

Observations from many angles: an interview with Attila Mata

by Jennifer Vignone

A piece of sculpture is a unique form of visual expression. Its three-dimensional presence requires the viewer to move around it to consider its various aspects — the way it fills the space. It is like encountering a person where you choose, or are drawn to, engagement. Sculptors think, plan and create knowing their finished work has to trigger that engagement with the observer, or the piece will simply be an obstacle in their way.

Attila Mata has had a long career as a sculptor. Mata was born in 1953, in Eger, the second largest city in northern Hungary. Having been drawn to sculpture by 1972, Mata began formal studies at the University of Fine Arts Hungary in 1977. His interest stirred from a feeling of belonging — finding the right “calling” or medium — and having it recognized by others. Mata explains:

“As a young man I was spending the compulsory military service in Hungary in 1972-1973. Being rebellious by nature, I got a lot of punishments. Locked up in the cell, I had plenty of time to think and suddenly, during meditation, all became clear. It was like an enlightenment. I realized that human will has no boundaries, is capable of everything if you are free...if you are not blocked. I remembered always being the best in sculpture. Most of the time my teachers praised me and I was able to achieve the best results with the least effort in this art form. So, I made a resolution ‘After finishing military service I will do my best to be a sculptor’. When I finally left the barracks after two years my first thought was ‘I vow I will put all efforts into becoming a sculptor’.

Mata believes in examining a theme and by creating variants to explore its potential. This, in part, comes from his training at University:

“My Master at University, Tamás Vígh, taught me how important the variations on a theme are. You should not be satisfied with the first version of a theme. You should create four to five variants, making the specific work relative, and choose the most powerful one in that particular theme. We argued a lot with my Master about some problems arising in sculpture, which also helped me a lot in my personal development.”

In recent work, ranging from 2020 to 2010, Mata explores several themes through his choice of content, materials and shapes — forming entities that explore the material used (“White and Metal II”); intriguing natural structures (“Spider Web”); reactions to nature (“Sails II”); and human interaction (“Date”, “Double Date”, “Stainless Love”).

Based on the female form, “White and Metal II” (2020), looks at the female figure from many different views — physical, emotional, spiritual, and metaphorical. It is a presence that pulls together options for a viewer to experience on several levels. Although there are echoes of Picasso, Matisse, Moore, Arp, Gehry, and Gabo, the piece is unmistakably Mata. The viewer is carried along the planes and curves, a part of what the artist refers to as the “ambivalent effect of its different views”. This touches upon one of the main themes of Mata’s work throughout his career — how many layers, contrasts, and persistent ambivalence clamor for attention throughout life.



"White and Metal II" (2020), acrylic, stainless steel sheet; 103 x 52 x 60 cm / 40.5 x 20.5 x 23.5 inch

"Spider Web" (2019) catches the viewer in endless twists and turns of wire. The stainless steel shapes forming the base suggest the stability and strength of a real spider web, while the mirror creates a "false" web that continues the structure and design to confuse the viewer in a visual and mental puzzle created by Mata. The piece is fascinating in that from every angle it is possible to see a design and yet be confused by it. Ultimately the guest is disoriented and becomes the spider's prey.



"Spider Web", stainless steel sheet and wire, mirror, 2020; 78 x 68 x 68 cm / 30.5 x 26.5 x 26.5 inch

"Date" and "Double Date" (2019) take a look at relationships, and how the subject matter influences the choice of material and the final physical realization. Created from bronze and stainless steel, "Date" glows with the hope and excitement of potential connection with another. The stride of a male figure is wide, anticipatory, and hopeful. A swirl of bronze suggests a head sweeping with emotion and excitement. "Double Date" takes this theme to another level — the figures have connected, are harmonious — the date is a success! They are now together, looking forward; the twists and turns of metals interrelate to show a connection both physical and emotional. These sculptures have a sense of purpose, stability, and mirth. One is pulled in and asked to participate — one cannot help but think of one's own date experiences and liken or contrast them to the pieces.



"Date", stainless steel and bronze, 2019; 52 x 44 x 20 cm / 20.5 x 17 x 8 inch



"Double Date", stainless steel and bronze, 2019; 50 x 47 x 20 cm / 19.5 x 18.5 x 8 inch

"Stainless Love" (2017) is a sinewy maze that pulls the eyes into its unending swirls of steel. Glints of light ping from its surface. It appears to be a solitary seated figure, lost in contemplation. The title implies love, which conjures the notion of the figure paused thinking about love or a beloved — the sensual lines indicating an erotic love more so than friendly or paternal affection. There is an energy of something about to happen, as if love is waiting, and in a moment may burst forth. The stainless-steel works to suggest strength, power, force — an everlasting love.



"Stainless Love", stainless steel, 2017; 30.5 x 15 x 9 cm / 12 x 6 x 3.5 inch

Throughout his career and work, inspiration has come from artists such as Naum Gabo, Vladimir Tatlin, Matisse, Velasquez, Vermeer, and Frank Gehry. It is not necessarily specific works as much as these artists' approach that has had an impact on Mata. However, when viewing works such as "Stainless Love", Spider Web", and "Sails II", the forms of Henri Moore, the sly humor of Marcel Duchamp, and the futuristic swoops of Umberto Boccioni are seen. Mata points out that as an art student in Hungary, as in other socialist countries, exposure to other artists and works was restricted:

"...we naturally learnt about all the important periods in art history but we had access only to images in our art history books and maybe in some catalogues", but "no works by famous artists from other parts of the world were exhibited...We were not allowed to travel to Western Europe or to the USA as a tourist at that time, or at least without knowing someone there who could send us an invitation letter. We were separated from the West as we were living behind the Iron Curtain...I had to get permission to go to the library of the American Embassy in Budapest to look at his works, i.e. reproductions of his works. The first time I could travel to Western Europe and visit museums was in 1988. I was invited to West-

Germany by a collector of mine so I had the opportunity to see big white sculptures made of plaster by Henry Moore and other well-known works in the museums of Stuttgart, Munich, Köln, Mannheim, Düsseldorf.“

It is easy to see how critical the choice of material is to the finished piece. Mata is not confined to a specific range, having evolved over the years from wood, painted wood, copper, stainless steel, welded stainless steel sheet, and wire sculptures sometimes combined with acrylic (acrylic resin). He states that the choice of material contributes to the creation of new spatial effects...to “open up” the surface of the sculpture. The specific piece determines the choice of material:

“However, neither the sculpture, nor the material can be considered primary. In my works they are in the closest relationship. Changing any of them brings a change in the other one as well. If I change the material new form requirements emerge. On the other hand, I often choose new material because new form requirements have come up.”

Earlier works display this exploration of materials. “Lying Woman in Erotic Pose” (1989) echoes Henri Moore in its shapes and has a Duchampian naughtiness to it. The painted wood has the overdone quality of a heavily made-up “invitation”, while the varied texture lends a sensuous, tactile quality. It invites the viewer in on many earthy and perhaps even slightly uncomfortable levels. It is reminiscent of Courbet’s “The Origin of the World” with its ‘I shouldn’t be looking at this, but I must’ quality.



Lying Woman in Erotic Pose, painted wood, 1989; 96 x 120 cm / 38 x 47 inch

Mata’s work is timeless and affective. It has the ability to call upon so many frames of reference, and always in an abstract way that allows the viewer to engage on many levels, and discover points of reference, some intentional on the part of the artist, and some that speak to the subconscious of the viewer. The pieces become meditative focal points.

In this current day where we are so distracted by the COVID 19 virus and its implications on how we communicate, interact, and wait to discover what the new “normal” will be, Mata considers where art will fit into this redefinition. It is important to stay connected to one’s creative self and connect creatively with others:

”...to still recognize a place for art as a means of engagement...during quarantine time more than ever while other material goods start to lose their value and importance. People need arts, emotional security, stability, something to cling to...”

While each of us struggles with the question of what happens if we are among the fortunate who make it through this critical time, Mata's work provides a respite where we may stop, think, plan, and realize the need to be in the moment — learning from the past, acknowledging the now, and taking all that remains into the future. It calls us to contemplate that we possess the strength of steel, only when we admit the fleetingness of life and the need to come together in thought and humanity.

As we await how museums and galleries redefine how they will be available to the public, Mata's work may currently be seen online. A virtual tour of a group show called "Artonomy" can be accessed on the website of Mucsarnok/Kunsthalle (mucsarnok.hu), one of the most important museums in Hungary, where one of his sculptures is exhibited. His work is also available on his website, <http://attilamata.com> and on the Agora Gallery website, https://www.agora-gallery.com/artistpage/Attila_Mata.aspx.