

## Fonseca's Imaginary Playground

**SAMRIDDI SHARMA**

The Cooper Union

Looking like architectural models, the works of artist Gonzalo Fonseca (1922-1997) born in Montevideo, Uruguay stimulate the viewer's imagination through the unfolding of different narratives in his miniature sculptures. His sculptures are filled with stories, connections, abstractions, metaphors and associations, something that could also be adopted in architecture models. Fonseca studied architecture at the university of Montevideo for three years, before joining Uruguayan artist Torres-Garcia's workshop school from 1942-1949. There he explored concepts of abstraction and constructivism. The nature of Fonseca's sculptures are an embodiment of the ideas and concepts of Latin American Art that he absorbed from his voyages to archaeological sites, as well as from the relationships he entertained with fellow artists. Another key figure in Fonseca's life was the Japanese-American artist Isamu Noguchi (1904 -1988), whom he met in 1960s and 70s on several occasions, first in NYC and then in Italy. Fonseca and Noguchi shared a close bond based on their unique identities. Their friendship fostered a new understanding of sculpture, which went beyond object making into observing them as a microcosmic way to understand play.

### INTRODUCTION

Artist Gonzalo Fonseca's work creates an interplay between wall-relief, sculpture and drawing, to provoke our imagination. His works create an interactive playful narrative of showing the conflicting conditions of revealing and concealing, inside and outside, open and close to engage the viewer. Fonseca was born in Montevideo, Uruguay, where he studied architecture for three years. It is here where he came in contact with artist Torres-Garcia, in whose workshop he went on to work from 1942-1949<sup>1</sup>. Here, he explored themes of abstraction and constructivism. Fonseca's works have inculcated his mentor Torres-Garcia's philosophy of questioning the conditions of duality or paradoxicality to be one and the same, this can be seen as the timelessness that he creates in his works, by placing architectural symbols from the past and the future in the same physical space.<sup>2</sup>

His extensive travels to archaeological sites in the Middle East, Europe and South America<sup>3</sup> also inspired him and led him to develop the primitive, ancient and mythical aspect of his sculptures. Encounters with the antique world in the form of Mesoamerican, Egyptian and European architecture led him to develop his own language for his works, which operated in this cultural limbo. His voyages to all these pre-historic sites

influenced him deeply, and helped him develop a universal identity, of a nomad in spirit. Fonseca split his time between his studio in New York and Seravezza near Lucca. The playful manner in which Fonseca incorporated iconographic mythological and abstract elements from the past and the future in his sculptures, prompted his viewers imagination. The viewer can then start to make associations from these images creating his or her own alternate realities. Fonseca used signs and imagery in bits and pieces from other cultures as signifiers to evoke his viewer's memory.

### CONFRONTATION BETWEEN ARCHITECTURE AND SCULPTURE

Fonseca's methodology of excavating blocks of stone also plays a key role in activating his sculptures by engaging the viewer in different scales. In his Arethusa piece, 1980 he carves out niches, amphitheatres and terraces juxtaposed with geometric forms. As the name suggests, the circular cavity in the left corner is a signifier of the Arethusa story<sup>4</sup>, in which she was a nymph who transformed into a fresh water fountain. On looking at it closely you become a participant of this fantasy. In order to open up a dialogue between his sculptures and the viewer, Fonseca plays with scale in the photographic reproductions of his models as well. The Arethusa piece is viewed both in a subjective<sup>5</sup> and an objective<sup>6</sup> manner. In the first scenario it is viewed closely where you're engrossed in it's details, in the other case you view the entire piece in a natural surrounding outdoors, by placing it there you're being distanced from the sculpture and it starts to read more like an object.

The Castalia piece from 1980 (Fig.3) highlights his act of recovering, and his play with scale. He dismantles or rather extracts a non-figural body in the form of fragments to evoke the image of it as a whole. The head, the toes, the fingers, all seem to have been salvaged from a monolithic mass. The delaminated figure appears to be like an unsolved puzzle, waiting to push the viewer's imagination off balance. When viewed closely you can imagine yourself being absorbed by this miniature labyrinth where you find yourself entering miniature enclosures, taking stairs that lead nowhere and dodging absurdly scaled parts of the human body, thus transforming our conception of scale.

Another artist playing with our perception of scale is Charles Simonds (born in 1945, age 73 years) based in New York. He juxtaposes his primitive looking miniature models of



Figure 1: Mantelpiece, 1978. Brownstone, 92 x 40 x 12 cm. Gonzalo Fonseca, XLIV Biennale Di Venezia, Museo Nacional de Artes Plasticas y Visuales.

dwelling with the context of the city. The photographs framing contrasting scales of his dwellings, placed in the nooks and corner of existing real scale architectural elements acts as an agent to stimulate the viewers fantasy. While Fonseca takes fragments from existing cultures and juxtaposes them with his own geometric forms, Charles Simonds imagines a civilization consisting of “Little People”<sup>7</sup> who coexist with us in cities and walk through our streets. His work exists in cities throughout the world; New York, Paris, Shanghai, Berlin, London, Dublin, and so on. When you compare both their models one seems to be a miniaturised environment in itself while the other is initiating a dialogue with the outside world. Somewhere in between these conflicting scenarios you are encouraged to imagine, and explore the space between reality and imagination. The play of miniature creates a world of fantasy, but in order to enter it, we as viewers are forced to cross the threshold of absurdity.

Fonseca plays with the aspect of time in the piece *Piazza* (1985)<sup>8</sup>. It is carved out of a large block of orange Persian Travertine. The roughness of stone gives us an impression of timelessness, and the geometric forms that have been carved out tell another story. The sculpture seems to exist in a sort of limbo. Its overall form reminds us of a table hill, with its rough sides and flat table like top. It is punctured with mysterious niches, and hollowed out gateways on all sides. As seen in his *Mantelpiece*, Brownstone (Fig.1) sculpture he uses suggestive forms with secret doors and windows carved into the monolith, teasing the viewer's imagination. Another characteristic element in this is the hand-drawn ladder connecting openings leading to secret passages, such as the one on the left, which leads up to a recessed entrance with a half closed door. The carved out architectural elements in this case suggest a gesture to engage the viewer by the act of intrusion.

The technique of carving or extraction that Fonseca uses in his work can be also read in relation to the term, *stereotomy* (or the science of cutting solids), given the fact that he studied architecture before becoming an artist. Francesco

Cacciatore<sup>9</sup>, Associate Professor in Architectural and Urban Composition at the IUAV University in Venice (DACC) states that, “the term stereotomic, from the Greek *stereos* (solid) and *tomia* (cut), introduces an idea of building, which is not conceived as the assemblage and juxtaposition of elements typical of the tectonic approach, but rather as the gradual removal of matter from an initial shape”. What we see in Fonseca's work is the synthesis of both the techniques of tectonic and stereotomic. He extracted the stone in a way that contains spatial voids within a solid mass, then he further added fragile looking, dangling elements from within those voids. Thus, maintaining the overall monolithic quality of the block at the same time arousing our imaginations by introducing captivatingly playful tactile elements for us to tug.

#### **STRUGGLE BETWEEN MODEL AND SCULPTURE, THROUGH THE WORKS OF GONZALO FONSECA AND ISAMU NOGUCHI**

Another key figure in Fonseca's life was the Japanese-American artist Isamu Noguchi (1904-1988), whom he met in 1960s and 70s on several occasions, first in NYC and then in Italy, where they sourced their stone from the same mines as Michelangelo<sup>10</sup>. Fonseca and Noguchi shared a close bond based on their unique cultural and universal identities. Their friendship fostered a new understanding of sculpture in architecture, which went beyond object making into observing them as a microcosmic way to understand play.

Mount Altissimo is the stone quarry in Seravezza where they both mined their stone and it's also where Fonseca set up his second studio apart from Manhattan. The image of his sculptures with the straight lines are similar to the existing quarry marks showing how being in that environment influenced him. This shows how play can be triggered by our interaction with materiality at different scales. Scale and materiality play an important role in the process of negotiating between the stone as an object and stone as a sculpture, embedded with layers of stories. There is a photograph which shows Gonzalo Fonseca standing next to a ladder, which is an architectural object. The ladder is also drawn in a lot of his works, signifying its role as a mediator between play and architecture. This dual relationship that we share with an object at the human



Figure 2: This Tortured Earth, 1943. Bronze, 7.6 x 96.8 x 73.7 cm. The Noguchi Museum.

Noguchi's playground models were realistic models of his unrealized works, which represented a collection of ideas addressing the act of play in education and learning. This Tortured Earth, 1943 has been molded fusing male and female forms, to be reminded of the disfiguration of the earth's surface as an effect of wars. The land has been sculpted highlighting the earth's bruised body in the form of incisions and distortions. Both Noguchi's and Fonseca's perspectives towards civilization can be seen in their work, one highlights the self-destructive nature of it and the other brings out its quality to build, construct, explore and create. Noguchi's Play Mountain, 1933 represents, gently molded earth forms, shallow depressions and highly sculpted areas. In Noguchi's own words he states, "It's their world, not a grown up's world. It's a land in which a person three feet tall can run around. I want the child to discover something I created for him and I want him to confront the earth as, perhaps, early man confronted it."<sup>11</sup> This quote makes it clear that Noguchi's unrealized playground models were representations of a child's universe, he calls it a heightened landscape for them consisting of many aspects of theatre. Whereas, Fonseca's play intended or not, was open to everyone. Noguchi models can be read as sculptures, whereas Fonseca's sculptures can be read as architectural models. Both their models represent their idea of play in different ways. It is implicit that they both wanted their viewers to engage with their works. Noguchi's approach towards his models was more three dimensional, while Fonseca's was more frontal. The frontal approach to Fonseca's models with its niches and alcoves

fascinates the viewer even from a distance, because of its deceptive appearance, which arouses his curiosity. A planar approach in a way ends up revealing all the characteristics of Noguchi's models at the very first instance, thus not allowing room for any further investigation. Noguchi's playscapes are contoured and finished, they have a neat appearance and an absolute form opposed to Fonseca's rough stones. This gives it a haptic quality. It then doesn't necessarily have to be a miniature model of something but can then be perceived as a sculpture to be played with at a 1:1 scale. Fonseca's on the other hand are more tactile. He uses techniques involving scale and distance to create dynamic moments within his sculptures, which almost give them an animate quality. From a distance you see a play of light and shadow which invites you to come closer and that's when you find a door waiting for you to be opened, weird geometrical forms hanging from strings in niches, waiting to be pulled. Tools of play waiting to be manipulated with. It is a process of exploration where you unearth layers of mythology, history, reality and imagination.

#### CONCLUSION

There is direct correspondence between Fonseca's sculptures and drawings, they are not just images, but an embodiment of his ideas of play. His sculptures are filled with stories, connections, abstractions, metaphors and associations, something that could also be adopted in architecture models. He carves out spaces within the stone with a sense of intimacy, creating a dialogue between his work and the viewer. His constructions are an instrument to understand the order of culture and civilization, through their manifestation into miniature models. His scale of operation and the way he constructs frisky elements in his sculptures allows the viewer to participate in the narrative he creates, this is something that Noguchi's pure forms are unable to do. Fonseca's play with time, form and materiality into absurd fantasies depicted in his sculpture provides the seeds of imagination.<sup>12</sup> Artist Gonzalo Fonseca's work reflects upon various aspects of play in relation to architecture. In the coded framework of his miniaturized universe he uses architectural elements in an unconventional way, questioning and challenging our normative understanding of their use in architecture. He also uses encrypted suggestive forms, concealing the larger labyrinth of stories held within. Architectural models, in the current age have lost the element of play, by having been restricted by set standards of representation. They've become mere renditions of a building, but not a stimulant to initiate imagination. In the given context, Fonseca and the works by his contemporaries can be studied as an example to inform the way in which sculpture and architectural models could involve and engage people in a playful and imaginative way.



Figure 3: Castalia, 1980. Travertino, 65 x 180 x 170 cm. Gonzalo Fonseca, XLIV Biennale Di Venezia, Museo Nacional de Artes Plásticas y Visuales.

#### ENDNOTES

1. <https://www.gonzalofonseca.com/biography/>
2. <http://www.ceciliadetorres.com/taller>
3. Gonzalo Fonseca, XLIV Biennale Di Venezia, Museo Nacional de Artes Plásticas y Visuales, 1990, 18.
4. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Arethusa-Greek-mythology>
5. <https://www.gonzalofonseca.com/installations/>
6. <https://www.gonzalofonseca.com/installations/>
7. <http://www.charles-simonds.com/dwellings.html>
8. <https://www.gonzalofonseca.com/sculpture/>
9. [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/305397591\\_Stereotomic\\_Models\\_in\\_Architecture](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/305397591_Stereotomic_Models_in_Architecture)
10. [https://www.ceciliadetorres.com/pdf/press\\_182.pdf](https://www.ceciliadetorres.com/pdf/press_182.pdf)
11. *Noguchi's Imaginary Landscapes*, Martin Friedman, 1978, 39.
12. *The Poetics of Space* (1958), Gaston Bachelard translated by Maria Jolas and with an introduction by Richard Kearney.

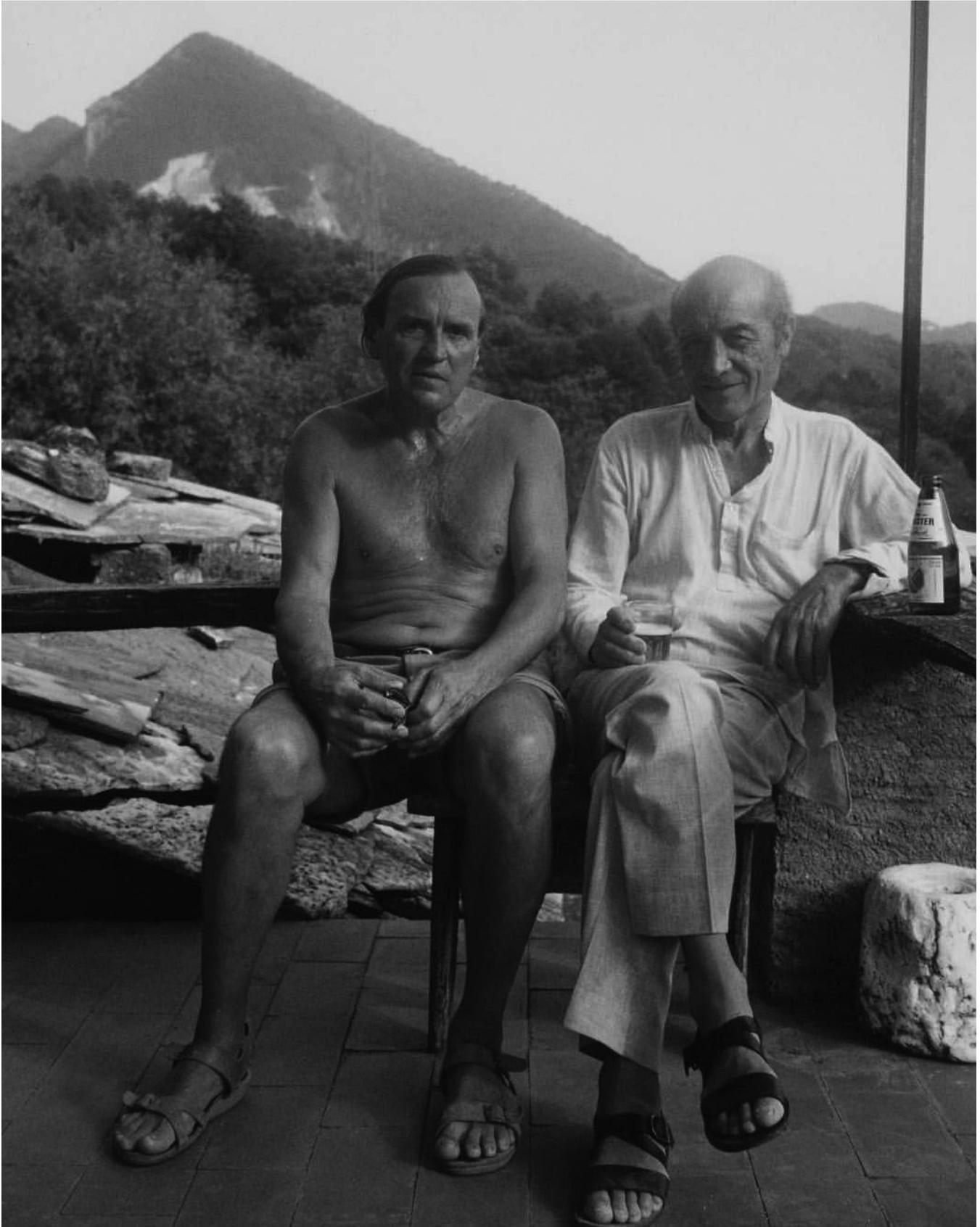


Figure 4: Gonzalo Fonseca with Isamu Noguchi, 1984. Seravezza, Italy.