

The Art of the Cross, Sculpture and Film

By JAMIE ELLIN FORBES

Three-dimensional Iconoclastic sculptural crosses, along with symbols of Buddhism and nature, are created by Ziggy Attias and are the motifs of choice by this unorthodox artist. His textural application of primary materials, smooth oblique metals, clear colored crystals, antler horns and ivory are evocative of ancient ruins. These crosses travel through time and space. Taking up residence in their environment they become both fascinating and powerful. In the starkness of their simplicity, they become even stronger as a result of the craftsmanship and attention to detail evident in the creation of each.



Ziggy Attias, Southampton, New York

Attias challenges and navigates traditional boundaries by forging a new perspective for his work. By making use of the various elements that comprise the finished work, as well as the symbol(s), he conveys a unique command of tools and technique necessary to express his vision.

With a deep understanding of the balance that his sculptural crosses occupy, he deploys his artistic drive to develop and investigate the meaning of the traditional Christian symbol defining the sovereign outworking of the love of God. "I respect and understand the meaning these symbols have held throughout time and I see the beauty in them," he notes from his Southampton studio, bathed in the famous sunlight reflecting off the great expanse of the Atlantic Ocean on Long Island's fabled East End.

"When I'm working I concentrate on the symmetry of the form and the balance of the elements. The symbols alone draw people to the work - whether they are religious, art lovers or rock and rollers - any one of them can be attracted to a particular piece and each feel something unique based on their own history. I feel my work attracts people for many different reasons." The tension between Attias' Jewish background and his found mode of expression is an interesting contradiction that finds a very natural rhythm and dynamic in this work. Powerful yet delicate, Attias merges this opposite in the same way the cross, originally a tree, symbolizes a brutal death followed by eternal life. It is with much respect for both his own background and all that is inherent in the cross that Attias depicts the art and culture of others and brings his sculptures to life.

Attias' artistic odyssey didn't begin until his early twenties, "When I was a teenager I felt like I was an artist without a medium"

he remarked. "I noticed that other kids were drawing and doing what creative people do, knowing I had an affinity for it." Like most young people Attias was searching for a direction in life, and a form of expression he could be proud of. "Then one day I came upon a friend of the family David Johnson, a local Huntington artist and teacher, David specialized in stained glass, crystal wands and art construction boxes. I was fascinated by his soldering technique. I felt an immediate attraction toward this process and asked him to teach me how to do it. There was something about seeing his work...and right away I knew that I had found my way."

This format which uses soldering as an integral element to the overall design was the doorway for him to walk through. Through Johnson, Attias learned to use the tools necessary to "manipulate the material" enabling him to deliver his energetic concept. Immediately he was drawn to ancient symbols as primary subject matter. Constructing in metals, crystals, found materials and semi-precious stones, he began to investigate the artistic qualities that the medium had to offer. "The finished objects felt formidable. They had a presence that somehow looked ancient upon completion." He credits the symbol of the cross and the way it interacts with the space, for this. His direct artistic intent is to be devoted to the developing essence of the piece, not quite able to explain how or why the finished sculptural effects of the crosses evoke such an emotional response.

As an artist, Attias did not look for any reaction. Starting out working on a much smaller scale, Attias found making jewelry his initial direction. "At the time I had to find a way to support myself and I wanted to do it on my terms. I formed a company, started doing trade shows, and luckily found a positive response to my pieces of jewelry. They sold well and so began my career. It was not for art's sake then- as it is now," he continues, "Later I grew in another direction and I started to create larger pieces using different elements in the work. I noticed that people began seeing the new works in a much more serious way. This in turn gave me the confidence to push myself further."

In the way traditional constructionists and found object artists do not subscribe to any particular "school" - Attias' mediumistic style is the spontaneous compiling of the assembled objects, selected by choice, almost in a rhythm, from an assortment of collected materials. "People view the pieces as somewhat Medieval." Attias credits this with his



Amethyst V - 23" x 16" brass/metal/amethyst 2005



Slim - 42" x 27" brass/metal 2004



Tusk - 23" x 15" brass/metal/bone 2005

In reality a cross is a very specific shape, yet Attias continues to find new ways to interpret the symbol while always staying true to the form. Attias begins placing objects on four points and the objects dictate the intersecting lines and overall size while each piece starts to take on its original form. Once a work is complete it often appears as if it was created by an artist in another time and is a remnant of an old church or house of worship.

use of natural materials such as metals, crystals and his use of dark patinas. "The patina enters the nooks and crannies of the object, creating shadows and giving a sense of depth, enhancing the piece and becoming an integral part of the overall look and feel of the piece." His rustic look is only enhanced by the use of antlers and horns. The antlers and horns he uses are dropped by the animals in a natural shedding process. The antlers become found objects which are then collected and sold. This makes the work true to the constructionist found art philosophy.

In the way Louise Nevelson went about construction, Attias applies his materials to his singular artistic goal. The one big difference between the two methods of approach is that Attias decides ahead of time that the object will be a particular symbol and not an abstraction. The alchemy of this creative play allows for the sculptural objects to take on the presence of life as deployed in the space by the artist as an intended outcome, not creative happenstance.

Attias is tireless in his investigation of his primary subject, the cross. He finds this surprising, feeling that the energy of the crosses lends a definition, simple but constant, in their fascinating interplay.



Goddess - 10.5" x 11" brass/metal/horn 2005

Attias has investigated other motifs in the same medium and manner and is of the opinion that his work is best expressed in the cross. "I personally love the pieces that are inspired from Buddhism and Hinduism, and maybe if I lived in the East things would be different - but here, in the west there is something about the cross and all that it represents that just seems... important. It's been over 2000 years and people continue to die for it." The materials lend themselves to his process, refined and well-suited to make their pure statement. The formatted design of the cross has developed and deployed a seemingly endless capacity for Attias' creative skills. He gives his work a unique and definitive touch. "There's something about making a cross, a simple design, that when I combine the elements - the solder, and the brass, whatever it is I do - the result is that

people put a value on it: historical, religious or artistic. This perceived value evokes a very distinct feeling from people; they assess its importance to them. People bring their own history to the piece immediately." Emotion surpasses the art. First



Peter Beard, Cross Detail, 2003

ART PHOTOS BY **GARY MAMAY**

there is an attraction to the shape; the realization that the shape is a work of art soon follows an ideal harmony for any dimensional piece to achieve.

“There is always a reaction to the crosses. It is a very powerful symbol and I of course bring my own history to the work.” he continues, “The crosses have strength, an integrity about them. I feel there is honesty there. Their very presence in a room becomes a focal point. Not because of me, but because of the symbol itself. I just do my thing and the work takes over after that. The symbol stands for what it is and the artwork becomes secondary, as it will be a thousand years from now.” Attias maintains that his desire is not to deliver a religious message, the spiritual value or message is there for the taking. Sculpting energy into a pleasing balance, he takes action by combining the materials to develop the statuary in this manner.

Attias’ work has begun to attract the eye of gallery owners and he is now working on an exhibition for The National Museum of Catholic Art and History in New York City, also his recent works can be seen at Sublime American Design in Tribeca.

Attias’ open, spiritual nature has led him to an interest in cross-cultural statements, not only in his sculpture, but in his work as an award winning documentary filmmaker. Attias films have been seen on PBS and he has edited, written and directed films ranging from *Traveling the Distance*, about the Shinnecock Indian’s 50th Anniversary Labor Day Pow-Wow which The New York Times calls “...an important anthropological reference...” to *The Nepal Diaries* (a personal journey through the Kingdom of Nepal) and *Ride on Brother*, about the cathartic journey of six NYC firefighters in the wake of 9/11. For which Attias was applauded by President Bush, “I commend your work to document this remarkable bike tour which reflects the true spirit of our country”

These films explore wondrous places full of fascinating people, rife with the back story of spiritual quest - not only for the subjects, but for the filmmaker. As Attias writes in his Nepal Diary, March 2, “This journey is not about the search for a Lama in a faraway village... but about our thoughts and feelings in this moment, right here with each step, that is all that we have... All that I have.” Continuing on his exploration of religious themes, Attias is currently in pre-production on a new feature film which he will be directing. *Prophets and Brothers* was written by Brian Evenson, who received the prestigious O.Henry Award for one of the four stories which the screenplay is adapted from.

The screenplay for *Prophets and Brothers* takes place in rural America, it is a character driven story which explores how human nature struggles with religious principles, questioning both the existence of God and the things that people do in the name of religion. Neither pro-religious nor anti-religious, the film suggests that religion and our relation to it is a great deal more complicated than we might think.

Extremely timely in its subject matter, *Prophets and Brothers* is imaginative and original, taking many unanticipated turns and always staying ahead of the reader. This powerfully written story is not for the faint of heart, yet it is a wonderfully sensitive, moving and compelling dark tale. With so many underlying themes, it may very well be the perfect story for these troubled times. It is no wonder that it has been said about the writer, “There is not a more intense, prolific, or apocalyptic writer of fiction in America than Brian Evenson.” With Attias’ attention to detail and the complimentary style of Evenson’s writing, the potential for what this film may be is extremely exciting.

Attias lives in Southampton, New York with his wife Stacey and daughters India, Falon and Lily Bleu. For more information about Ziggy Attias please go to Ziggyfilms.com or ZiggyAttias.com