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The Sculpture of Gonzalo Fonseca

**First New York Museum Exhibition of
Important Uruguayan Artist in Nearly 50 Years**

Opens October 25, 2017

Press Preview: October 24, 4:30–6:00 pm

The Noguchi Museum presents a retrospective exhibition of the sculptural work of Gonzalo Fonseca (1922–97), an important Uruguayan-born modernist who for forty years was based in New York City, where he created some of the most enchanting, idea-rich sculptures of the second half of the twentieth century. The exhibition will encompass some 80 objects dating from the mid-1960s to the 1990s, primarily works in stone carved with his own hands in studios in Lower Manhattan and Tuscany, complemented by a selection of drawings and sketchbooks. Organized by The Noguchi Museum in partnership with the Fonseca Estate and curated by the Museum’s Senior Curator, Dakin Hart, the exhibition is on view from **October 25, 2017, through March 11, 2018.**



White Facade, 1987. Roman travertine.

Noguchi Museum Director Jenny Dixon states, “With *The Sculpture of Gonzalo Fonseca* the Museum continues to broaden its curatorial reach, all while remaining anchored in the legacy of Isamu Noguchi and his protean artistic practice. While we don’t know the circumstances or timing of the meeting of these two artists, we do know that they shared numerous artistic interests and beliefs. It is fascinating to see how these manifested themselves in Fonseca’s work, and to be able to look at them in the context of this Museum.”

Mr. Hart adds, “Like Noguchi, whom he met in New York or Italy probably in the early 1970s, Fonseca was a globe-trotting world-builder, in love with stone as an index of human civilization, from the geological to the archaeological, the

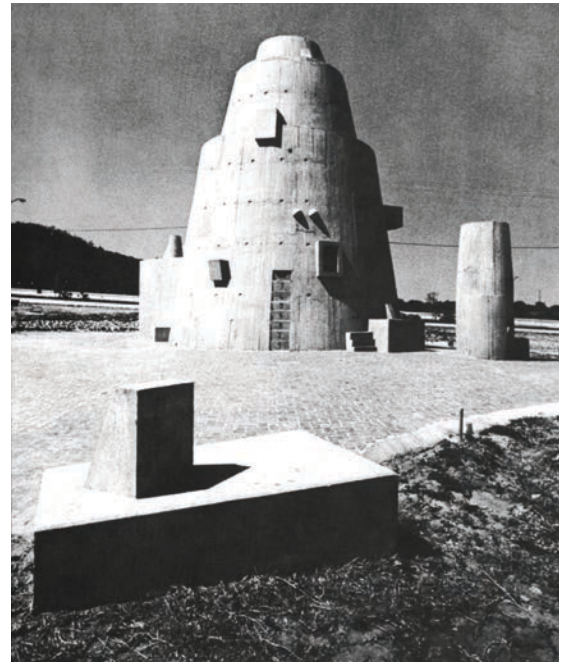
architectural to the mythic. In 1958, having spent more than a decade in the workshop of Joaquín Torres-García and exploring ancient cultures in South America and around the Mediterranean basin—including time spent living in Greece, Rome, Madrid, Egypt, and Syria—Fonseca moved his family to New York City and transitioned his architectonic imagination from painting to sculpture. That is the starting point of this exhibition, which explores the conceptual reach of the universal language of forms that Fonseca worked with throughout the rest of his career.”

Gonzalo Fonseca

Although the Uruguayan-born Gonzalo Fonseca entered university as an architecture student, he left early to join the studio of his brilliant countryman, the painter and theorist Joaquín Torres-García (1874–1949), to which he remained connected for approximately ten years. In 1958, following extended intercontinental travels, he moved to New York, where he would gradually trade painting for sculpture. This included, between 1965 and 1970, a number of large-scale public works, including a playground, underpass, and monument in Reston, Virginia (extant); an experimental play structure for a park in the Bronx, New York (destroyed); and a concrete tower for the 1968 Mexico City Olympics (extant). A voracious reader and superb draftsman, Fonseca had a number of scholarly hobbies, one of which was illustrating books by authors including Jorge Luis Borges, Thomas Mann, Rainer Maria Rilke, and Michel de Montaigne. In the last two decades of his life, he divided his time between New York City and a disused quarry in Seravezza (Italy), conjuring Swiftian worlds in stone.

Exhibition

The Sculpture of Gonzalo Fonseca begins in the indoor-outdoor galleries through which visitors enter the Museum. Here four monumental works in Roman travertine—two fountains, a pillar, and a large wall—have been installed to capture something of the otherworldly atmosphere of the disused quarry studio in Seravezza, Italy, where Fonseca made and originally installed them. They introduce the variety of ways that Fonseca transformed stone into fictive space. The wall piece, *Tabularium* (1980), for example, takes its name from the official records office of ancient Rome, yet the forms the artist has carved across its surface, a kind of index of archetypes, imbue the civic



Torre de los Vientos (Tower of Winds),
Mexico City, 1968.



Gonzalo Fonseca sculptures in Seravezza, including
Castalia, *Arethusa*, and *Tabularium*, c.1980s.

connotations of the title with notions of private collecting and storing—achieving something like an object-based version of historical fiction.

Fonseca's studio in Seravezza, Italy shared many qualities with The Noguchi Museum, including, principally, a serene yet restless sense of remove. The travertine works installed in the indoor-outdoor galleries, which dominated Fonseca's aerie in the last two decades of his life, are meant to elaborate on, in another language, Noguchi's installation of large late basalt and granite sculptures.

Moving into the Museum, visitors will encounter Fonseca's sculpture *White Facade* (1987) and an untitled drawing (1974). Latent in each of these, but explicit in their combination, is the notion that civilization's cycles of construction and ruin are universal, in that they can be analogized with sculptural techniques for compressing and conflating different times, spaces, and cultures. Through abstraction and subtle shifts in perspective and perception, Fonseca employs simple architectural and natural archetypes as a way to engage our spatial imaginations in the construction of worlds, the histories that our drive to build has produced, and how those histories shape our relationship with our own world. This is the leitmotif that is carried through the heart of the exhibition, in the Museum's second-floor galleries.

This installation is loosely organized into three areas, beginning with a group of early works made in New York City that offers a look at Fonseca's transition from painting, through wall relief, to freestanding sculpture. His original ambition was, not surprisingly, to be an architect. In his time with Torres-García, his interest in architecture developed into a concern with structural metaphors and the scaffolding, we might say, of universal archetypes that underlies much of civilization. Fonseca's move from painting to sculpture was essentially a shift from archetypal images to universal objects. This is illustrated in comparing two early works: *Facade I* (1961), a painting in cement of symbols, and *Stele* (1962), a carved stone container holding a few basic shapes.

Ultimately, Fonseca realized that the most effective way to deploy the arsenal of symbolic building blocks he had developed with Torres-García was to create a universe of imaginary microcosms in three dimensions. Like the history of its namesake, an administrative district in Egypt centered on ancient Thebes, which after many evolutions, at the tail end of the Roman empire become synonymous with monasticism, *Tebaida* (1973–79) is at once universal and particular. And like the great cities of Egypt, it is an index to the mysterious dignity that time imparts to those things and structures that last long enough to span civilizations and become universalized.



Untitled, 1974. Ink and wash on paper.

The works in the rest of these galleries cover most of Fonseca's major bodies of work. There are boats, such as *The Regent* (1975–77), which, like an eighteenth-century frigate 10,000 miles from home, is for all intents and purposes a self-contained universe, and *Barge* (1987), a whimsical stone-slab sailboat that makes a provocative connection between assemblage and improvisational engineering.



The Regent, 1975–77. Persian travertine.

Fonseca tended to work in two types of stone: found pieces of architectural refuse (limestone and brownstone), in New York and rough pieces of marble, in Italy. Generally speaking they can be seen as representing parts of what he viewed as the spectrum of culture and nature, which he never saw as opposite poles. In *House of the Pendulum* (1976), for example, a work in Siena marble, Fonseca's ability to evoke the sublimity of mountains in tabletop sized blocks of stone, as well as his obsession with the engineering required to shape mountains, are on full view. *Oculus* (1982), likely made from a piece of cut stone that was once part of an architectural facade, is an example of his interest in the churning cycle of reuse that characterizes the "progress" of civilization. It is also, compared to the vast openness suggested by *House of the Pendulum*, an essay in private space.

The final section of the exhibition focuses on tabletop works, sketchbooks, and drawings where Fonseca elaborates a material culture extending well beyond conventional contemporary sculpture, and which document projects in which the fictive hybrid universe that is the heart of his project intersects with ours. Particularly revealing is *Self-Portrait* (1996), the artist's final work. An ambiguous structural fragment filled with pieces of sheet stone—the remains of something or raw materials ready for the construction of something new—it could be anything from a piece of civic architecture like a Parthenon (real or imagined), to a parts bin on the bench of a Stone Age arrowhead maker. Fonseca saw himself as a collection of such fragments (physical and metaphorical, actual and mythical), and his work as a process of breaking down the barriers between the past and the present, the real but unbelievable and the barely conceivable.



Untitled, 1953. Ink and wash on paper.

Exhibition Support

The Sculpture of Gonzalo Fonseca is organized in collaboration with the Estate of Gonzalo Fonseca.

The exhibition is supported with public funds from the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs and New York State Council on the Arts. Additional support for the exhibition and publications has been provided by the J.M. Kaplan Fund.

Monograph

The Noguchi Museum will be working with the Estate of Gonzalo Fonseca to produce a new monograph on the artist. Publication is anticipated in fall 2019.



Tabatinga (Nilometer VI), 1984. Limestone.

Film Screening

Wednesday, November 15, 6:30 pm

The Noguchi Museum will screen the New York premiere of *Membra Disjecta: Gonzalo Fonseca and the Heart of Stone*, a new biographical film by Michael Gregory, as part of the programming surrounding the exhibition.

Fonseca and Noguchi

While we do not know when or how Fonseca and Noguchi first met, there were many opportunities for them to do so during the 1960s and 70s, first in New York and then in Italy. It is clear from their correspondence, catalogue inscriptions, and photographs that when they did meet, by the early 1980s at the latest, they formed what was for Noguchi an unusually relaxed and affectionate friendship. Based in New York City, both spent summers in Italy in the quarries and stone-working communities around Monte Altissimo (one of Michelangelo's marble mountains). Both were cosmopolitan outsiders, inspired by the European modernist avant-garde and trained by titans of modernism (Noguchi by Constantin Brancusi, Fonseca by Joaquín Torres-García). They shared a deep understanding of the global social history of art, and had both gathered experience from around the world with the intent of synthesizing it into a new mission for sculpture. Both resisted the narrower tracks of mid-twentieth century modernist sculpture, instead dedicating themselves to expanding its envelope. Both understood sculpture as a microcosmic way to engage civilization and weave its past and future together. Both worked with found stone; considered nature, time, and chance their collaborators; believed in the universal and transformative power of play; and developed strategies for using the techniques of sculpture to shape public space and, therefore, civic life.

The Noguchi Museum

Founded in 1985 by Isamu Noguchi (1904–88), one of the leading sculptors and designers of the twentieth century, The Noguchi Museum was the first museum

in America to be established, designed, and installed by a living artist to show his or her own work. Widely viewed as among the artist's greatest achievements, the Museum comprises ten indoor galleries in a converted factory building, as well as an internationally acclaimed outdoor sculpture garden. Since its founding, it has served as an international hub for Noguchi research and appreciation. In addition to housing the artist's archives and the catalogue raisonné of his work, the Museum exhibits a comprehensive selection of sculpture, models for public projects and gardens, dance sets, and his Akari light sculptures. Provocative, frequently-changing installations drawn from the permanent collection, together with diverse special exhibitions related to Noguchi and the milieu in which he worked, offer a rich, contextualized view of Noguchi's art and illuminate his enduring influence as a category-defying, multicultural, cross-disciplinary innovator.

The Noguchi Museum is located at 9-01 33rd Road (at Vernon Boulevard), Long Island City, New York. It is open Wednesday–Friday, 10 am–5 pm; Saturday and Sunday, 11 am–6 pm. General admission is \$10; \$5 for seniors and students with a valid ID. New York City public high-school students, children under 12, and Museum members are admitted free of charge. Admission is free on the first Friday of every month. Public tours in English are available daily at 2 pm, and in Japanese on the first Friday and second Sunday of every month. **718-204-7088 or www.noguchi.org**

@NoguchiMuseum on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Tumblr, and Snapchat

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Image Captions

1 Gonzalo Fonseca, *White Facade*, 1987. Roman travertine. 26 3/8 x 35 13/16 x 8 1/4 in. Photo courtesy of the Estate of Gonzalo Fonseca.

2 Gonzalo Fonseca, *Torre de los Vientos (Tower of Winds)*, Mexico City, 1968. Photo courtesy of the Estate of Gonzalo Fonseca.

Gonzalo Fonseca sculptures in Seravezza, including *Castalia*, *Arethusa*, and *Tabularium*, c.1980s. Photo courtesy of the Estate of Gonzalo Fonseca.

3 Gonzalo Fonseca, *Untitled*, 1974. Ink and wash on paper. 17 1/2 x 21 3/4 in. Collection of Elizabeth Fonseca. Photo by EPW Studio/Maris Hutchinson.

4 Gonzalo Fonseca, *The Regent*, 1975–77. Persian travertine. 11 13/16 x 35 1/16 x 16 15/16 in. Photo by EPW Studio/Maris Hutchinson.

Gonzalo Fonseca, *Untitled*, 1953. Ink on paper. 13 3/8 x 10 1/4 in. Photo by EPW Studio/Maris Hutchinson.

5 Gonzalo Fonseca, *Tabatinga (Nilometer VI)*, 1984. Limestone. 20 1/16 x 32 1/2 x 22 1/16 in. Photo by EPW Studio/Maris Hutchinson.