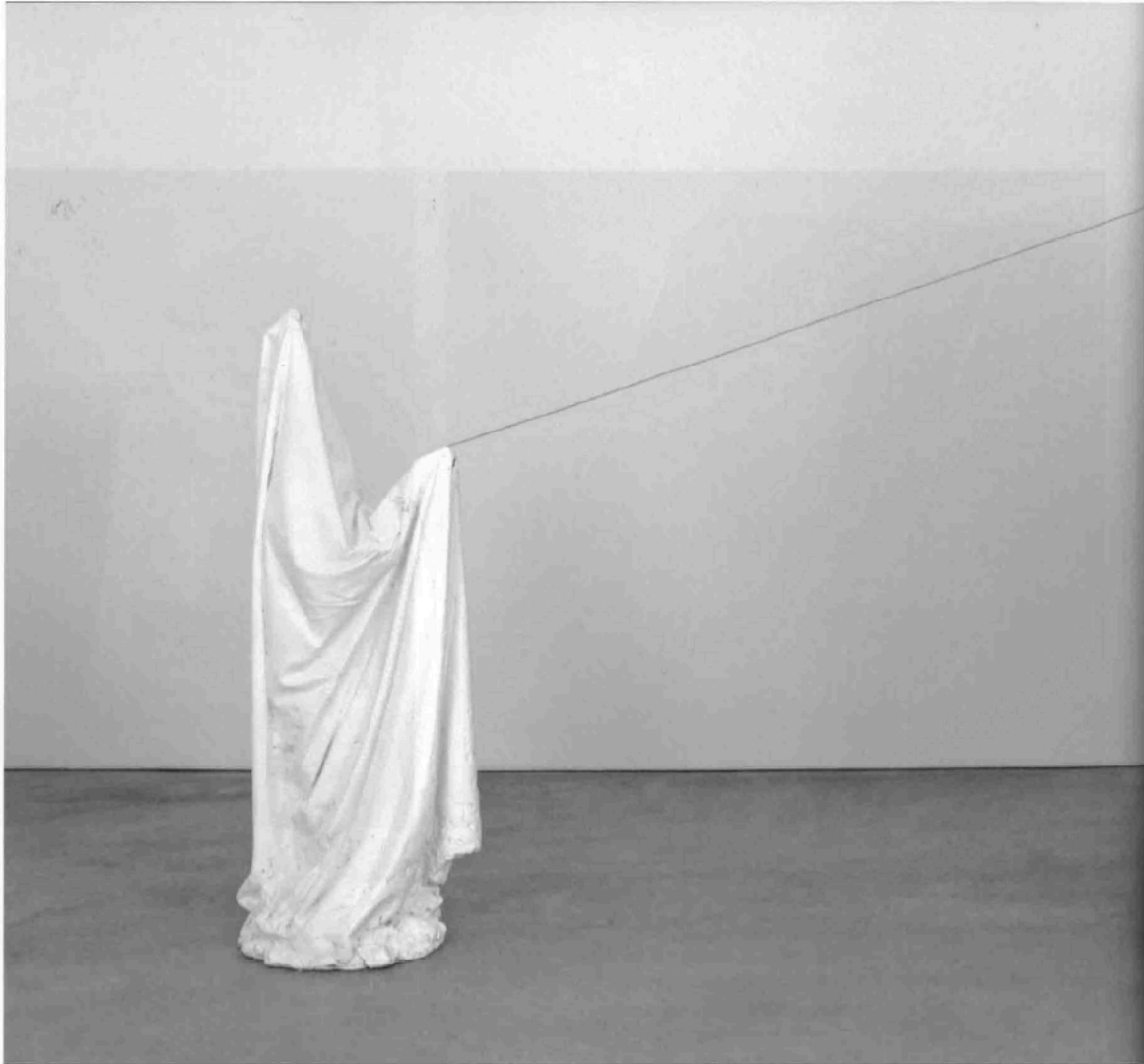


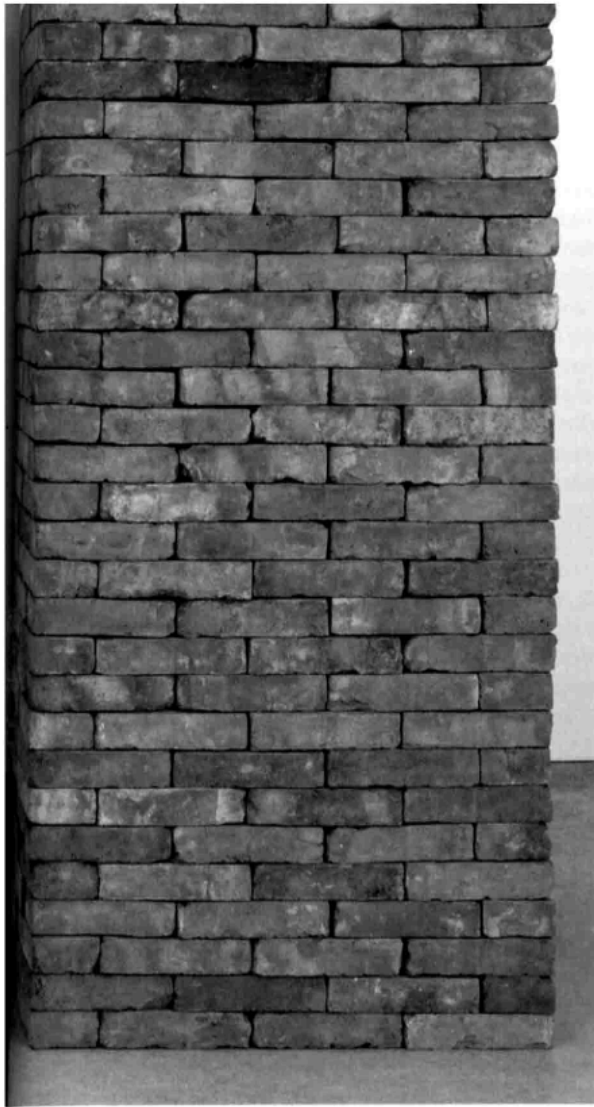
Sculpture
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Waltz of the Apparitions

A Conversation with **Saint Clair Cemin**

BY CHRISTOPHER HART CHAMBERS



The Absence of Caption, 2008. Brick, plaster, and string, 82 x 138 x 41.5 in.

Saint Clair Cemin's sculpture is often imponderable. Because the works are rarely wholly abstract, they seem to want to mean something, to hint at allegory—but do they really have to be something other than what they are as things, as untainted lyric? They cry out like riddles begging to be solved: "What am I?" The works are genuinely quizzical. Are they effigies? Are these independent notions anticipating the magical breath of life? I imagine Cemin like Pan playing the role of puppet master in a waltz of apparitions.

His work is difficult to place categorically. It is assuredly post-Surrealist. It doesn't really look contemporary, but it is far too well informed to be anything else. All the major modern sculptors are referenced: Rodin, Giacometti, Brancusi, Arp, Moore, Puryear, and de Saint Phalle, just to name a few; the ancients are present, even the Rococo and Baroque; and current design influences, conceptual leanings, and Minimalist tendencies are incorporated. Cemin's synthesis embraces so many eras, this work has to be new, how could it *not* be? It is a veritable merry-go-round of diabolical wit, fancy, whimsy, and delight.

Christopher Hart Chambers: *When I first saw your work, I thought you were Italian, possibly Eastern European. Some of it reminds me of the Neo-Expressionist Enzo Cucchi, among others. How has your cultural upbringing affected your themes and subjects?*

Saint Clair Cemin: Well, I was born in Brazil, and I was influenced by what I saw there, mostly South American Rococo and the sculpture of Aleijadinho, 18th-century South American Baroque. I was also influenced by the Brazilian Modernists. Modernism was a very important influence in Brazil. During the war, a lot of people came from Germany. Max Bill was in Brazil and was a big influence. Brasilia was being built when I was a kid; I was nine years old when it was inaugurated. It was the kind of energy that still remains today: very naturally, one of my sides tends toward Modernism and the other tends toward Baroque.

CHC: *How did your career transition to the international level?*

SCC: I left Brazil pretty early. I went to France, where I studied at the Beaux-Arts. I studied printmaking, because I didn't know I was a sculptor. It was a fantastic discovery that came many years later. I came to New York in 1978, and I started making sculpture in the summer of 1983. It was a revelation for me, and I never stopped after that.

CHC: *How did it happen?*

SCC: Actually it didn't occur as a sculpture. I started a conceptual project, and the idea was to give myself complete freedom to do anything I wanted as long as it was simple, made with the hands, with simple materials—with a table—but with a complete lack of criteria. I wanted to see—it's like when somebody puts a microphone in front of you and says, "Say anything," and you're mute. You can make sounds, you can recite a poem, but until you come to something that will lead you to that goal, you don't know what to do. I like the idea of a paradoxical situation that allows you to have total freedom, but you have no criteria. So, I decided to start making things, and the first things that came out of my hands were tschotchkes—ashtrays and little mugs. Of course, since I had classic training I could at least model very well—I could draw very well when I was 18, so it was not a difficult thing. I made hundreds



of small things, and after a week of this process, I realized that the conceptual premise of the whole thing had gone down the drain. I was making sculptures. There was no reason for me to create a conceptual framework because that framework was full of holes.

CHC: *Your efforts have been variously described as humorous, religious, and morbid. Are they all correct?*

SCC: I think they are all correct. Mostly, I began with the idea of giving myself complete freedom. When that happens, you have to relinquish control. In a way, my attitude is very close to Surrealism. I relinquish control, I let things happen. I am not using automatism like the Surrealists, but there is an unconscious acceptance: acceptance of the unconscious. When you allow the unconscious to manifest itself without hindering it, you are going to have juxtapositions that are humorous and other juxtapositions that are morbid. I don't look for the morbid or the humorous or the religious, but they happen. I don't try to evolve them.

CHC: *Your work seems to be connected with the history of sculpture. Do you make everything with your own hands—at least the models, the originals, before they are cast—or do you use digital technologies and current devices?*

SCC: No, I never copied anything. I don't use readymades whatsoever. If I want to do something that looks Gothic because I'm interested in that feeling, I am going to reinvent it. I'll draw or model something that I think is Gothic. The last time I did that, somebody saw what I was doing and said, "That is not Gothic, that is Japanese." It was quite funny, actually. But I realized what he was saying. It was a pattern that touched on Gothic, but it was much closer to a Japanese pattern than anything else. I love the idea of making mistakes with a style. That's why I never copy anything.

CHC: *But, it's made with your own hands?*

SCC: It's made with my own hands. I don't use digital technology because I don't like mathematical transformations, they're too obvious. For instance, when you have a form and you use Photoshop to make it grow, or you change it, the entire form is changed based around one mathematical formula. In a way, the brain of the viewer decodes it very fast, and it becomes just too boring, too simple. That's why I never use it. If I want to transform something into something else, I just draw or model or make a wire structure.

CHC: *Regardless of medium, there is a strong tactile presence in your work. Does your hand touch everything that comes out of your studio? To what extent are assistants involved?*

SCC: It depends on the work. I make the models, for sure, but there are certain hammered copper and steel works that I'm making in China that I don't make. First of all, I don't have the skill to do it. It's very difficult work, and it would be pointless, at least to me. Those are made by specialized workers. Normally I love to carve. I carve wood and stone; I made most of the pieces in those materials myself. Maybe I use an assistant to help me, but I make all the models myself.

When I make something big, we weld the whole thing together, we put clay on top of it, and I do it. I prefer to make the large pieces from scratch. I don't believe in copying a model, because the scale changes. I had that done once, and it was a big disap-

pointment. I couldn't even change it, I had to redo it. I made the model in view of a large piece, I got the guys to copy it exactly, and it was a disaster. It didn't work at all with the scale.

CHC: *You use many different materials, and the results can be quite disparate. Are there fundamental conceptual leaps from work to work within a single exhibition?*

SCC: What you're saying is that I use many different modes of expression and materials. When I work on a piece, I try to create something new. Overall, I don't have a visual style that you can identify as this or that, so that you can tell something is a Cemin. I use different styles to communicate something that makes sense with the work. The materials go with it; the proportions, the size, the title go with it. All of that is part of the work. I can pass to the next one, and I can start with something completely different. Spiritually they can be connected even though they have very little in common.

CHC: *Contrary to certain critics, I see an old-school formalist aesthetic coupled with an appreciation for a variety of materials in your work. Some sculptors, Richard Long, for example, became known for works in resin but have recently opted for more traditional materials, such as ceramic. Do you see this as a trend, and does this have anything to do with your own directions?*

SCC: Yes, absolutely, I believe in traditional materials. They are traditional because they are good. It's not by chance that people use marble. Marble is a fantastic stone to carve. It sounds good when you carve it. You can relate alchemically; your body relates to it. On the other hand, I did use resin a couple of times, but I don't like it. It was OK, but it was because I wanted to have a visual effect, purely visual. In retrospect, I regret it a little because I think that it is very important to know what the material is. To know, for instance, when a piece is solid or hollow makes a big difference—even though you don't experience it visually. Knowledge is as important as experience. There is a story about a bunch of blind people at the Smithsonian: the *Spirit of Saint Louis* was hanging above their heads. When the guide told them where they were, one of them said, "Yes, but is it the real *Spirit of Saint Louis* or a replica?" The guy was blind—he would never be able to see what was hovering 18 feet above his head, but he wanted to know if it was real. It was important to him. I think this is essential in art, because art is magic and that counts for a lot.

CHC: *It seems to me that your work is abstract in thinking, but concrete in narrative.*

SCC: Narrative is the most familiar thing to a human being. You think in terms of narrative. You look at a rock, and the rock doesn't mean anything unless you start imagining things. You impose narrative on the world even if the narrative is not there. So, I accept the narrative part of my work, the part that is suggestive or connotative.

CHC: *By its nature, your work is very labor intensive. To what degree is it improvisational?*

SCC: It depends on the piece. I do improvise, but sometimes I don't. Sometimes I make 500 models before I come to what I want. But I do improvise. Most of the pieces are hanging around until I decide how to finish them. Normally five years is the limit.



Opposite, top: *Allegory*, 2008. Copper, (sculpture) 256 x 140 x 120 cm. Opposite, bottom: *Witness*, 2008. Lacquered stainless steel, 127 x 29.5 x 57.5 in. Top: *Apollo (Armor)*, 2008. Bronze, 183 x 100 x 50 cm. Above: *The Artist*, 2008. Painted bronze, 55.9 x 138.4 x 56.2 cm.

Once I have something around for more than five years, I throw it out. Then I know it's never going to happen.

CHC: *You never regretted it? After 10 years, you've never said, "Oh! Now I know what I should have done with that."*

SCC: I don't regret anything.

Christopher Hart Chambers is an artist and writer living and working in New York.