

# Exalted Spaces

*Gustavo Bonevardi is an artist for whom questioning the world's realities is an integral part of his oeuvre. That there is no clear narrative in his art adds to its layered enigmatic qualities. His play with forms, literary and three-dimensionally, demands our most serious consideration.*

By Robert C. Morgan



**Gustavo Bonevardi, *Box Interior III*, 2014, African pyrophyllite and wood, 10 x 8.5 x 7.75 in.** Photograph by Arturo Sanchez. All images: Courtesy of the Artist and Cecilia de Torres Gallery, New York.

**G**ustavo Bonevardi, an artist, sculptor, and architect of Argentinian origin, was born and raised in Manhattan, where he continues to live and work. His intimate sculptural works in stone and his manifold drawings, both in graphite and watercolor on paper, involve the use of letters. In both sculpture and drawing, hand-etched or drawn Helvetica letters function as intricate units in time and space, appearing mysteriously somewhere between a code and a dissembled Minimalist alphabet, reminiscent of the scatter pieces shown in New York in the late 1960s. Bonevardi's affection for these relatively small uniform letters, even as they are isolated from any syntax involving words and sentences or from any textual referent, are transformed into verbal/visual instruments whereby they evolve toward form.

Despite the artist's confusion with words, whenever asked to read or write in his early years, possibly due to dyslexia, Bonevardi would seem to have made an indirect contribution to literature. The feeling of his work holds a curious connection to many of the statements made by the French semiologist Roland Barthes in *The Pleasure of the Text* (1975) and with works of theoretical fiction by Jorge Luis Borges, especially in *The Library of Babel*. In fact, the title of Bonevardi's recent exhibition at Cecilia de Torres Gallery in the SoHo section of lower Manhattan was titled *Fictions*, as in *Ficciones*, the title of one of Borges's most profound and well-known collections of stories. Even so, the artist insists he is not making words from letters. There is no overt narrative in his work, whether in his art (drawing and sculpture) or in architecture; yet each of his alphabetical works are profoundly layered with meaning. Somehow by rejecting the formation of words and syntax as he playfully arranges letters derived from Latin roots, Bonevardi is operating between literature and visual form, including architecture. His work as an architect is a creative enterprise he shares with his associate and colleague, the architect John Bennett.

Bonevardi works in two ways: One, his personal studio involvement with paper, graph-



View of Manhattan with **Tribute in Light**. Photograph by Ryan Budhu.



View of Manhattan with **Tribute in Light**. Photograph by Robert Vizzini.



View of **Tribute in Light** from the base. Photograph by Jose Pereyra Lucena.

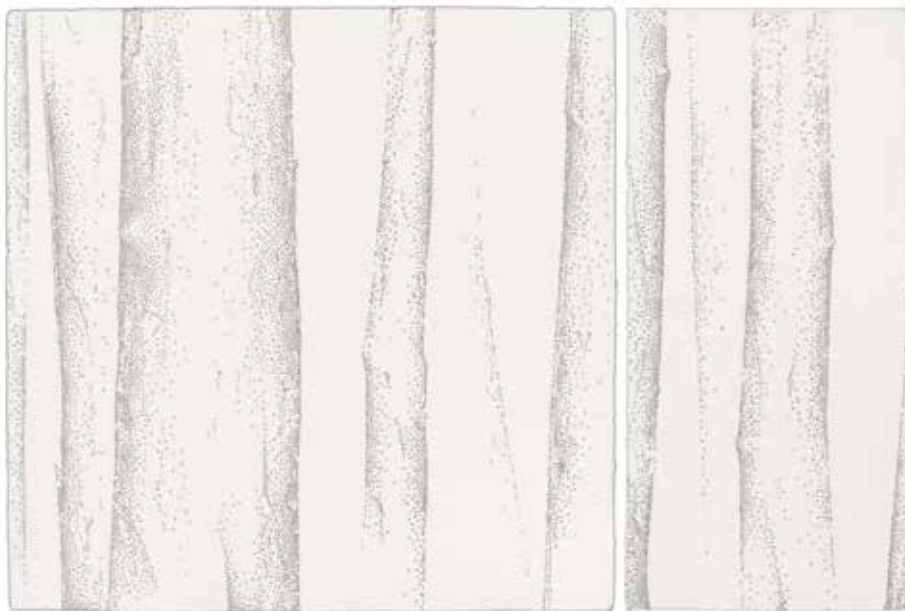
ite, and watercolor, in addition to his work as a sculptor with polished black stones called African Pyrophyllite, which are mounted occasionally on wooden bases; and secondly, he works cooperatively in tandem with Bennett in designing and producing large-scale public art, such as their *Tribute to Light* memorial on the site of the former World Trade Center (2002) and the *Ten Thousand Flower Maze* for the *Shenzhen & Hong Kong bi-City Biennale of Urbanism/Architecture* (2011–2012). These works by Bonevardi and Bennett were conceived as “temporary installations” to be shown for a designated time.

For example, their well-known *Tribute to Light* was conceived as an immediate response to the attack and destruction of the World Trade Center in lower Manhattan, but was not realized until the following year (March 11, 2002). The political coordination involved in making this memorial succeed was contingent on a complex integration of numerous agencies, officials, and collaborators, including computer and lighting specialists. Finally an agreement was made. The major participants (among others) included Julian LaVerdiere, Paul Myoda, Richard Nash Gould, Paul Marantz, and Michael Ahern, along with Creative Time and The Municipal Art, the mayor's

office, and numerous officials representing city, state, and federal agencies. It was a major undertaking; but the view of these lights soaring upward into the misty evening sky in lower Manhattan was a sight to behold. Like a great symphony, all the parts cooperated to their fullest extent. They played well and the results were breathtaking, poignant, and ineluctably moving.

**T**he more recent public art installation in Shenzhen, *Ten Thousand Flower Maze* (2011–2012), located at the plaza near the City Hall, was less demanding to construct but similar in terms of the numbers of people who came to see 5,000 orange-and-white traffic cones mapped out in the plaza as a maze. Apparently, the title came from a 1756 work commissioned by Emperor Qianlong (1711–1799) who commissioned the Italian painter and architect Giuseppe Castiglione (1688–1766) to create a European-style garden for the Old Summer Palace near the Forbidden City in Beijing. The work's impact on the children of the region was truly festive. Screeching for joy, they ran, jumped, tumbled, and skateboarded through Bonevardi and Bennett's conical maze.

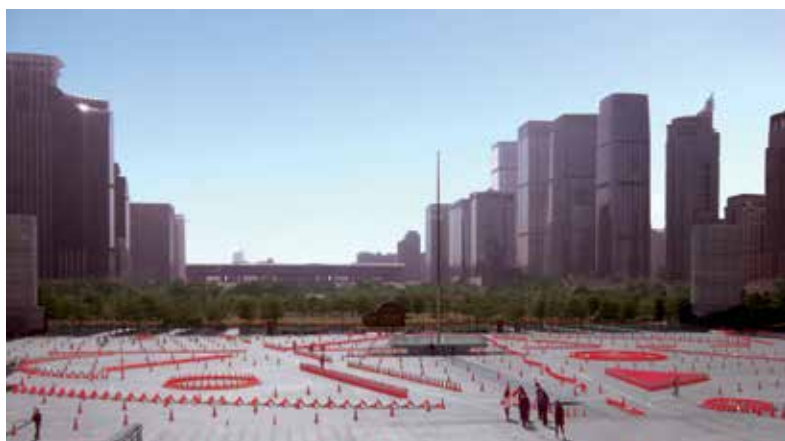
Bonevardi's approach to art is



**Gustavo Bonevardi, *Untitled (Fictions)***, graphite on paper, 30 x 30 in. and 30 x 14 in. Photograph by Arturo Sanchez.

reminiscent of that of the late Hungarian artist György Kepes (1906–2001), who founded and directed the former Center for Advanced Visual Studies at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Kepes believed that significant artists in the future would be a combination of Antaeus and Daedalus. In Greek mythology,

Antaeus was the son of Gaia (“Mother Earth”), while Daedalus conceived the possibility of man in flight beyond planet Earth. Kepes felt that artists were driven to take their virtual forms and ideas into flight, but then, occasionally they had to rest, to find moments of stasis, as in painting and sculpture. Indeed, Gustavo



Installation views of **Gustavo Bonevardi's *Ten Thousand Flower Maze***. Photographs by John Bennett.

Bonevardi is one of these artists, now living and working in the futurist present. Whereas the public works are intended for the urban centers and plazas of the urban metropolis, his desire to sculpt and draw is the life-breath, the *élan*, that functions as a precondition for the release of energy to expand and evolve over time.

**T**he black stone sculptures, broken, carved, and etched with letters on the polished surface of Pyrophyllite, are Bonevardi's respite from massive out-door architectural manifestations. His concept is very Asian in the sense that resting occurs in the process of shifting one's attention from calligraphy to painting or from painting back to calligraphy. The mind retreats from one activity in order to engage in another. In this sense, Bonevardi plays the role, destined by Kepes: to become Antaeus and then Daedalus. The craft present in his sculpture is really the focus, passion, and concentration by which he works, stirring the conceptual filigree from the Library of Babel. The bands of dissembled letters over the shiny black in relation to the porous cuts and cleavages hold their own monumental appearance; and within the appearance is the incisive memory or lost texts and messages flagrantly pulled apart, torn asunder, only to find another form of placement, another matter within the act of toil, the motion of cutting or inscribing bit by bit, sensing the meaning of what has been lost and, through doubt, somehow miraculously regained.

Maybe the best word to encapsulate the achievement of Gustavo Bonevardi is "knowledge." It is a general term, to be sure. Even so, one cannot deny its rele-



**Gustavo Bonevardi, Untitled, 2014**, African pyrophyllite and wood, 12 ½ x 4 x 3 ½ in. Photograph by Arturo Sanchez.

vance in terms of memory and loss, not only in relation to known civilizations, but also tribes—*island people*—from archipelagos who have lived in organized communities for millennia and whose proto-cultures were suddenly vanquished only to disappear prior to reaching the archives and museums in the civilized world. What kind of knowledge did these people possess at the same synchronic moment that the stampede of conquering civilizations came into effect from early Paleolithic times to the present? The spatial dissemblance of letters on rocks and paper, presumably destined for words and thoughts by the artist Bonevardi, carries an important message, in a sense, an oblique retrieval of memory and loss over eons of time as long as human occupancy has evolved and settled either within geographical boundaries or as itinerant herdsmen and wanderers across the straits and seas, the mountains and forests of this fertile and at-one-time resource-bound planet.

Where are we today? Where are we now? Gauguin was asking this question more than a century ago. Now as occupants in the 21st century, we are asking the questions again, but from another point of view, another angle of vision. Apparently, the predestined text has less meaning today than it did at the time of *La Belle Époque*. The inscriptions of Bonevardi are scrambled, not absolute. Language is given to make new forms, and the context of delivery remains open—as his work continues to reveal. Δ

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**Above:** Gustavo Bonevardi, *Sail III* (back and front views), 2012, African pyrophyllite, 13 x 11 x 2 in. Photograph by Arturo Sanchez. **Above right:** Gustavo Bonevardi, *Untitled*, 2014, African pyrophyllite and wood, 12 ½ x 12 ¼ x 4 ½ in. Photograph by Arturo Sanchez.