

Estella Campavias

Estella Campavias (1918-1990) was one of the most exciting sculptors of the 20th century. Of Scottish and Spanish origin, born in Istanbul, she travelled and lived in many countries as the daughter of a diplomat before finally marrying an Englishman and settling in England. She was thirty years old when she embarked on her artistic career.

She first devoted herself to ceramics, which revealed her stupendous talent for capturing things in the third dimension. What is more, people who work with clay are drawn to earth, the chthonic element (Greek for earth). The sculptor Wilhelm Lehmbruck put it in a nutshell: "Each work of art must have something of the first creation, an earthy odour, you could even say something animal".

Estella Campavias, small in height but great in prowess, is a lady with temperament, charisma and humour. One day in the early 70s, Estella Campavias discovered the great world of sculpture. Not that this world had escaped her in her travels through a multitude of cultures. No. But Estella Campavias was sufficiently self-critical to wait until she was mature enough to venture into sculpture. And then she aimed high: from the outset, deliberately, confidently and independently, she adopted her own language. As a ceramist, Campavias had learned to work with a variety of materials, and she now turned that experience to account. For Campavias, the huge, simple and reductive form was so important that, unlike other modern sculptors, she simply skipped mimesis, the imitative representation of nature.

Estella Campavias creates form from a deep and wholly obvious affinity for nature. Since childhood, Campavias has had an intimate bond with matter, earth, the body and its movements, with moods reflected in physical expression. But her art is never about the hic and nunc, the here and now; it is not about capturing the instant like the Impressionists or like you see in Rodin's early work. The instant, the recorded moment, is ephemeral and irretrievable. Estella Campavias seeks to counter the random, irretrievable, temporary and anecdotic with something else. And she succeeds. By discovering a new world of form reminiscent of the human image but which, if you observe closely, overcomes that proximity to create a new, autonomous type of sculpture.

During the decades she worked with ceramics, simplicity became so central to her vision that she never gave in to the temptation of copying nature. From the very outset, Campavias's quest was to create something new, not a representation of nature but a creation capable of standing alongside nature, a creative extension of the cosmos. Campavias does not want to copy nature, she wants to plunge to the depth of things, to the very depth of herself; she is not content with simple and superficial effects, she is vying with nature to produce something spiritually organic, capable of conquering tedium and banality, and extending beyond the individual. It is not the purpose of modern sculpture to duplicate nature. Each work aspires to be a creation in its own right, obeying its own inner laws.

Some sculptures are left as raw torsos, as says the title Campavias herself chose: "Torso". But a torso does not have to be a mutilated figure à la Venus of Milo. A torso is a deliberately sculpted form, and Campavias leaves out all that is not essential. A torso is therefore a focus on the essential. Or, as Max Liebermann once said: "Art is the art of omission".

Like Henry Moore, Campavias depicts the body as a landscape, with hills and vales, cliffs and caves. Positive and negative forms are engaged in a lasting interaction, a cyclical dance of forms.

No matter how small the exhibited sculptures, they often bring to mind tectonic shapes, landscapes that transport us into new emotional worlds, and suddenly, the miniatures are no longer small: they turn out to be monumental sculptures.

Her work is often reminiscent of archaic art ("L'Africain" or "La femme à genoux") or of the art of primitive peoples, like pre-Columbian art, for example. But it also brings to mind Egyptian art, especially the miniatures. Personally, I find her work bears a special proximity to the figures and fragments left behind by the Etruscans.

What lucid elegance, poetic strength and inner energy flows over you when you touch these sculptures (sculptures may – indeed, must – be touched)! The smooth, softly curved surface where only the patina is animated has to be tactily experienced.

Estella Campavias plunges us into her cumulative world of form, continuously presenting us with new secrets. Her “grand monster” and “petit monster” belong in this area. Exciting, oddly moving figures that touch us deeply and encourage us to seek interpretations. These works spontaneously call to mind the famous sculptures of Auguste Rodin depicting poet Honoré de Balzac in his absurd and inimitable genius, reminding us of Man’s psychological complexity and his peaks and chasms.

Estella Campavias portrays a figure in movement. No one ever did this before Rodin. Man was always presented as a static figure. Auguste Rodin was the first to make a stride the theme of art. We observe something similar here: Estella takes the theme of walking and turns it into a metaphor for movement. Everything in the world is in perpetual movement. *Panta rei, omnia fluunt.*

Paul Klee put this thought into words when he said: “Art relates to creation in the manner of a parable, it is a paradigm, just as the earthly signifies a cosmic paradigm.”