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In the Studio with Lika Mutal

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By intsculpturectr
in In the Studio
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Visiting Lika Mutal's studio for stone sculpture in Villa Salvador near Lima, Peru requires driving south through industrial sections, shantytowns, and great sand dunes. On the day I visit, April 23, a water main has burst and there is flooding on parts of the mud two-lane road. Inside a cement brick walled space, a lush garden of trees, ground cover, and flowering plants fills the sloping clay-sand earth to compliment the vast landscape of stones culled from varied remote locations north and south of Lima. The studio has heavy hoisting machines, but most work is being done with hand tools and by hand.



Lika Mutal Studio. Photos: Gam Klutier

Mutal travels to solitary places to find her stones. She has learned this process from shamans who live in deep respect and symbiosis with the Pachamama, the Mother Earth. They taught her that you don't take anything without honoring and asking through special rituals. They believe that stones can harm as well as heal and are carriers of peace as well as suffering. Andean priests say the great untouched stones

share the properties of the sacred mountains (Apus). Mutal calls them ancestral stones.

Sometimes Mutal cuts, shapes, and polishes all or part of the stone or makes marks that seem symbolic or abstract. Sometimes she does nothing physical to the stone other than to provide it with an orientation and a new base. Sometimes she embeds one type of stone or fossil into another stone. Some stones become unbroken, highly polished interlocking forms. Her most recent public commission is *Eco*, a May 2013 sculpture for the Magdalena del mar district in Lima, which will soon be installed on a polished granite base. Her work is in museum, public, corporate, and private collections in Peru, Japan, and The Netherlands, including the Kröller Muller Museum.

The following interview highlights a few special completed works in Mutal's studio:

Jan Castro: We're in front of a large granite stone called *The Guardian of the North*. Do you want to start by telling me where you found this?

Lika Mutal: I found it in the north in an outcrop of the Andes where many rough boulders are stacked upon and next to each other. I walk and climb around. If I see a significant shape, I will stay with it and walk around it, then go away. If I find it a second and third time, I will

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sit with it, draw, and eventually take it to my studio. This is such a piece. It's important to me that my sculptures finish "natural." This knife edge in front is a contrast to the untouched part. I did the whole shape in such a way that we could save this rusted rough river of stone on the side.

Castro: And the *Lunar Stone*?

Mutal: The *Lunar Stone* is left over from a huge piece of marble that is now at Novartis (Basel, Switzerland). Inside is a calcarean algae — a stone shaped with the roots of an algae deep in the sea; when the plant is done, the sea throws it on the beach, and it will petrify. Its color is still changing, becoming more and more subtle. At the back, you see a sort of map; that's why I called it *Lunar Stone* — because of the color, the craters, and the rivers.



Guardian of the North – 2007. 89 1/4" x 37" x 15 1/2". Black Granite. Photo Gam Klutier



Lunar Stone – 2010. 41 3/4" x 41 3/4" x 15". Travertine with calcarean algae". Phot gam Klutier

Castro: Is the crater stone (a tall 15 ft. narrow pyramid shape in beige to buff tones, in 3 pieces on top of each other) named?

Mutal: I may call this stone *River Flowing Up*. It came from a rectangular block that I had to cut in such a way that the textures would match. It stood in a factory nearby, polished, and I was absolutely flabbergasted with this flame and energy which defines the shape.



What also defines the shape is the place where it came from: on top of the dungeons of the Peruvian army. The General in Command was Avelino Caceres, a famous general in the war with Chile. And right under the quarries – this was told to me by the factory owner after the stone was cut – people were tortured, killed. It was almost a premonition in relation to the memorial I did, *The Eye That Cries*, for the victims of the internal conflict in Peru (1980-2000) and I thought about whether my intentions could influence the energy, the consciousness of the stone as well as its original location. When the Sikh Master Parvinder came from

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"River Flowing Up" – 2013. 17ft x 5ft 7" x 5ft 7". Crater Stone.

Photo Gam Klutier

India and saw this stone, the first thing he said, without my asking him, is "This is a very happy

stone." (laughing) I hope so.

Castro: The range of earth tones from buff to white is beautiful. Now we're going to *The Condor*, which has a special history, Lika found it in a special place, it weighs seven tons, and it has a skull on one side. Inside this, a condor spreads its wings and holds a baby bird. The back side could be a hungry ghost with two holes for eyes and a larger hole as a mouth.

Mutal: You have to look for the condor. Even if you look for two years, as I did, you may not see it until a lama comes and she says, "What a beautiful condor." The granite is black with a green chip; it's been around for millions of years. The mystery is that it had this shape long before we humans existed. Clearly, death and new life are in the stone.

Castro: What processes shape your studio practice?

Mutal: My process is mostly by hand. Blessedly, I started out with hammer and chisel, avoiding the compressor, which would spoil it all. My teacher at Catholic University was Anna Maccagno, a mentor and friend. She brought in Don Juan Arias to teach us direct carving. After I left the school, he would teach me difficult things. He had a wonderful ritual for cutting huge blocks of granite: he would make holes for the wicks, and then hit them with an even beat; then he'd turn around, and behind his back the stone would crack.

On this remote piece of land in Villa Salvador, there is a family of stones. My work has changed since making *Guardian of the North*. There is a clear connection to the peace process from this to *The Eye that Cries* and there is much less cutting to the extent that in *The Condor Stone*, I don't cut anything. In the *ECO* stone for Magdalena del Mar, I only made one hole on the inside.



Lika Mutal Studio. Photos: Gam Klutier

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