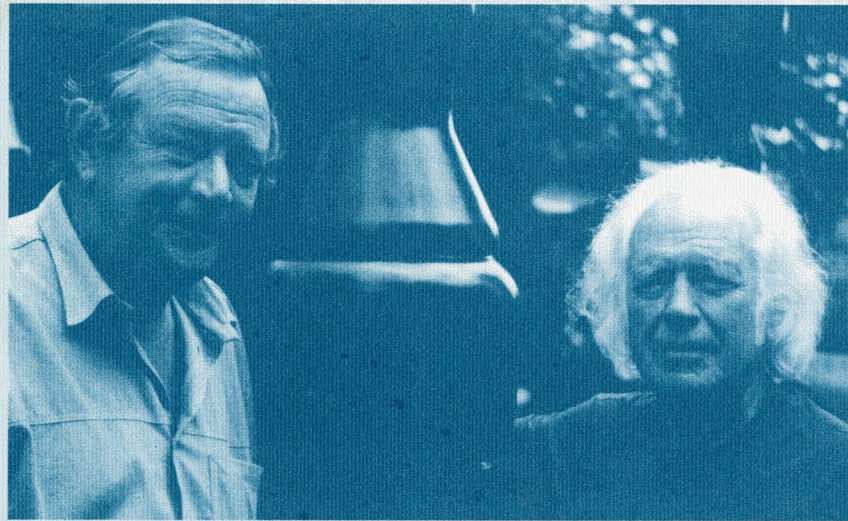


Edoardo Villa: Conversation with a sculptor

Lesley Pretorius

The University of Pretoria was recently the fortunate recipient of a bequest made by one of South Africa's most well known and acclaimed sculptors, Edoardo Villa.



The bequest includes several of the artist's large works, many smaller works, numerous maquettes, as well as his personal archives, library, awards and photographic records. Though the bulk of the work is still in the artist's studio and garden, twelve smaller pieces are in Pretoria already, giving an idea of what is still to come, and six large sculptures have been delivered and placed on campus, eliciting a mixed response from the student body as well as staff. Although the general level of visual literacy among the South African public is very low, the appearance of several new sculptures on campus has stimulated a lively debate.

The bequest and subsequent response to it prompted me to request an interview with the artist, resulting in a delightful visit that left me with renewed respect for Villa, a man well on in years but possessing an enviable zest for life and a tremendous creative energy.

Villa is a prolific artist who works at his craft every day, often returning to previously explored themes, and always striving to renew. He lives surrounded by his work in his studio and spacious garden in Johannesburg. Although he produces a lot, he is very selective about his final product:

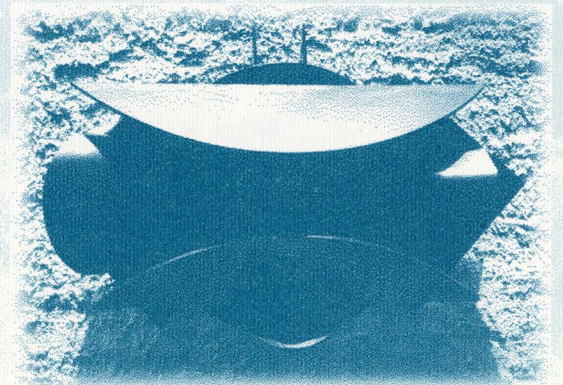
I enjoy working. I believe very strongly in producing a lot. If you produce a lot you have a lot to select from. Not everything you produce can be good.

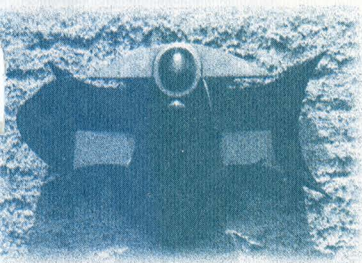
Though Villa works on one piece at a time, he usually produces a series on a specific theme, because he believes that one can't solve an idea in only one piece of sculpture. He always has a lot of ideas for variations on a project, and likes to exhaust a theme before going on to something new. He is the kind of person who cannot go a day without creating and

says that the period between a series until he finds a new theme is torment for him. He adds:

Another thing I like to do is to keep a piece of sculpture with me for at least three months before letting it go. I look, change, until I am satisfied. I would even change something that was done a long period of time ago, but not a major change: then I prefer to do a new one.

Actual production of most of the work takes place at the studio with the help of Lucas Legode, his long-time assistant. Only for very large works does he make use of factory premises, where he has access to heavy equipment like cranes. Very heavy steel, which can-



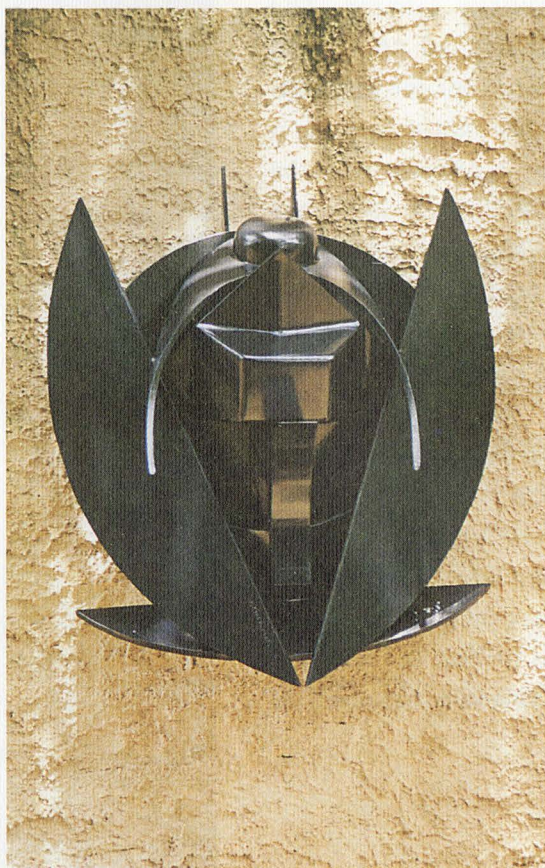


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not be cut by acetylene torch is also taken to a steel works. Villa makes his drawing on the steel, according to which it is cut by laser, and then hand finished by the artist in his studio.

Villa is a quintessential sculptor, a creator in three dimensions who hardly ever draws. He says:

It is a personal matter. I feel much happier working three-dimensionally. If I do draw, it is only a few lines, because I like to see the other side of the thing, and in a drawing you can't. I do a lot of maquettes in metal, very rough and quickly.



He has a great love for his chosen medium, steel. Sometimes during the planning stages he will work with cardboard, but finds that it is not ideal because it reacts differently to manipulation than does steel.

I feel it is good to start off with the material that you are going to be working in straight away. I like working with steel - I started off for purely economic reasons. I'm too impatient to carve - I can't sit down for a month or two to carve.

The quality of finish of his work is superb, and pleasing to the designer's eye: edges are painstakingly smoothed, and precise balance is achieved between the components of a specific work. Often the final effect is enhanced by layer upon layer of rich colour. The layers of paint are applied in a luminous way which absolutely enhances the work.

Displayed against an outside wall of the sculptor's home are two series of relief works recently completed. They are strongly reminiscent of tribal masks, and when I comment on this, the artist responds:

Look I've been in Africa more than fifty years. You must assimilate something. If I had stayed in Italy I would not have produced the same things I produced here as the environment is totally different. The landscape is there in my work, but not consciously.

The sculptor's association with the University of Pretoria started with his involvement fourteen years ago as external examiner to the sculpture students.



On the subject of students and teaching, Villa likes to stress the equal importance of technique and creativity in the artistic process. His penchant for technical perfection is put down to his Italian background, education and the tradition of craftsmanship in which he was raised. Teaching was different in those days, he says, one had to do things 'properly'. But keeping the 'gentle balance' between creativity and craftsmanship is regarded as essential.

A problem he often senses when working with young people is an impatience: often they tend to think that they can become sculptors/designers/artists instantly, and Villa is of the opinion that no-one can hope to



become this with only a couple of years of training behind them. Discipline is to him very important, as well as careful time management and particularly INVOLVEMENT: you have to be involved with what you're doing every day. No compromise either: when he was young he lived for six years in one room, sleeping under two blankets - the prisoner of war camp he had recently left seemed like a castle compared to that! But even though he was hungry, he never compromised by making sculptures that he didn't believe in:

African Throne



People, you must remember, people remember the compromises you make rather than the good work that you did.

Although the artist would have liked to have seen his life's work housed in Johannesburg, where he has lived since settling in this country, this proved impossible, and due to his good relations with the University of Pretoria over the years, he finally decided to donate his work to this institution.

The handing over ceremony was held in June 1993, and plans are at present underway to establish a museum on campus in (what used to be) the old Merensky Library. The University's Bureau for Cultural Affairs is in charge of the arrangements for the establishment of the museum. The official opening is planned for May 1995, to coincide with the artist's eightieth birthday. Villa would like the museum to be a place where students move in and out all day, where they will have the opportunity to listen to lectures and as a result become better informed about art.

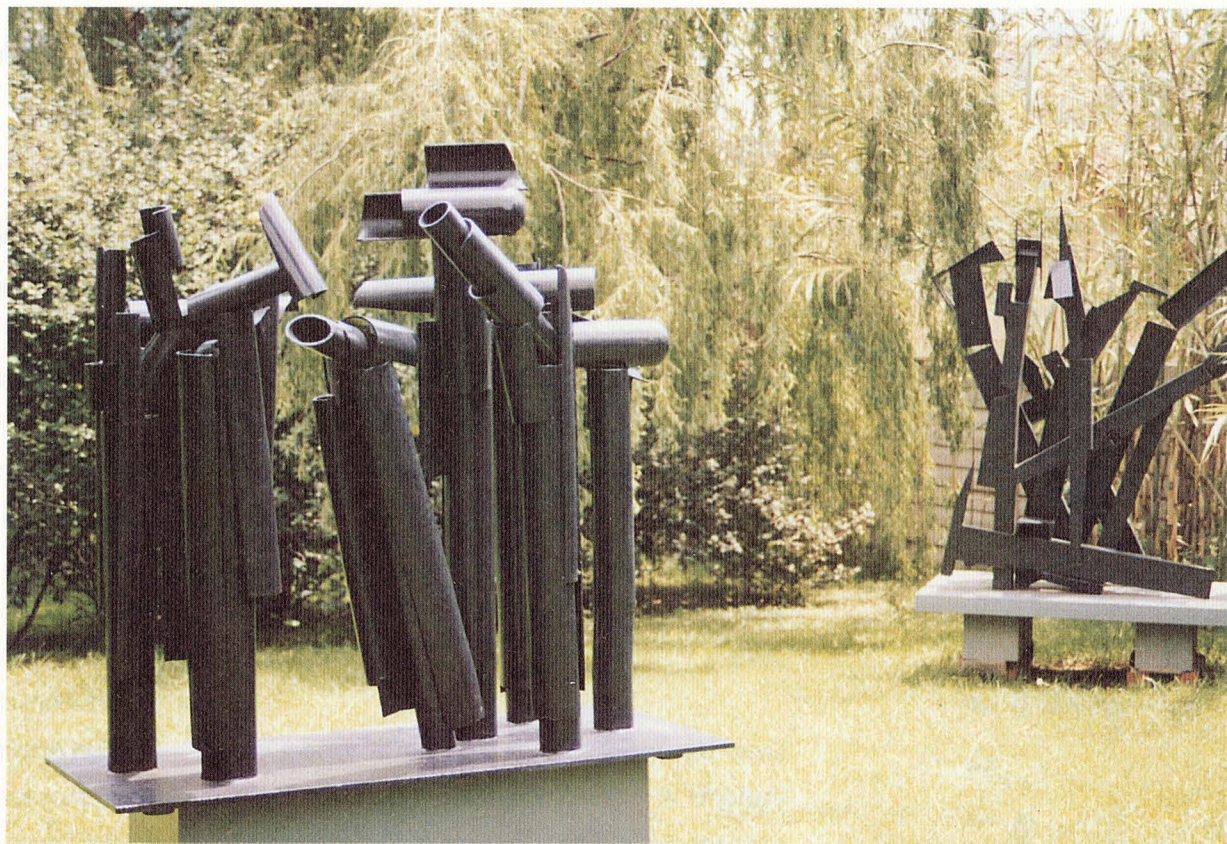
Because of the problems associated with placing large pieces of sculpture in a new, and in this case visually diverse campus environment, I asked the sculptor if he had any strong feelings about the placement of his work. Quoting a conversation he had had with the famous Henry Moore, Villa said that they had



both agreed that if the sculpture were inherently a good piece of work, it should sit successfully anywhere. At his 1980 retrospective exhibition at the Rand Afrikaans University, for example, his work entitled *The Meeting* was so satisfactorily placed at the entrance, that the artist feels that even if he had been commissioned to create a sculpture for that space, he couldn't have done better. Some environments are however obviously unsuited to certain works, for instance where there is too little space for one to stand back and gain a perspective of the work, but apart from obvious limitations such as these, a work should fit in just about anywhere. The environment can certainly complement and add to the appeal of a work of art, but the artist does not like to place too much emphasis on this aspect.

The campus of the University of Pretoria is a conglomeration of architectural styles which are not always harmonious to the eye. Despite the artist's opinion on placement, it may be argued that the Old Arts Building, erected in 1911 in a late French Renaissance style, does not provide the ideal backdrop to the very large Villa sculpture at present located in front of it. Having visited the artist in his garden, where diverse works are placed side by side amongst the vegetation, creating a wonderfully restful ambience, one feels prompted to suggest that the same kind of placement be made on campus: a special sculpture garden

Encounter Series



would, to my mind, offer a much better alternative than dotting the works all over campus. This suggestion is however made with the full realization of the existence of both spatial and monetary restrictions.

Everyday confrontation with works of art should ultimately mean something to us, or they may as well be locked away in a basement somewhere. The works donated by Villa are a physical presence and will hopefully

become an integral part of their new surroundings, appreciated by everyone as objects of beauty that uplift the human spirit while helping to create a pleasing environment.