Q&A WITH ARMEN AGOP

JULES MCDEVITT in CONVERSATION with ARMEN AGOP

*Mantra,* the title of Armen Agop’s multidisciplinary exhibition, held at Meem Gallery in the Autumn of 2019, reflects the esoteric concept behind the work as physical documentation of a spiritual practice. Each artwork is undertaken with
a focus or mantra, set by the artist and created by a repeated action. Choosing the profound simplicity of the ‘point’, and applying it over and over, Agop seeks to discover its limitless interior potential. Working with basic, elemental entities such as a ‘point’ or ‘line’, and carefully observing them until he sees a new way of being, the artist describes this obsessive process as a meditative ritual, which seeks to reveal an internal cosmos.

Well known for his sober black granite sculptures, expertly rendered into abstract organic forms, here Agop introduces his ethereal works on paper and canvas for the first time. The paintings have a luminous quality, at first glance they resemble the inherent monumentality of the artist’s sculptural work with their large, black expanses of space. However, upon closer inspection, the works reveal an explosion of ‘points’ in colourful hues, lightly and purposefully placed upon the canvas. The notions of time, labor, and ritual are rethought in these paintings, in an act of processing time.

**INTERVIEW:**

**Jules McDevitt**

Did this body of work materialise after the realisation that meditation has always played an unconscious part in your artistic process or did some exploration into the practice develop into this body of work?

**Armen Agop**

There has always been a meditative element to my practice, I believe a level of intimacy and solitude with the material itself is essential.

Like any birth, time is a fundamental factor in any kind of creation. We are born; after which it takes us time to develop an awareness and understanding in regard to our existence. My process is simply about practicing this awareness. The instinctive desire to create, combined with the contradictory desire to articulate silence and acting as an observer rather than a communicator led

me to deepen my intimacy with time and its duration. Human experiences can be a physical, cerebral and soulful process, I believe in the wholeness of the experience.

**JM**

It must be said that the inherently elemental qualities of granite don’t

automatically lend themselves to the ephemeral nature of mantras. Do you see these sculptures as visual manifiestations of an intangible concept or as biproduct of a personal spiritual exploration?

**AA**

I consider my instinctive desire to connect with stone simply as an example
of man’s engagement with his environment, an engagement which is absolutely essential to our survival as well as our experience on earth. This symbiotic connection permeates our lives in every possible way.

Man has used stone to make his way on this earth since the dawn of humanity. From its use in tools and hunting weapons, to tombs, it has been utilised in almost all human activity - a vital component within our story. I consider my obsessive relationship with granite to be relevant to all of our pasts. It is about extracting something from our interior universe and delivering it, through time and matter, to the outside world, effectively, learning to materialise the immaterial.

**JM**

You are known for your use of black granite, what keeps drawing you back to this notoriously difficult material?

**AA**

I don’t think about granite as being a difficult material.

Granite starts out deep at the core of the earth and ends up on its surface. I believe that there are reasons for this, perhaps humans, including myself, are one of those reasons.

Like most Armenians of my generation who grew up in the diaspora, I was always acutely aware of the word *Koyadevel*. This word has a complex definition, meaning: to exist and to endure, as merely existing is not enough. Growing up in Egypt and being surrounded by the eternal sculptures of the Pharaohs, this word developed a very personal significance for me. I guess in some ways the enduring characteristics of granite feeds the Armenian dreams of my generation.

**JM**

Can you talk about the process of creating your granite sculptures?

**AA**

I have a very intimate and obsessive relationship with granite, I have always felt that we complement each other on an intrinsic level. Granite is an ancient material which is not accustomed to change or manipulation, its hardness
and compactness require great time.

It is this very slowness of the process which allows me the time to discover
what it is that I really want to share with the material. What fascinates me about granite is its internal compressed energy, it has a profound dignity. I’ve observed that any piece of granite, in its natural form, stands with a certain pride, it’s the

character of the granite. Its presence dominates the surrounding space, so
to interfere in such a noble element of nature is a huge responsibility (granite doesn’t concede easily). I always ask myself, what sculpture could possibly be worthy of the transformation of such a material?

**JM**

You talk about the repetitive, laborious practice of sculpting granite in terms of the achievement of a meditative state, with every movement resulting in
a meaningful imprint. How much of this process is led by your subconscious?

**AA**

It is a practice of praying.

Granite requires a long time and a slow process of repetitive movements,
with each movement hardly showing any development, this certainly helps me become one with the material over time. Praying and ritual often comes with the repetition of sounds or phrases, or in my case, gestures. Practicing these gestures over an extended period of time, allows me to unite with the material and, ultimately with myself.

**JM**

In this body of work, you have focused on one basic element, the ‘point’, experimenting with drawing and painting as well as sculpture, what inspired you to do so?

**AA**

Although the ‘point’ is the smallest element of the sculptures it is fundamental as it gathers the internal energy of the material and communicates it to the outside world. I always noticed the potential of a ‘point’ and kept on observing it without having a specific intention. I discovered its richness by exploring its relationship with the form and space, each time unveiling a new side of its personality.

By getting acquainted with these manifold aspects of the ‘point’ I have become fascinated by the contradiction, the depth of its soberness, the greatness of this smallest of elements. Above all, it is the practice that is inspirational. In the granite sculptures, I work for a long time to capture and carve out the form and the raised ‘point’, in the process there are a lot of repetitive movements between carving, grinding, and endless shaping to capture a ‘point’, it is a meditative practice.

The paintings (and drawings) are a natural development of my ascetic approach. They have developed into a meditative process in which a ‘point’ becomes a personal mantra, a gestural mantra, being repeated endlessly without lofty plans or pretentious claims. The ‘point’ transcends from being a solitary entity,

as in the sculptures, to a member of a cosmic society, without losing its soberness or dignity.

**JM**

Do you see these works on canvas and on paper as a cathartic antidote to the hard labour of sculpting?

**AA**

No, I don’t.

Sculpting, painting, or drawing is not only a physical process, the authentic human experience involves our wholeness in mind, body, and soul, uniting with oneself and exhaling a personal experience through a matter. The process transforms the material, color, canvas, paper, stone into a container of a human experience.

**JM**

You are well known for your smooth, sculptural forms that appear to the viewer as perfect, and precise. Did you find it difficult to focus on the same subject matter and create the same effect using paper and paint?

**AA**

The subject matter of my work is the depiction of time in tangible form.
The work reflects the time that I spend with the material. In essence, the shift was from spending seemingly endless time in order to achieve one ‘point’ in granite to limitless time in the production of countless ‘points’. For me it’s not about the form itself, but about the interior world and the exterior universe. When I draw, I am a line, a dot, or a gesture, when I paint I am color, when I sculpt I pray to the inside world of the form and play with the outside.

**JM**

Do you see parallels with these works, which often resemble cosmic, space like scenes, and the esoteric void one achieves by meditation?

**AA**

Yes, I believe that art externalises an authentic interiority. The internal cosmos and the external one are just a matter of perspective.

**JM**

Could you elaborate on the process behind the works on canvas and paper?

**AA**

Time is the essential tool, time is the matter and the subject matter.

The paintings and drawings reflect the experience of the passing of time, they demonstrate the slowness of the process without the preoccupations of execution or completion. This allows me the freedom to give up the usual approach to go forward and, instead discover the alternate path of reaching inward. In a process of endlessness (which is close to stillness), changes are invisible, an intimacy with the stillness is in progress.

**JM**

For me your work makes me think of the 1964 landmark exhibition *Primary Structures*, perhaps the way your work interrupts the space, and encourages
the viewer to truly encounter it, to have to interact with it. Is that something that you think about when you make the work - how people will engage with it?

**AA**

In some respects, yes. A good example of this is in the *Touch* series where the viewer is invited to touch the sculptures, so the interaction is physical as well as visual. In other series I’ve focused more on the internal energy of the sculpture so that the external silence is articulated and leaves the viewer in a more reflective state, inviting a more internal level of engagement. To interact with artworks on both a physical and spiritual level simultaneously may seem antithetical but I believe the core of the experience is one, what we touch, touches us, physically and beyond.

**JM**

In the past your work has taken inspiration from humanity itself, as well as religion/mysticism, do you feel that this new series carries on these themes in terms of its elemental concept?

**AA**

Humans, at their core are egocentric beings, and the art of humans has always been self-centered – we created gods and demons from our own likeness. For a long time the human mind limited the universe to itself. From my perspective, a sculpture is an entity which should be able to relate to the whole world, as a world relates with a galaxy; and a galaxy with the universe.

Although the sculptures and the paintings contain a common element - the ‘point’, they diverge in concept. The paintings are a result of the duration of time, rituality, and a personal gestural mantra. Renouncing the manifold possibilities that can be achieved with a brush or a pen and being satisfied with the smallest mark. A ‘point’ is the beginning of a line, any drawing starts with a ‘point’, it is the first meeting between tool and surface, I chose to stop immediately, and restart and stop and restart, exploring the duration of time.