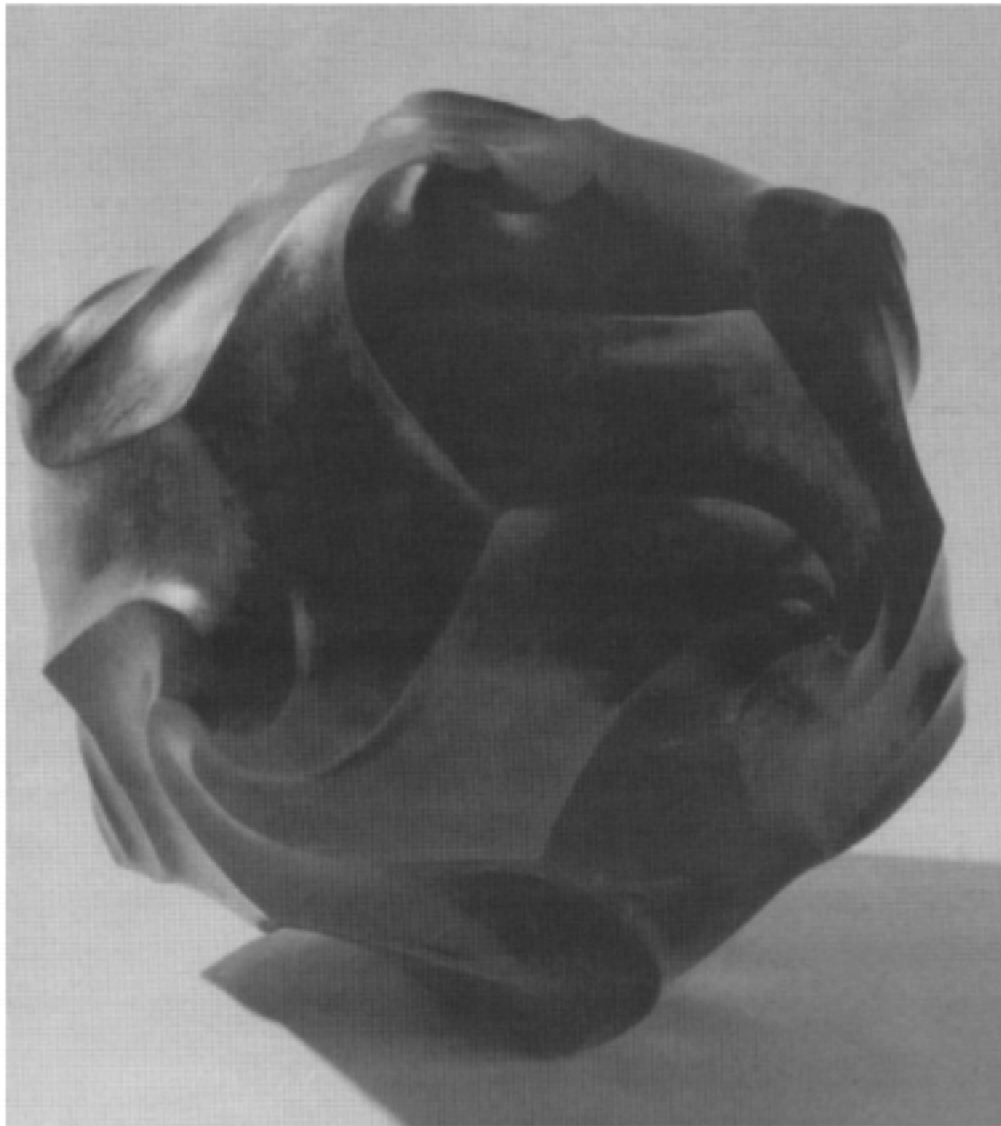


# Saint Clair Cemin by Shirley Kaneda

*"It's impossible to create more than what you are. You can only unveil more of yourself."*



New York City is like a magnet, people are still drawn to it the way they were to Paris before the War. Some come for economic reasons, some for excitement and others to contribute to its cosmopolitan sophistication. These expatriates, pursuing their goals in diverse ways, differ in language and traditions. The significance is that our collective culture is illuminated by a resplendent array of perspectives and practices.

One afternoon in his vast studio in the Red Hook section of Brooklyn, I spoke with the sculptor Saint-Clair Cemin. Originally from Brazil, he came to New York by way of Paris in the late 1970s, quickly becoming an important part of the then burgeoning downtown art scene.

His work brings together many disparate approaches and temperaments. By mixing naive craft and folk art sensibilities with those of High Modernism, Cemin manifests inexplicably elegant and simultaneously absurd sculptures.

**Shirley Kaneda**

I want to know your background. You're originally from Brazil, right?

**Saint-Clair Cemin**

That's right, a small rural city of 30,000 people in the South, a part of Brazil whose culture was formed by cattle ranchers and wheat farmers. The population is of European origin and I believe that it was not so different from a small American town in the 1950s. The difference was when you went into the countryside which was like the Wild West, the mentality and the conditions of the people were much more primitive. The earth itself is red. It's a very beautiful country.

**SK**

And how did you become a sculptor?

**SCC**

That was a very, very late development. As a teenager, I was in touch with the intellectuals of the city. One of my mentors was an extremely eccentric gentleman farmer, a true scholar who could recite Sappho's poetry in Ancient Greek. We would talk and drink for hours. His wife would come in and say, "Stop giving hard liquor to the child!" And he responded, "We are talking Plato here, he is no longer a child." And we would continue to drink Scotch and I would go back home totally, totally high.

**SK**

How old were you?

**SCC**

Fourteen.

**SK**

Oh, my God! (*laughter*)

**SCC**

Once I became very upset because a massacre in Indonesia was reported as a little line in the paper when 100,000 people had been killed! He said, "You are at an age to know that in life, not even the atoms are glued together because of justice." (*laughter*)

I was very much interested in philosophy and science at that point; art was a sidekick. When I was eighteen my family moved to São Paulo and my intention was to study physics. But I realized that it was not my calling, I didn't have the personality, I knew I would be a mediocre scientist. I got involved in art, I drew, I was making illustrations for magazines...

**SK**

What art were you looking at then?

**SCC**

I was working instinctively. I was making very surrealistic drawings. I was very young, and self-taught, I didn't believe at all in art schools. I hooked up with some hippies and lived in a commune.

**SK**

This was the late '60s or...

**SCC**

Early '70s. In '73 I went to Europe. I was quite sick of living in Brazil. The Fascist dictatorship made me very uncomfortable; it was dangerous. If you were talking to the wrong person, you could be arrested for any political reason. Also, the leftists were extremely boring. Fascism produces a reaction, Marxist discourse, which already seemed stale. So I went to France to study at Vincennes University, but they were on strike all the time. It was a leftist university, a free university, and they protested against God-knows-what, constantly. I never understood the logic behind it. So I left because I couldn't study anything there.

**SK**

How many languages do you speak? English, Portuguese, French...

**SCC**

French, Italian, Spanish, and Russian.

**SK**

Really?

**SCC**

I didn't learn them all at the same time. When I came to America I could read and write perfectly in English—I couldn't understand a thing though. It took me six months just to understand what people were saying on T.V. or in movies. *(laughter)*

**SK**

Did you study art anywhere?

**SCC**

I started studying at the Ecole des Beaux Arts. I studied printmaking there for three years. What I was doing then was not art. It was stuff that would be quite adequate as album covers for psychedelic music of the '70s.

**SK**

It's ironic that that kind of work is beginning to seep into "fine" art at this point.

**SCC**

Which I find perfectly good. It's very dangerous, though, because the bad taste is incredible. *(laughter)* But that is where I came from. Then I moved to New York. And I loved New York. Paris is a wonderful city, but in the '70s was quite boring for a young man. It was not the kind of atmosphere that made me feel as if I could progress, simple as that. In Europe you are what you are born into. There is no notion that you are what you make yourself to be. This is completely an American notion. It's very fertile here for people who have ideas. You don't know how hard it is in Europe to find information and tools for any craft, it's unbelievable. Professional secrets are guarded inside...

**SK**

A vault...

**SCC**

Inside a vault over there. Here they're not guarded, they're openly publicized. Things that families and generations would keep a lid on, keep secret... Here, you open a book and it's the first chapter. I came here and started making prints for other people.

**SK**

That's how you made a living?

**SCC**

That's the way I made a living, and I was doing pretty well. Then I met Alan Jones, and Alan thought I was an artist and said, you have to read and know everything about art. At the Beaux Arts, I had a very good academic training and there was a lot of dialogue about art, but I was not so involved in that. I was more involved in the academic part because I thought it was a skill that I needed. I immediately set myself to the task and started reading and going to every possible museum, and I educated myself in a couple of months. (*laughter*) You know, that's about what you need. Let's be real.

**SK**

Well, it's subjective.

**SCC**

You don't need four years and thirty thousand dollars a year to get a grasp of what art is all about. You need a good intuition, a good will and lots of research. Then I saw this big retrospective of Joseph Beuys' and that really opened my eyes. I went back to my studio and I saw the prints I was making, and stuff that I was printing for other people, and I was sick to my stomach. In a few months, I sold everything; my press and my printmaking business disappeared. And that was it. (*laughter*) I spent two years trying to figure out what to do—from '81 to '83. I went from a pretty good income with printmaking into a horrible income doing carpentry—what sculptors normally do in New York, renovating lofts. Finally, I started doing cabinet-making which gave me more money, it was skilled work. It was great because I really learned a lot about proportions and dimensions. I only started making sculpture in the summer of '83. My parents came to visit me, and maybe because their presence gave me a sense of protection, psychological release, I felt I was no longer under pressure. In that period I said to myself, okay, I will start making sculpture. I started carving because Brancusi said that the heart of sculpture is carving. A friend of mine gave me several pieces of stone and I decided to make one piece every week. It was quite a lot of work.



Saint-Clair Cemin, *Quote Unquote*, 1993, Bronze, 15½ x 10¼ x 8 inches. Photograph courtesy of Robert Miller Gallery.

**SK**

How and when did you start showing your work?

**SCC**

With a horrible-looking piece called *The Granny Ashtray*.

**SK**

I remember that.

**SCC**

An old woman, made very small, is kneeling on the floor with her legs open, and her head is a skull. Between her legs is an ashtray, called "Granny Ashtray." Alan Jones said, "My God, this looks like the Hell's

"Granny Ashtray." Alan Jones said, "My God, this looks like the Hell's Angels learned academic technique, this is a true spit in the eye to the public." So that gave me a good kick to go on working.

**SK**

You weren't consciously making anti-modernist pieces?

**SCC**

Oh, I was quite conscious of what I was doing but I didn't think it was worth doing something anti-modernist. I wanted to access modernism through another gate. I like to use what's there. But if you don't put your own spirit into it, it's dead. We have way too many ready-mades: mental ready-mades, conceptual ready-mades, and we are working inside of that rut. I thought about making objects whereby it would be hard for people to know whether or not it's art. They could even be seen in a curio shop.

**SK**

I get that sense from your work, but they are non-Duchampian, not really ready-mades...

**SCC**

I was seeing that there are entire populations of objects which are proletarian: stuff that's cast out, that is supposed to be so uncool and so out of fashion, so absurd, or completely objectionable. I think if they are so objectionable, then there must be something very interesting about them. They're objectionable to the intellectuals, and they are devoured by the masses. I was quite used to intellectual discourse, but I have the impression that life is not that. I do not think that you can capture life with language. You can use language as a pointing device. Language is an excellent tool. It's being glorified by people like Lacan. My project was to use my studio as a laboratory. But I felt that to use the studio as a concept and then to show all the work as part of that concept was a really cheap trick, and would immediately cut me off from the very people whom I wanted to have access to—regular people who look at things and say, oh, this is a nice object, or it's not a nice object. I like it, or I don't like it. It's that mentality which is pre-conceptual art. I just introduced pieces as pieces, each piece is itself, and that's it.

**SK**

While your work is fueled conceptually, its content is not conceptual.

**SCC**

I was seeing myself as a conceptual artist because at the time, it was hard to avoid. Conceptual art is something you experience once and then you are no longer a virgin. *(laughter)*

**SK**

You were associated with people like Jonathan Lasker and Philip Taaffe...

**SCC**

That's right, a couple of years later.

**SK**

What do you think of that association?

**SCC**

It all came through Collins and Milazzo, who discovered an enormous amount of people at that point, like Jonathan Lasker, whom I met through them, many friends I have now.

**SK**

In terms of the work, did you feel an affinity?

**SCC**

Oh, I felt completely at home with that work, I understood quite well what they were trying to do. They were also trying to experiment and experience what it was to manipulate those conventions, and through those manipulations, come up with something quite new. Lasker's work, for instance, is totally conventional, it's canvas and oil paint. There's nothing more antique than that.

**SK**

What is your relationship to craft then?

**SCC**

I have the impression that there is a great complex of inferiority in the avant-garde circles which produces what's called a simplex of superiority, also known as snobbism. (*laughter*) When you feel inferior, you act weird, you have a chip on your shoulder, and you start cutting out everything that is not cool. It's a very adolescent thing. And of course, decorative stuff was definitely not cool. But that's not an artistic problem, it's a sociological problem that has artistic implications. Let's talk about one artist who is a great craftsman and a wonderful artist, one of the best that America has to offer, and everybody complains that he's too crafty. This is Martin Puryear.

**SK**

He's able to go across the board.

**SCC**

Exactly. And what is the complaint—there is too much craft? I love that he does it without any sense of guilt and I don't think he's pompous about it either. There's always craft in art, I mean if you don't put it in somebody will. The hand of the artist is one aspect of one totality. The music in art is to play the relative values of all its elements. In my work, sometimes I play very heavily on the craft, in other pieces I play heavily on the sloppiness. It all depends.

**SK**

Do you see yourself as reclaiming what the formalists or minimalists were doing?

**SCC**

Talk about reclaiming, I want to reclaim it all.

**SK**

Woodcarving, modeling and all the traditional craft of sculpture?

**SCC**

There are two ways of seeing that. One of them is the tradition which creates a connection with the past, creates a connection with a network of people who have been doing that for centuries, but that's not the most interesting. The other aspect is the experience of the artist modeling, carving, doing things like that. The metaphysics of carving can be understood by a carver. When you do it you understand, you start to realize certain things about yourself, about your relationship to the world in this very minimal, reduced form. When you are making art you are interacting with the world in a very specific way, and this corresponds to a very precious human experience. The artist's experience in the studio is, in my opinion, the center of human experience. It corresponds to the experience of every man.

Imagine you are a Viking and you have to carve your own spoon. You take a piece of wood and you carve it. But as you're doing it, you decide to make a little decoration, a little flower there and you carve a little more of a curve—you basically can make a spoon with...

**SK**

With just a flat piece of wood.

**SCC**

Exactly. It's very easy. You don't have to go through that extra five hours. But it is that extra five hours of play that creates the possibility for thought, that is creation.

**SK**

Is that progress?

**SCC**

Yes, of course. Absolutely. It has to do with progress. It has to do with Dr. Faustus. It's a diabolic thing. It's a dangerous thing. The repression of the libido is a pale ghost compared to the repression of creation. Freudian theory wants to make you believe that the repression is libidinal. It is not. It is a repression of creation. And you know that creation is irrepressible. What an artist does in the studio is more primordial than religion. What an artist is doing is re-enacting the most primordial act, the "Acte Par Excellence," which is the act of perception. Think about a bacteria or any living creature, the first requirement for this creature to live is to perceive. There will be nothing, there will be no action without perception.

**SK**

What is the role of taste in your work?

**SCC**

Taste is something that you really cannot talk about. Taste is politics, a negotiation. Taste is not a thing, it is a relationship. Taste is what I say is good, and you are going to say, No, taste is what I say is good. And then we are going to count on accord, or we are going to be enemies.

**SK**

Greenberg said that taste is everything.



**SCC**

There are different ways of talking about taste. Taste is self-referential absurdity. (*laughter*) Taste is an inquisition. It's power. That's what it is. Taste is a system of criteria that you use to judge something. Of course, then ignorance and a lack of information can generate very ugly results.

**SK**

How do you think the question of taste is represented in your work?

**SCC**

I have different tastes for different things. I have tastes which are contradictory.

**SK**

In your last show at Paul Kasmin, the sculptures reminded me of tourist's souvenirs from somewhere like the south of France. I liked them very much, there was an element that had to do with bad taste, but not necessarily kitsch.

**SCC**

Yeah, sometimes my work has that. And sometimes it has other qualities. But I recognize the things that other people think are in extremely bad taste. I will say that I think they're in good taste. I play with that, but not in a sly manner.

**SK**

You don't think that your work has any affinity with somebody like Jeff Koons, for example?

**SCC**

My work has a certain affinity with Koons, but I am not using a tradition that is considered kitsch. For me, the concept of kitsch is pointless. I don't even understand why people insist on this totally obscure notion. We have bad art because there is a demand for that type of work, and who is left to do that kind of work? The bad artists! Simple as that.



Saint-Clair Cemin, *Untitled (Twist)*, 1993, Painted Bronze, 28½ x 17 x 17 inches. Photograph courtesy of Robert Miller Gallery.

**SK**

What about the art in Brazil?

**SCC**

In Brazil, there is an absurd combination of Dadaism with Concretism, as if that were possible. (*laughter*)

**SK**

All the influences were European then?

**SCC**

They are totally European.

**SK**

Is there anything specifically Brazilian in your work or is it totally cosmopolitan?

**SCC**

That is hard to talk about. It is definitely American, in the sense of the entire Americas—it is from the new world. There is no way in the old world that somebody could do this kind of work. We are not carrying the mausoleum of our civilization on our backs full time. That's a heavy rucksack.

**SK**

Do you think there is a crisis in sculpture, in terms of bad art, kitsch and so on...that objects have taken the place of sculpture, that anything can be a sculpture right now?

**SCC**

Well, back to the problem of the schools, the artist can interact with the world, and the basis for that interaction is a skill. What we have in art schools is that the students are receiving a lot of verbal information on art. They are receiving no information on how to interact with the world on the most basic and primitive level. They are learning how to talk about cooking but they have no access to a stove or the ingredients.

**SK**

But enrollment in art schools is higher than ever.

**SCC**

Yeah, and they are all going to talk about art, and make the most pathetic little things. I mean, a little wire with something hanging. They are making experiments using trash. These people are getting completely side-tracked. Nature used to be the teacher of the artists. Look at nature, see how people are made. Look at trees and see how trees twist in the wind. We don't hear that kind of discourse at all. It's not cool, right? Craft is not cool. Trees are not cool. Nature is not cool. What about mother and child? Mother and child is the supreme subject of any civilization from Africa to China. In China, the ideogram which depicts a woman and a baby together is the ideogram that means good. And everybody wants what is good, right? Get an artist now to paint or to carve or to represent a mother and child sincerely, it's almost a crime.

**SK**

It would be really stupid.

**SCC**

Where did this artist come from as an organism? From a mother, probably. The art discourse nowadays is perverse.

**SK**

Do you think of yourself as a traditionalist?

**SCC**

No. I think the problem with tradition is that you make a cadaver out of yourself. The function of the artist is not to be a traditionalist. The first academia that has to be rejected is the most recent one, not the oldest one. The oldest one is not a problem. My problem is the dog that is biting my leg, it's not the ghost of the wolf from two million years ago. This is the academy that artists have to get rid of. I mean, get rid of Giotto? Why? It's wonderful.

**SK**

Yeah, exactly. Your most recent work seems to have very intricate and feminine qualities, is that a shift?

**SCC**

More like the unveiling of things. It's impossible to create more than what you are. You can only unveil more of yourself.

**SK**

You've introduced more handwork, more sweetness into the works.

**SCC**

Oh, yeah. That's absolutely important. Sweetness, all of those things that are cast out, I am recuperating. All the good stuff that art threw out the window, I am downstairs with a bag. (*laughter*) I am on the street, gathering everything they throw out, including sweetness.

**SK**

What about pleasure in your work?

**SCC**

Oh, pleasure in the work! That's the first thing that goes out the window, right? When we start obeying, (*laughter*) pleasure becomes a very hard thing to obtain. Very few artists can avoid feeling pleasure with their own production. Pleasure, seduction, beauty, all of those things. There is a parallel time, most of the world thinks in those terms. I take it for granted that the function of art is to give pleasure. If art is not to be a pleasure, it is very separate from life. Even if an art work is unpleasant in many aspects it will give, at a certain level, pleasure.

**SK**

What are your thoughts on the '80s and the recent reevaluation of the art world that is taking place in the '90s?

**SCC**

The money that was going around in the '80s was great. For the first time, artists were paid decently for their work. There was a popular visibility of art. More money is better than less money.

**SK**

In the '80s, there was a glut, as well as pressure to do more work. Do you think the re-evaluation that has been going on is healthy or do you think it's destructive?

**SCC**

There is nothing wrong with artists making money. I find that it is a very healthy thing. Artists, when they have money, normally make very good work. They have more time. They have more energy. The moment you are making your work, is the moment of freedom.

**SK**

What do you think will happen in the '90s?

**SCC**

I tell you what I wish to happen from now on. You see, we went through such a repressive time in art. I have the impression that every five years every new generation of artists comes up with more restrictions. What I wish for artists to do, is to get involved with what is not art. An organism does not survive by eating itself. You don't cook your own arm when you want to make a roast. You roast a part of another animal, right? So, likewise, if art starts nourishing itself from itself, it's a sad spectacle. And the result is it's getting smaller and smaller; there is nothing to feed on. What if you end up pretending you don't breathe, you don't walk, you don't talk, you don't make love. It's totally pretentious. Talking about taste, taste is what you think looks good. What you think looks good is your intuition, is your aesthetic judgment. Your aesthetic judgment is going to be used in every step of the process. There are certain things which are the domain of the artists, and now they are completely forgotten. Now, art is more the domain of philosophers. French philosophers who come from a tradition of literature that is twenty years retarded in relation to science, and art is following that. Now, we have work representing this most infantile Cartesianism of separating body and mind, of work about the body. It's a horrible point of view.

**SK**

But Western culture hasn't been able to reconcile the body/mind split.

**SCC**

Why do we have to make work about the body? You are using the damn thing to make the work already. I mean the brush stroke is the body, is the gesture.... The body is there, you cannot avoid it.

**SK**

Both professionally and personally, do you think you are nomadic, that you can conceptually travel anywhere without a fixed discourse.

**SCC**

Yes, I want that quality for all artists. Art is a drive, like wanting to eat, or sleep. But art does not have a purpose. It's too primitive for that. It happens before purpose, before past and present.