**All Stones Lead to Rome**

*Prize winning local sculpture Armen Agop has temporary base in Italy*

- Elin Rantakrans

These are busy times for the sculptor Armen Agop. He recently returned to Cairo after having participated in the Fifth Symposium for Sculptors held in Aswan. Now, as a recipient of the State Prize of Artistic Creation in Italy for Egyptian artists under 35, Agop will spend the next year in Italy on a fellowship. Agop is the first sculptor in seven years to receive the fellowship. Although he will be gone for over a year, Agop is preparing two shows in Cairo in the autumn.

Agop has participated in several exhibitions already. His bronze, brass and granite pieces are distinct and playful with their organic shapes, sharp lines and smooth surfaces. The hollow bronze and brass pieces seem light and airy, despite their weight. Recently, he started to move away from sculpture as an object attached to a base, such as those on display at the Espace Karim Francis Gallery, towards free-standing pieces where the shape decides how the sculpture will stand. His most recent works in granite are designed to wobble when touched.

His contribution to the Fifth International Sculpture Symposium in Aswan is composed of a gigantic piece of granite that will be on display at the Aswan International Open Museum. While many sculptors go for the square monumental piece that makes viewers stop in their tracks and admire from a distance, Agop’s pieces deliberately encourage exploration and interaction. “There should be equilibrium between the viewer and the artwork,” he explains. Agop was delighted when at the symposium in Aswan a child jumped on top of his sculpture and made the massive 10-ton piece move by leaning back and forth.

Agop started out taking private drawing lessons, but eventually turned to sculpture. As a teenager he visited a private studio and saw some clay lying on a table: “I could not leave without taking a piece of the clay,” he admits. He made a portrait from the piece, not knowing then what he knows today, that clay shrinks when it dries; the wooden neck forced the clay to crack. That is how it all started. Nowadays he works in bronze and brass as well as granite. He explains the traditional definitions of direct and indirect sculpture: direct means that you subtract from the material by carving — not a forgiving medium in terms of mistakes. Indirect sculpture uses materials that are cast in metal or another liquid material. While modern techniques have opened up the art to less experienced sculptors, Agop takes his work seriously: the granite pieces he makes and even the brass ones can take several months before they are finished. He never works from a sketchbook. “I want to see the piece — it is the first step to know where I am going.” It’s almost like Agop wants to build a friendship with his material before he starts to sculpt it. He watches it, walks around it, drinks tea, smokes, and watches some more.

Every year the Ministry of Culture sends 10 Egyptian artists to the Egyptian Academy in Rome as nominees for the State Prize of Artistic Creation. An architect and a theater director are already there. Agop was supposed to go to Italy a few months ago, but the ministry — which also sponsored the symposium in Aswan — let him postpone the trip in order to participate in the symposium. The actual prize will be awarded when he returns to Cairo after having spent three months learning Italian and 12 months working on his sculpture in Rome. In the meantime he will receive a fellowship that will cover expenses. The fellowship, Agop says, “makes you more responsible and encourages you to work and do your best.” If the ministry feels that a nominee is making excellent progress it is even possible to extend the stay and continue working without worries.

Agop still isn’t sure exactly what he wants to do in Rome. There are places he wants to visit such as Carrara, where the famous white marble comes from, and Pietrasanta, where well-known artists work next to amateurs at the foundries. “The only plan I have is not to have a plan. It is what makes me want to work,” he says.