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Samaneh Reyhani - Sculpting poetics

Samaneh Reyhani

Carl Eldhs Ateljémuseum, Stockholm

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As with most artists' studios turned exhibition spaces, the Carl Eldh Ateljémuseum bears the imprint of its original tenant, Carl Eldh, one of Sweden's most prominent sculptors of the past century. And as anyone who has ever visited this magnificent space can attest to, that imprint is almost quite literally set in stone. The space, flooded with light pouring in through the immense windows that face towards the studio's garden, is populated with a large selection of models in plaster and sculptures by Eldh. This summer, the exhibition space makes room for the works of Samaneh Reyhani whose work is associated with large-scale installations and sculptural works. In conjunction with the opening of the exhibition, C-print had the immense pleasure to reconnect with Reyhani about her practice and the works currently showing, following working with her on the 2021 exhibition Future Watch at Kulturhuset in Stockholm.



Samaneh Reyhani at the Carl Eldh Studio Musuem. Photo: Corina Wahlin (C-print)

C-P: While your practice spans across a variety of mediums and forms, one also associates it with the large-scale sculptural works exhibited in the past years. How have you gone about preparing this exhibition given the Eldh studio's spatial limitations? Where does the artistic voice go - or rather - in what form does it arrive so as not to be rendered into a whisper?

S.R: The strongest immediate impression I had of Carl Eldh's studio was the beauty of the place and the strength of his works. Of course the space is already filled with great sculptures and that is something you have to relate to, but for me it has mostly been uplifting and inspiring. I had so many ideas and works for the exhibition that the main problem was to pick what to show. I'm happy this exhibition gave me the opportunity to bring together both old and new works and make this new installation.

There is always a need for some sort of balance in exhibitions with more than one artist. I think I cannot speak on how my artistic voice meets Carl Eldhs yet. I have an idea of how it will turn out but this always changes over the course of the exhibition.



Photo: Corina Wahlin

C-P: Your sculptural practice is characterized by versatility amongst others in your use of different materials. In the current exhibition you are showing both works in wood, stone and bronze. What considerations come into play when selecting the material you opt to work with? On that note I am also curious to know more about the physical aspects of working with a material like stone.

S.R: My works usually begin with a kind of inner process, starting from an emotional impulse or inner image and then continuing out into the material. The material and the form of the work are inseparable, they arrive at the same time. There are certain things I can do in stone and certain things I can do in wood, for example. It's not really translatable. The materials all pose different challenges. Stone is more simple for me to actually shape, it's almost like drawing, though it is very heavy to move around. Working with wood takes a lot longer since the process of preparing the wood, drying, straightening, gluing, is very time consuming. Bronze is another type of process since it requires me to work with a foundry and consider things in a more technical way.

C-P: As I began my research ahead of this interview I didn't get further past your first statement in the exhibition text for this show. In it you mention that upon entering the studio you heard a song, 'The Song of Gabriel's Wing' by the philosopher and mystic Shahab al-Din Suhrawardi, and that you could do nothing but follow it. I understand that sound and music have been a recurring element in your working process but that it has also been employed as an artistic medium in your works. I am referencing here the sound piece featured in your previous exhibition *Bagh-e man* (2024) at Cecilia Hillström Gallery. Could you tell us more about how sound found its way into your practice and the role it plays in your artistic expression alongside your sculptural works?



Photo: Corina Wahlin

S.R: The Song of Gabriel's Wing was never really about sound in a literal sense, but about entering a certain state of consciousness. When I first encountered Suhrawardi's text, I was struck by the idea that the "song" is something sensed inwardly rather than heard directly. It felt very close to my own experience of sculpture. Entering Carl Eldhs studio I felt such a strong presence in the space, as if emotion, silence and movement had somehow become held inside the material itself.

Sound and music have always been important parts of my process, even when they are not visible in the final exhibition. In the studio I often listen to music, sing, play drums or return to songs connected to memory and emotion. Sometimes these elements remain private and only shape the space in which the work is made. Other times they enter the exhibition directly, like in Bagh-e man, where my mother's lullaby became part of the installation. But even when sound is not a part of the final exhibition, I think traces of its rhythm and intensity remain in the sculptures.

C-P: I understand that poetry, and in particular Persian poetry, is a significant driver in your creative process. It could also be said that poetry gains a spatial quality through your works by portraying a poetic landscape. I would love to know more about your reflections on the relationship between the written and spoken word and how that informs your artistic practice.

S.R: Poetry has always been very close to the way I experience both sculpture and language. One thing that strikes me reading Persian poetry, especially Rumi, is that it accepts the limits of language while still trying to speak about experiences that are somehow beyond language. Sometimes I feel that the work begins exactly where ordinary language becomes insufficient.

When I read poetry, I do not experience it as an illustration of ideas, more as a space one can enter. Through metaphor, repetition and image it creates an emotional and spiritual landscape. I think that is why poetry naturally becomes spatial in my work. I am not trying to translate poems into sculpture literally, but to create forms that hold a similar sense of ambiguity, movement and intensity.



Photo: Corina Wahlin

C-P: The circular form is a recurring element in your artistic practice. I have also read about how your use of this form connects to your exploration of the concept of *djaan*, a term employed by the poet Rumi. As I understand the term it refers to an inner yearning within the self, something akin to the soul, to reach or be connected to its source beyond the physical or earthly sphere. Could you elaborate on how your exploration of these themes has informed the direction of your work?

S.R.: I do not see the shapes in my work as illustrations of ideas with fixed meaning, even if I repeatedly return to certain forms. The symbols are often only the first surface of the work. What becomes more important to the work is how the reading or feeling it continues to shift during the process.

In Rumi there is often this idea of longing for reunion, like the fish searching for the sea while already existing within it. I think something similar happens in my work. These ideas connect closely to the concept of *djaan* in Persian poetry. The word is difficult to translate exactly, but it can mean soul, spirit or inner life.



Photo: Corina Wahlin

C-P: In a past exhibition *Som här* (2024) at Trelleborg Museum, where you exhibited alongside Marcus Matt, it is noted that the inter-referential aspects of your works and whether or not these come through to the viewer is something that you have reflected upon since embarking on your artistic practice in Sweden. Could you tell me more about how these reflections have impacted your views on the role of art in general and how you approach your own artistic practice?

S.R: I use metaphor and poetic language, but I don't see the core of it as culturally separate. I think there are shared human experiences underneath different forms. I remember feeling happy when people saw *Bagh-e man* and drew connections to the story of the Burning Bush, then I was shown the painting by Forrest Bess titled *Burning Bush* and the connection was made even stronger. That kind of free interpretation feels like a two-way exchange and the work itself grows in the process.



Photo: Corina Wahlin

C-P: I would also be interested to know more about the place the exploration of memories holds in your work and whether this has evolved through the years.

S.R: Memory in my work is very close to me, almost too close to speak about. It is not something I use as a subject, but something that is always already there inside the work.

It often comes from very simple moments, like the smell of fresh walnuts, my father breaking them in his hands, and me sitting beside him as a child. But it's not something I try to represent or describe. It lingers as feeling, as something that returns rather than something I look at from a distance.

Over time, what has changed is not the memories themselves, but my relationship to them in the work. Earlier, they were more on the surface of things, more direct. Now they stay hidden, more fragmented, and they come through indirectly.

So memory is not a theme for me. It is something that is always there in the background and informs how I make decisions, even when it is not visible.



Photo: Corina Wahlin

C-P: Looking ahead, could you tell us more about what is next for you?

S.R: After the show at Carl Eldhs Ateljémuseum I will do a presentation at Chart Art Fair with Galleri Arnstedt.

Text and images: Corina Wahlin