nature, spirit, and intuition.

Most recently, during a residency in the fall of 2008 at the Liguria Study Center in Bogliasco, Italy, Glesta began work on a series of video projects based on Masaccio’s *Expulsion from the Garden of Eden* in the Brancacci Chapel. Her triptych-style installation (which was shown at Five Myles Gallery in Brooklyn earlier this year and travels to the Museum of Contemporary Art Villa Croce in Genoa in 2010) features performances by dancer/choreographer Vanessa Justice and lush imagery, in which oranges become forbidden fruit and artichokes appear as violently moving snakes. The fluidity of video—and its basis in painting and sculpture—allows for a numinous



visual poetry that transforms architectural space into a dialogue linking viewer, time, and place, connecting the Old Testament, early Renaissance, and today. *Expulsion*’s elegiac, rhythmic recording of Eden’s delights and the body’s central role in the story of lost paradise may be an attempt to find a balance between despair and hope—it is certainly a reckoning with nature.

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