

# THADDEUS MOSLEY: AFRICAN-AMERICAN SCULPTOR

CARNEGIE MUSEUM OF ART, PITTSBURGH, 1997.

## TALK ABOUT SCULPTURE

Interview with David Lewis and Thaddeus Mosley

*In addition to the taped conversations we had in the summer of 1995, I have had many conversations with Thad about his work. You can't be with Thad for very long without sculpture-talk. For the sake of brevity, I have distilled several hours of taped discussion, hoping that I have not lost too much of Thad's voice or meaning.*

### Logs and Stones

*DL: Where do you get the raw materials for your sculptures?*

*Thad:* I get them wherever I can. Cherry, sycamore, and walnut are the main woods I'm interested in. When street trees are being trimmed or felled by the City's Forestry Division, they are sawed into lengths to be transported and disposed of. I take logs that I can fit into my station wagon - so I seldom take any that are longer than six feet. Many of my sculptures are five to eight feet high are made of two or three pieces stacked or fitted together. I begin thinking about sculptural themes even when I'm out there choosing logs.

I occasionally buy logs from tree surgeons or from lumber mills near Touchstone where I teach in the summer. Sometimes artists give me the logs that are too big or too difficult for them to carve. That's fine with me.

A lot of my stones I pick up from the sites of demolished buildings, limestones and sandstones especially. Stones from steps and foundations are usually dressed. Occasionally I've used railroad ties or old wooden beams, oak, and mahogany. Then I explore scrapyards where I find odd pieces of metal that interest me even before I know how I am going to incorporate them into a sculpture. I never weld these pieces or alter them. By incorporating them into a sculpture, I change their context; then they come alive in a new way.

### Generating Themes

*DL: How do you generate your sculptural themes?*

*Thad:* Well, first of all, I don't generate themes. My woods and stones and I generate themes together. When I bring in a load of logs or blocks of stone, I stack them up in the studio. The logs are generally green and need to dry out. Every time I go to my workbench I walk by them and get to know them better. The more I see them and restock them the more I see special characteristics in each one. One log may split while it is drying, another may have a scar or some rot, another a twist or a knot. Similarly, stones have different grains, colors, textures. Gradually an idea begins to assert itself, and then I start to carve. Because trees are alive and raise their trunks

and branches from the earth to the sky, I often see human associations. But I never make drawings. I draw with hammer and chisel - a sculptural improvisation, a journey.

## **Discipline**

*DL: Talking of improvisation, Charlie Parker had an exceptional capacity for musical innovation, but was he “an intellectual?” Is there a parallel between his approach to music and yours to sculpture?*

*Thad:* Parker is often said to be one of the most intellectual of all jazz musicians. There's a discipline that's the basis of his music, a mental structure, on which improvisation takes off. I've heard that Mahler, Schonberg, Hindemith, and Bartok were the composers he most liked to listen to. One might say that this is parallel to my fascination with Brancusi, Noguchi, and African art. Miles Davis used to recount how Parker would disappear for a week, or even several weeks, and then turn up on the night of a concert in a not-very-good mood. But once the beat was set, away he would go.

In my own case, everything I surround myself with relates to what I'm trying to do in my work. I listen to jazz a lot; most of the stuff I read is non-fiction and deals in the realm of ideas. What I'm thinking about most of the time is sculpture. Even beneath turmoil and chaos there's a pattern. I try to channel my mental energies into a narrow sculptural focus: materials, form, rhythm, surface, relation to the earth, capacity to soar.

My basic approach hasn't changed in years. In every sculpture there are new explorations. That's what makes sculpture alive and keeps me sculpting. I don't think I will ever change this approach now.

## **African-American Language in Art**

*DL: You are an African-American. Your African-Americanness permeates your life and conversation. Whether you are larking around or being serious, it is always present. Do you think there is an African-American “language” in art?*

*Thad:* How people react to pervasive experiences such as being black in American society varies from person to person. Everyone's life is different.

People who participate in art have perspectives that are entirely different from most people. For those of us who are African-American artists, being African-American is central to our lives. It's necessarily something that we self-consciously purvey but it's something that we are. Some people have a personal relation with God, with religion; but I have a personal relation with all the things I live with. I live with being an African-American; it gives me intellectual satisfaction, meditation, and the inspiration to work.

For me the largest contribution black have made in the world is African sculpture. African music, particularly as it has been channeled through dance on modern dance is not spoken about enough. In spite of these contributions, there still is very little money or support for African-American music or dance or visual art.

Noguchi made a remark about sensibility being more important than status. To me it is unimportant whether an object is made by an artist of great recognition or by someone unknown.

## **African Art**

*DL: As a black American sculptor, what draws you to African art?*

*Thad:* In the late 1940s, before I ever thought of being a sculptor, I was drawn to African art. Then I quickly grew from being interested in it to being exhilarated by it. I enjoy the extraordinary energy and inventiveness of those countless objects made by anonymous people as part of their lives.

In my generation, blacks thought of African art as debased, from the jungle, because they had been taught that Africa before the white people came with primitive and savage. But from the 1960s on, there has been a great change because of so many exhibitions and museum collections of African art.

Perhaps what I like most is that every object is unique; nothing is repetitive. When you consider the size of Africa and the number of regions and cultures and tribes, the range and invention of African art is unparalleled.

For me it's the power of inventiveness and freshness in each individual object that's inspiring. Whatever it takes to fulfill the life of an object is done - whether it's the energy of its gesture, the power of its form, the gouging of its surfaces, the way its mass is penetrated, the inserting of nails or metal or shells, the addition of beads or cloth or hair or grasses; it's the vitality of the object that inspires.

But you are right. I'm a black American sculptor, not an ethnographer and not an African. But as an African-American, I feel an affinity with African art in my blood. I feel it's one of my roots. But it's not my only root. I'm an American also. You may call me a split personality; that's OK. A few years ago I was reading a poem by Stephen Crane and listening to a song by John Coltrane. I made a sculpture, Trane to Crane, two different forms weaving together.

## **Influence of African Art on European Twentieth-Century Art**

*DL: Brancusi came to African art as a European. So did Picasso. They incorporated African influences into European traditions in which they were already working. African art became a tributary, as it were, to their language. But you, Thad, are an African-American.*

*Thad:* No matter where you go, there are influences. But they communicate to you because of what is already there within you.

A Greek doorway or a doorway from Ghana or Zaire, a Mexican Courtyard or courtyard in France, may suddenly relate to one's African-Americanness - a spiritual as well as a physical and aesthetic communication.

So there is Brancusi, moving in a certain direction and he suddenly sees something in a piece of African art; and it's not necessarily a new direction or a revelation, but rather a confirmation and an extension of what is already there within him. It's a matter of communication.

One of my big influences was, as you know, that photograph of grave markers in Georgia,

which I first saw in Marshall Stearn's book, *The Story of Jazz*. The moment I saw it, I thought of Brancusi's *Bird in Space* sculptures, which I had seen years before in my "world cultures" book at the University. Straight away I thought how the slaves who made those slaves and Brancusi had never known each other existed, had never seen what each other did. Yet in each of them I saw a similar spirit, the similar approach to clean fluid shapes coming from people working close to the earth and trying to fuse the earth and human spirituality into a single form, fusing the outside-ness of the world and the insideness of one's spirit.

But getting back to your question, Brancusi was a Romanian sculptor living and working in Paris. African art was a confirmation and an extension of a tradition he was already working in. In much the same way, Brancusi and Noguchi are important to me because they confirm and extend what I do.

## **Sculptures as Assemblages**

*DL: Many of your sculptures are assemblies of two or more pieces. Would you like to comment on that?*

*Thad:* As I said earlier, I start with logs and stones of a certain size because these are the sizes I can transport in my station wagon and store in my studio. So if I want to make a tall sculpture, as I often do, I have no option but to stack sections together.

For a short time I shared a studio with another sculptor in a large industrial building. Her name was Lorraine Wiegman. She was seldom there, and I had the space pretty much to myself. It was nice to have room for big pieces. But actually I don't need a lot of room. I can make big pieces by means of assembly. In some galleries there are high ceilings that enable my taller pieces to soar.

But that is only part of it. I like the complexity of related forms and interlocking forms. Some of my stone sculptures are made up of various stones, each of which has a particular color and grain. Often when I'm moving logs and stones around in the studio I see possibilities of new combinations and get fired up. Every material as a life of its own.

I like each component of an assembled sculpture to have its own form and rhythm, so that it belongs to the sculpture by contributing its own special character to the whole rather than being subservient to it.

Sometimes I combine other materials with wood or stone - bolts, nuts, steel, cable, plastic, wire, cloth, and bits of machinery I have found in the scrapyards owned by Paul Warhola, Andy Warhol's brother. Occasionally I add polychrome if I think a piece calls for it. There is nothing new or innovative about this; just look at African or Native American art. You have to listen to the sculpture while you are working on it; it will tell you what it needs.

## **Sexual Imagery**

*DL: Several of your sculptures appear to include sexual images.*

*Thad:* I have never set out to make sexual images any more than I might attempt to consciously impose any other sort of representation. If we speak of growth, thrust into space, concavities, rounded masses, and so forth, we are bound to run into sexual images. Nature is full of them, whether in fruits, flowers, trees, rocks,

or clouds. So are sculptures.

## **Shadow to Light**

*DL: Your house is always cool and dark, particularly in the summertime when the light outside is bright. As one's eyes get accustomed to the shadows, it seems as though your sculptures advance from being dark masses into sharp detail.*

*Thad: First of all I should say that I'm a cool weather person. I don't like hot sun; I find heat debilitating. So my house is always shaded and I try to keep it cool winter as well as summer.*

*My wood sculptures, especially when they're oiled, are soft brown tones. I suppose that melds them into the shadows.*

*DL: It seems that the marks of your chisels, rippling over the surfaces of your sculptures, play an intricate game with shadow and light like piano jazz.*

*Thad: The ripple, as you call it, of chisel marks is important to me in many of many sculptures. You might say that they are related to my interest in jazz and dance. Although I'm not aware of it myself, several students when I teach workshops have remarked on the persistent rhythm of hammer and chisel that goes on hour after hour when I'm carving. In dance, every part of the body responds to the beat. The beat of hammer and chisel sets up a sculptural discipline. My chisel marks are not simply surface texture. They are as important to the articulation of sculptural form as mass.*

*With regard to shadow, I think you are right when you say that shadows are the means by which one can appreciate the rhythms of chisel marks. I use different widths and depths of gouge to make different marks. The broad deep gouges hold a depth of shadow and the narrow shallow ones play along the surface of forms. What happens is that shadows break up light and set in motion a ripple, as you've called it a swarm of shadows.*

*DL: Do you think that there's a parallel between the way your sculptures move from shadow to light with the way a viewer may gradually see more and more meaning in them the more he or she experiences them?*

*Thad: I don't know that I've thought much about that, but I don't know that as a sculptor I have often started working on a log, or two or three logs in relation to one another, and just let the idea come along and become clearer and more definite as the work moves forward. So I assume that the same thing might happen to a person seeing it for the first time and realizing that the more you experience it, the more it will reveal itself to you.*

*DL: Do you think that what you've just said may be a metaphor for a growing recognition of the African-American contribution to American Culture?*

*Thad: Being an African-American in the broad sweep of American life is part of everyday living for me. While I firmly believe that art has its root in the life of each individual artist, it also has the capacity to transcend racism through the variety of*

people who experience it. The future of American culture, just as in American society, lies in a growing understanding and appreciation of pluralism. It may take three or four more generations, but I believe we are moving in that direction.

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