

Bill Vazan

Exploring The Limits of Sculpture

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Number 21, Fall 1992

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/10109ac>

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Publisher(s)

Le Centre de diffusion 3D

ISSN

0821-9222 (print)

1923-2551 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Campbell, J. D. (1992). Bill Vazan: Exploring The Limits of Sculpture. *Espace Sculpture*, (21), 42–47.

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Bill Vazan, *Observed*, 1990-1992. (Detail).
15 engraved granites. 1,5 x 6 x 4,8 m.
Installation in Agnes Etherington Gallery,
Queens University, Kingston, Ontario.
Photo : B. Vazan.

Over the course of more than thirty years, Montreal-based artist Bill Vazan has established himself as an important practitioner of conceptual, photographic and land-oriented art. Arguably the most important conceptual and land-

oriented artist now working in Canada, his oeuvre has always revealed a highly sophisticated social and environmental conscience and has demonstrated a deep understanding of the issues at stake in conceptual and land-oriented art. More impor-

tantly, it has attempted to explore the limits of sculpture.

From works of international significance and scope in the late 1960s, such as the global linkup projects *Worldline* and *Contacts*, through his conceptual photographic projects and earthworks, and culminating in his most recent sculptural (routed rock) and drawing works, Vazan's oeuvre as a whole has always represented a conscientious attempt to change the condition of being here and to push forwards the frontiers of what sculpture is.

Vazan addresses the panglobic factuality of culture in a human-centred universe and, most importantly, he acts out of a profound sense of respect for the natural environment. He has used rocks in his conceptual sculpture over a period of many years (such as *Rock Alignments & Pilings* (1963) and the *Balance* series (1971-74)). His more recent recourse to a routing technique transforms them into sculptures per se with real symbolic value.

One should stress at the outset that Vazan started his career as a painter but it was not long before he found it necessary to reach beyond what became for him the claustrophobic limits of the painting plane into the world of our concrete lived-experiences. Painting was simply too cloistered an endeavour; he wanted to realise possibilities that it could neither realise nor contain. He wanted to connect with our actual and possible experiences in what has been called the 'life-world' — which is nothing more or less than the world in which we already live.

Virtually from the outset of his concern for the 'life-world,' Vazan realised the boundlessness of its horizon: the awesome potentiality not just of the body and its kinesthesia but also the role of myth, magic and the imaginal for the making of art.

Vazan began executing his mature and historically important works in the late 1960s. While an analysis of the full scope of his endeavour obviously lies outside the parameters of the present essay, it is worth noting that his global linkup projects such as *Worldline* still represent a genuinely humanistic paradigm of cross-cultural communication and discourse.

In one of the more insightful texts written to this date on Vazan's work, Paul Heyer, an anthropologist, characterized Vazan as a contemporary "cosmographer". Heyer defined cosmography as a "mixture of science, art and philosophy that deals with the whole order of nature" and went on to suggest that Vazan is "concerned with a human centered universe."¹ This is still correct. All of Vazan's efforts as a creative artist have been, in effect, to educate his viewers concerning the potentiality — and, of course, the potential vulnerability — of the natural world now so much at risk; to reinstitute a long lost compact between ordinary man and the cosmic order he inhabits. This has had the effect of making us more sensitive to the natural phenomena and unseen forces that affect every facet of our daily lives.

II.

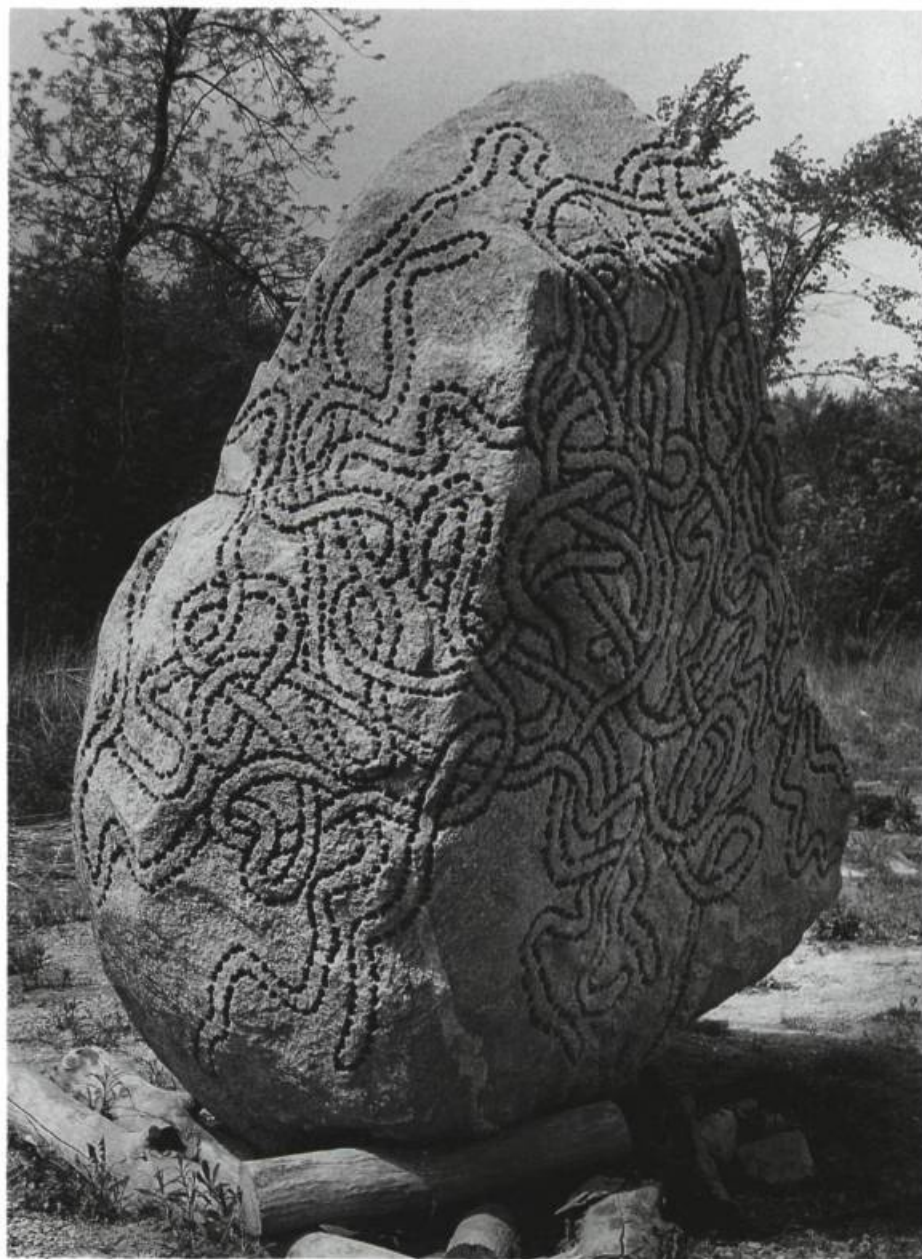
Bill Vazan's cosmogony is envisioned anew each and every time he penetrates the epidermis of a

given stone (in his sculptures) or the skin of the planet (in his earthworks). Going where no one has gone before, he etches there expressive lines in millenia-old matter; lines which project us beyond the mundane limits of the present tense, back into the plenitude of primordial time. In so doing, he effectively lets free an inhering spirit from the stone that really functions as an archetype — for him and for us, his viewers.

In the snaking lines graven in this living rock are haunting images, primal petroglyphs and atavistic sigils which bespeak a time when mark-making was magical by virtue of being invested with the power of anticipation; with sympathetic magic, and with primordial wonder.

Vazan's is a *cosmogonic* act. One might suggest that each line the artist routs in the surface of the rock is a contemporary recital of the cosmogonic myth. In effect, each time that he willfully circumscribes the mute stone with the immanent expressiveness of his line — sometimes coming back to where he started, full circle, as it were — that stone begins to speak, in a sense taking the artist and his viewers right back to the origin of the world.

Each stone that Bill Vazan exe-



In routing the rock; in articulating it; in subordinating it to his own intentions but working with, rather than against, its grain; in guiding it towards the fullness of an archaic expression still resonant today — in other words, in lending it a voice and a form adequate to express wholly human meanings,

Bill Vazan, *Black Nest*, 1992.
Engraved granite. H. : 2,59 m.
Installation: Tamworth, Ontario.
Photo : B. Vazan.

cutes makes us a living witness to the cosmogony. One could construe the stones as maquettes for our globe, and the routing its girdling. Vazan's act is a reactualisation of that mythical moment when the archetype was revealed for the first time².

In terms of Vazan's rocks and drawings, we can argue that a cosmogony is reproduced in each and every one of his constructions. A "new era" begins, in effect, with the routing of each rock. Each rock represents an absolute beginning.

We can also argue that it is this continual creation that renders him contemporary with the mythical moment of the beginning of the world and that his creativity is a very real attempt to return to that singular moment — the singularity of being — in order that he might continually regenerate himself as a creator. He shares in the sense and mystery of that moment which is unfathomable for most of us today.³ But here is no refusal of history, no effort to spurn an archaic past. There is only an intent to perform an archeology that might help us understand history better — and ourselves better. There is only the desire to re-establish contact with "being". Vazan dramatically brings to the foreground of our consciousness the long forgotten value of *mythification*, a value held sacrosanct by our archaic forebears.

While there is something of an "archaic ontology" in Vazan's endeavour, he is adamantly a late 20th century person. Vazan successfully reprises concepts of being and reality from a largely forgotten primordial past. This is the authentic meaning of his oeuvre. But he uses a syntax and sources that are very much of the present — and inflected with a premonition of our shared future.

Vazan tries to dynamically bridge both past and present in a paradigmatic creative gesture. Each stone that Vazan works has its hierophany enhanced through a host of interventions which are respectful of the materiality and demonstrate a somatic intimacy that is pervasive in the trajectory of each snaking, rhythmic line. His methodical subtractions from the rock mass never detract from the dignity of the stone as one thing in one world, but rather preserve and

channel its spirit without forsaking its natural presence. Vazan successfully unleashes a force that resides in latency in the living substrate of rock. The rocks he uses bring a history with them to his endeavour; they carry unutterable millenia of attrition, process and change. Indeed, their very existence as a material to be used is itself, as Mircea Eliade avers, a hierophany: *incompressible, invulnerable, it is that which man is not*.⁴

Vazan's stones become something more than stones, more even than aesthetic objects. They have acquired an atavistic voice. Vazan impregnates his rocks with a quality of primeval life through working with, rather than against, their innate properties and traits, whether pink granite, limestone or quartz. The symbolic shape or phenomenal resonance of a given genus of rock becomes a starting point, reflecting the depth of Vazan's own affinity for and familiarity with the material.

Such a resonance is never sacrificed by the artist as he works the rock; rather it dictates the parameters of his working methodology. His respect for the phenomenality of the rock — and the phenomenology of making — always enjoys primacy. Vazan works with the outer, more epidermal layer of the rock surface. He never strips it down to the point where its materiality becomes secondary. His well-delineated 'markings,' while well-nigh permanent in a relative sense, are themselves subject to the relentless attrition of time.

Furthermore, the brute authenticity of the stone *qua* stone enjoys real primacy over — and perhaps transcends — the innate transience of its status as an aesthetic object. It imbues that latter object with magical power, with the sensibility of archaic man, with the sense of a world unfettered by the often malign technics we have inflicted upon ourselves in modernity.

The very routing of the stone reflects kinship with a primordial act. One senses Vazan's respect for the stone itself, his desire to bring to a state of manifestation its inherent attributes. Paradoxically, this helps open our own empathic compact with it — as actual rock, as aesthetic object and even as celestial archetype — perhaps because we never lose sight of the genuine materiality that has been strengthened by the artist's manner of working.

What happens in this 'empathic compact' is an instant journey, or better, an instantaneous connection between the symbol (the engraved stone sculpture) and the thing symbolised (an archaic world that can be reached by the embodied imagination that the rock addresses directly).

Palpable atavisms surge up in the imagination. The imagination is as much a place as is the context from which the rock was removed by the artist in the first instance. The synchronicity between imaginal contexture and sculptural context is so seamless that we transpose ourselves there with alacrity.

The stone sculpture is the sign-vehicle for something else; another reality altogether, one in which we can move only by virtue of the motility of imagination. In this it shares something with the shaman's materials: bone, stone and skin. Like them, matter here is at the mercy of the imaginal, which informs and transforms it even while its materiality is left

pretty much intact. Because our own imaginative propensities are brought into play, the images that enliven these objects have no finitude, only an unending depth.

III.

Bill Vazan has an abiding understanding of and respect for the imaginal and a desire to share that understanding with the observer. He acts as our guide into a primordial world rife with atavisms and archetypes, and makes these immediately accessible to us.

Vazan as a creative artist has learned how to help his viewers develop a sensitivity towards the imaginal and to enter into a compact with it. He is able to teach and guide us into a relation with the imaginal because it is a terrain he knows intimately. He knows the topography and the signposts. He is conversant with the access roads and the border-crossings. He clarifies the imaginal by using images that remind us of those that emerge from the surface of a waking dream: images, pictographs and symbols that always point beyond themselves. Where do they point? To a time before attrition; to a space that precedes the cloistered urban spaces of today. To the therapeutic value of myth in a de-mythologised world. And finally, and perhaps most importantly, to the authentic voices of the Ancestors who have been now all but silenced in Modernity. Thus, his work is a catalyst for and itself contingent upon a relationship between real and imaginary worlds.

The imaginal cannot and should not be reduced to the merely *conceptual*. The latter does not supplant the former, and the former resists the taxonomy of the latter. It is not necessary nor is it advisable to subject Vazan's pictographic, graven images to the finalistic interpretation and enervating taxonomy all-too-common today. This sort of willfull reductionism is both self-defeating and superfluous. One should instead recognise the value of metaphor, and the inviolable nature of the imaginal. This recognition is brought on by the work.

Vazan amplifies images that arise out of myriad contexts, including folklore, myth, archaic life and timeless human emotions and gestures. Through an open framework of and for the imaginal, he nurtures an imagery that functions as a catalyst to change the condition of being here.

His images are restless chameleons, real polymorphs, moving from site to site in micro- and macroscopic depth worlds by virtue of a timeless vocabulary anchored in the universality of the symbolic. This mythic-symbolic language ensures that specific images always transcend the quotidian terrain of brute facts. The sculptures themselves, given their polymorphism, never resolve into static entities, but embroider their own universe.

The creative process begins with the choice of rock. Vazan chooses only those rocks that he intuitively will be promising ones for his purpose. These are the rocks which possess a palpable aura of both time past and being present; rocks that have suffered the effects of the millenia, but have

not been silenced; remnants of a lost world that live on in the present and which are redolent of the wonder of telescoped time.

There is something inherent in the symbolic topography of Vazan's work. It secures a sense of the archaic natural landscape in which, say, the Delphic Oracle was located — that 'towering cauldron of blasted rock'. If there are spirits in these stones, it may well be because they still evoke oracular vestiges of the bicameral mind.⁵

The famous oracle of Apollo at Delphi was marked by a strange cone-like structure called the *omphalos* or navel. It stood at what was believed to be the center of the earth. It was made of stone.⁶ Vazan's huge rocks of awesome tonnage literally dwarf us and annex their spaces or rather our spaces. They weigh on the body and gently coerce us into circumnabulating them, coming to terms not only with their immense girth but with their complex graphic petroglyphs. This is also true of his earthworks and their surface cuttings. The geoglyphs there stake a claim on our motility.

The rock becomes an edifice which carries the implicit promise of language. As we decode the graphic representations there, whether wholly abstract or partially figurative, the sculpture is transformed into an oracle, and begins to speak eloquently of other times, other places and other peoples. Times, places and peoples perhaps beyond our immediate ken, but never beyond our imaginative or empathic reach.

At their best, Vazan's stones make a powerful statement not about their materiality, but about their own phenomenality and the nameless spirit we project into them; the archaic yet strangely topical and beguiling life we grant them in the looking.

IV.

Thus far, we have discussed the imaginal aspect of Vazan's work. However, Vazan's routed rocks also possess a tactile dimension that enhances their physical presence, primordial aura, and imaginal potential.

Vazan's sculptures are profoundly *expressive* to the sense of touch; each has a plenary unit of meanings. As we trace the linear rifts across the surface, it is as though we are reading a braille that draws upon our potential for empathy.

We feel the features of the face-construction in the petroglyph that Vazan has carved there, but we also sense their spiritual-existential meaning. Feeling as well as seeing attunes us to the primordially of the endeavour, as well as something of the spiritual strength to be found (or rather *felt*) therein.

The smaller stones are eminently tactile objects which compell us to touch their surfaces. The roughness or smoothness of the surface, the coldness, the unyielding presence of the rock *qua* rock, its implement or tool-like character, and the primeval resonance that cloaks the living rock — these are communicated to us immediately as first-level perceptual information.

Vazan's work opens the door to a wholly human world, on the one hand, and a world that

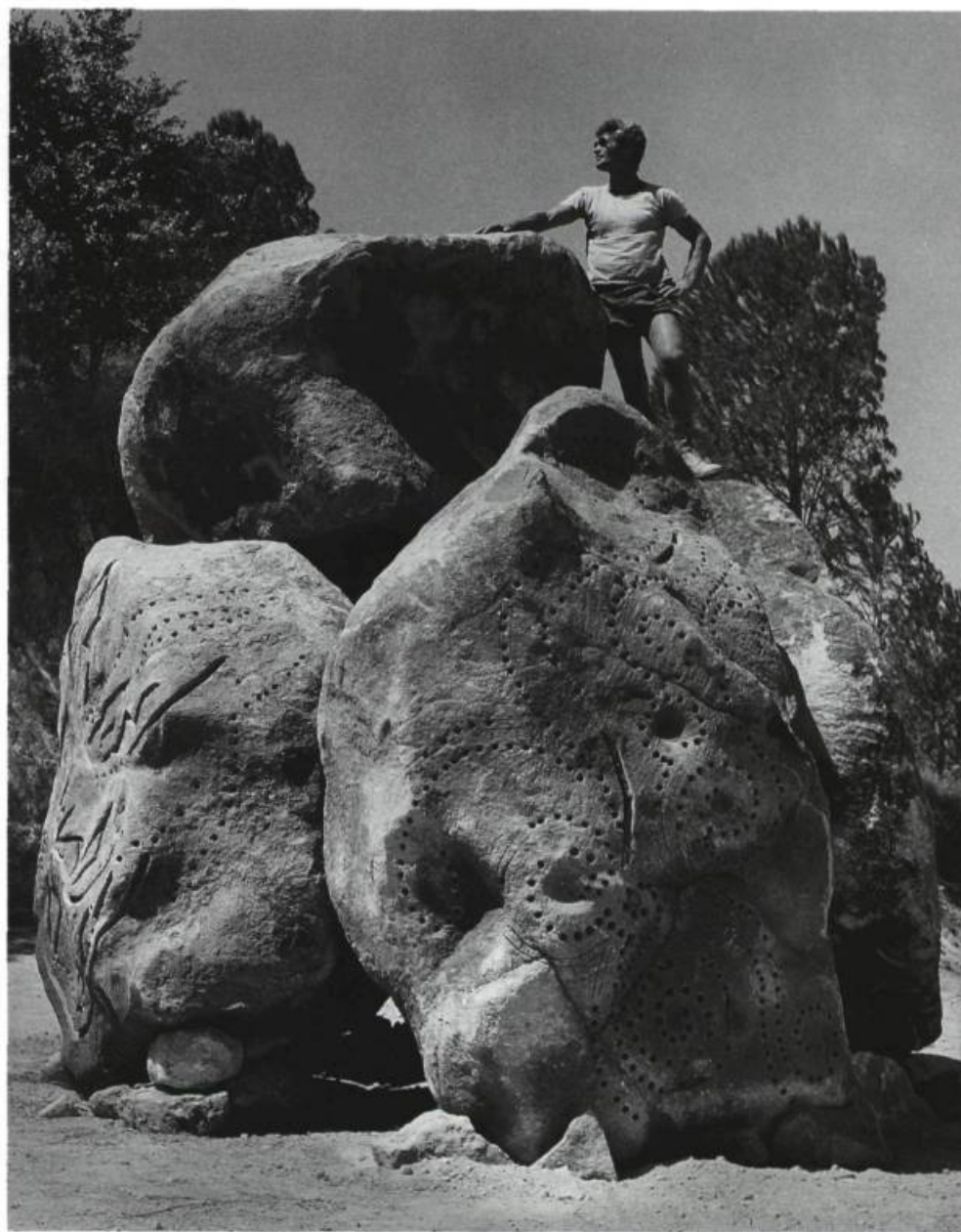
predates human inhabitation, on the other. Our communion with the etched rock frees up its inhering archetypes. Vazan believes that human consciousness is an integral part of the universe and his work makes us one with the stone. The rocks have a primary appeal to the very *restlessness* of our hands, our predilection for searching out patterns of meaning in the porous face of stone.

Touching is, then, of primary significance in coming to terms with what Vazan's stones might mean, quite aside from their pictographic identity, as as we decipher them.

Vazan makes the mute stones speak by virtue of his relentless routing, and the powerful petro-

These restless ghosts graven in time-worn stone have a stubborn capacity to haunt. We recognise the faces that stare out of the physiognomy of the rock-face as being nothing more nor less than our own.

Vazan's project is not addressed to nor contingent upon the synchronic authority of a Cartesian subject. His work is not anchored in nor the outgrowth of the tradition of Western subjectivism. Here is no mute metaphysics of presence. Vazan's



glyphs he leaves there. Through tracing a tangled skein of deliberate absences over his surfaces he creates a palimpsest of unforeseen *presences*: sometimes fey but never frivolous, always expressive and never mute, restive and never static entities.

Bill Vazan, *Burning Stone*, 1987. Engraved basalt. H. : 4,26 m.. Tel Hai Sculpture Park, Israel. Photo : B. Vazan.

glyphs are atavistic; they hearken back to a time when the tradition they are ostensibly situated within did not exist.

Since old stones are used, their primordially is a literal fact. The petroglyphs etched into their surfaces, with their deliberate crudeness and anti-decorative spirit, emphasise that primordially. The fact that a router — the product of a technological society — is used does not advertise itself. We think of the magnificent Mayan stone carvings, with their deeply chis-

elled surfaces. So there is no spectre of Cartesian closure here. Its observation and incorporation of the surrounding world is acute. Vazan has said to me on more than one occasion: "We as a species will exist only as long as we observe".

V.

We have discussed something of the specific experience of the work and tried to convey its particular resonance as sanctifying an older, more archaic world that is nevertheless relevant to our experience of the world today. There is a paradox here, for Vazan draws on sources from the cutting-edge of contemporary science. His sources are varied and include such things as

New Physics, Superstrings, Grand Unified Theory, drawing upon a host of scientific fields and discoveries. He is an artist fascinated with such things as black holes, wormholes, quantum 'ghostliness' and chaos.

For instance, a 'wormhole' is a recent development in physics, a notional shortcut through spacetime, whereby different parts of the same spacetime enjoy far closer proximity than they ordinarily do. Spacetime is treated as a two-dimensional sheet folded through a third dimension and passage between the two points is far more rapid through the wormhole than through ordinary space.⁷ Vazan has seized upon this concept in rocks which depict the wormholes on either side of a given rock, suggesting their passage through its interiority and out the other side and the notion that the holes are really passing through incommensurable and uncognizable realities accessible only to the imagination.

Vazan practices an 'anthropic' approach to his endeavour akin to that approach of cosmology that developed fairly recently in physics. The 'anthropic' approach is very different from the traditional scientific approach in which the observer played no role. In light of this new framework, coincidences and 'accidents' have taken on new meaning and it has become clear that the balance of celestial forces may depend on the presence of human observers. Suddenly we, as observers, have become cognizant of our crucial role in determining the nature of our reality.⁸ Bill Vazan is a creative artist, not a physicist, but he is still an adherent to the Anthropic principle.

The Cosmic Dance is also relevant for Vazan's work, albeit in a more poetic than literal sense. If we approach Vazan's work without presuppositions about either its genealogy or its context, we see how effectively it functions as a potent analogy for this Cosmic Dance. The line of demarcation between his shamanic practice and the exploration of the subatomic world is not so disparate as to be mutually exclusive. If some readers find this far-fetched, it's worth noting that the most telling metaphor for the Cosmic Dance is not to be found in elaborate scientific theorems from a related discipline but in the belief-context of Hinduism, and the dancing god Shiva.

Shiva, a primordial god, is the King of Dancers in Hinduism. The religion posits that all existence is part of an infinite rhythmic progression of creation and destruction. The dance of Shiva represents this eternal rhythmic pattern of creation and destruction, of death and rebirth, which proceeds through endless cycles. Certainly, the linear element in Vazan's sculptures and drawings enacts a continual cosmic dance of energy. A dynamic interplay between the line and the materiality of the stone surface is always apparent.

This metaphor seems peculiarly appropriate for Vazan's work, given that both modern physics and eastern mysticism are equally opportune fodder for his mythologising endeavour.

To see Vazan at work in his sandblasting lab at the Université du Québec à Montréal is to realise how modern is the technology he uses. Hunched



over the huge girth of rock, wearing what looks like a space helmet wreathed in sparks and detritus, relentlessly working the surface, Vazan resembles an astronaut looking out from his visor onto an asteroid's surface, scoured and ravaged under swirling, blistering clouds of dust, debris and electric discharges. As Vazan says, if by the mid-20th century the Western mind-set was suffused with an 'aerial view,' then by the end of the century, it will be suffused with planetary probes and scans (as in this artist's photoworks).

Indian artists of the twelfth century represented Shiva's cosmic dance by figures with four arms whirling in a relentless dynamism that symbolised the unity of all Existence. Vazan has recourse to

other human pictorial allegories, for example the recent series *The Observed* (1990-92) wherein a rendering of hands held up to the face in awe, chagrin, surprise, or a glyph-like face registering brooding, meditation, deep thought bear witness to the universality of the sculptor's endeavour. There is a superlative balance that is just as effective in invoking the dynamic balance of creation and destruction in the world. Vazan's work is redolent of this cosmic dance — whether it be Shiva's dance or the dance of subatomic matter.

VI.

In the end, we find Vazan's endeavour, his own picturing of the world, a sort of visual storytelling, as John S. Dunne defined it:

There is some profound link, it seems, between the story of a man's life and the story of his world. The story of his world is his myth, the story in which he lives, the greater story that encompasses the story of his life. To discover his myth he must go deeper into his life than he would if he were going to tell only his life story.⁹

Bill Vazan always goes deeper into his life than he would if he were only going to tell his own life-story. As the poet Wallace Stevens wrote: "The image must be of the nature of its creator. / It is the nature of its creator increased, / Heightened."¹⁰ Vazan attempts to rediscover the world of his own beginnings; and succeeds in heightening its impact and making that world new and provocative for us.

If, in his recent sculptures and drawings, he achieves intrinsic universality, it is not because of the resemblance between that story and the primeval world of the ancient myths, but because of the resemblance between his story and our own. The rediscovered narrative, written and

read in routed weathered stone, becomes our own myth, our own folklore, the archetypal rendering of our own life-story. ♦

The above text is a précis and revision of the author's catalogue essay that accompanied his recent survey of Bill Vazan's work of the last 5 years. The exhibition, at the Agnes Etherington Art Centre in Kingston, will be open through September 6, 1992.

- 1 Paul Heyer, "Cosmography in a New Context," *Bill Vazan: Recent Land and Photoworks* (Montreal: Musée d'art contemporain, 1980), p. 28.
- 2 Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, trans. Willard R. Trask (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1954), p. 76.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 77.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 4.
- 5 See Julian Jaynes, *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1976), pp. 325-326.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 321.
- 7 For a full and fascinating account of the latest discoveries in physics, see Paul Davies and John Gribbin, *The Matter Myth* (New York: Simon & Schuster / Touchstone, 1992).
- 8 See Paul Davies, "Speculations: The Anthropic Principle" in *Science Digest*, October, 1983, p. 24.
- 9 John S. Dunne, *Time and Myth: A Meditation on Storytelling as an Exploration of Life and Death* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), p. 50.
- 10 Wallace Stevens, "A Mythology Reflects Its Region" in *The Palm at the End of the Mind: Selected Poems and a Play*, edited by Holly Stevens (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), p. 398.

L'oeuvre de l'artiste montréalais Bill Vazan révèle une conscience sociale et environnementale importante, de même qu'une compréhension profonde de l'art conceptuel et du land art. La démarche de Vazan, tant au niveau du pictural qu'à celui du sculptural, s'inspire d'une gamme très riche de sources, allant de la mythologie primitive à la physique contemporaine. Dans les sculptures de Vazan, le passé et le futur se rejoignent. La narrativité des oeuvres témoigne d'une volonté constante de l'artiste de redécouvrir ses origines premières, à la fois qu'elle réussit à recréer, par les sillons gravés dans la pierre usée, l'aspect mythique, folklorique, et archétypal de l'histoire de tout être.

Bill Vazan, *Momento Mori* #1. Engraved metamorphic granite from Observed. Made in Tamworth, Ontario. May 1992. Photo : B. Vazan.

Bill Vazan, *Night Edge*, 1991. Engraved bohemian granite. H. : 2,8 m. Installation in Vystaviste Park, Prague. Photo : B. Vazan.

