

Bringing Matter to Life – Asphalt Art is born!

Reflections on Heinz Aeschlimann's Cast Asphalt Pyramids

Roy Oppenheim, Publicist

Heinz Aeschlimann has been a sculptor for over thirty years and has made a name for himself on the international art scene. Aeschlimann breaks down boundaries – in every sense; in art and in life. For Heinz Aeschlimann is one of the most unusual multitalented creators of our times. He has the versatility of a Leonardo da Vinci, the *uomo universalis* of the Renaissance, who was at the same time a sculptor, a painter, an architect, a musician, an anatomist, a mechanic, an engineer, a philosopher and an inventor. Boundaries are of no concern to Heinz Aeschlimann. A civil engineer by trade, he has an international reputation as an expert in poured asphalt. But above all, Aeschlimann is a highly talented artist who has set new milestones for modern sculpture. It is no wonder that the significance of Aeschlimann's work was first recognised in the United States, the land of unlimited opportunity. Meanwhile, his work has drawn the interest of art circles in other countries too.

Aeschlimann, *uomo universalis*

Since completing his training as a civil engineer, Aeschlimann, *uomo universalis*, has been attracted by a global challenge: he sees the modern structuring of public space as the central urban challenge of our day. This interdisciplinary task can indeed be compared with the monumental building feats of the Renaissance creator (Michelangelo, Brunelleschi or Palladio) who was at the same time a master builder, architect, sculptor and painter. In those days too, at the centre of the vision was an integrated structure as a meaningful, harmonious bond interconnecting nature, technology and man. As a youth, Aeschlimann already intuitively recognised that his goals could only be achieved by combining artistic vision, technical know-how, philosophy, dynamism, social commitment, perseverance and the power of assertion. Which is why the simultaneous recourse to all his skills and talents is not contradictory, but a prerequisite for success.

The Inventor

Aeschlimann is permanently seeking new solutions. At night and on weekends, he withdraws to his studio to search for new paths. As he handles materials and shapes, ideas emerge which he then develops in his lab. Aeschlimann is the antithesis of the romantic artist in an ivory tower; he knows that the huge challenges of our day can only be mastered in close association with a multitude of other specialists. His leadership methods and stimulating motivational technique are reminiscent of the builders' huts of yore; the builders'

huts to which mankind owes its most significant art works and monuments - the Egyptian pyramids, gothic cathedrals and baroque centrally-planned buildings.

Poured Asphalt – an Obsession

Asphalt is a natural raw material which Heinz Aeschlimann knows better than anyone. For years he has been experimenting with this fascinating, mysterious substance. In his early sculptures, he already combined steel, stone and asphalt. - The origins of asphalt reach far back into antiquity. Asphalt was already used 5000 years ago by the Babylonians and Sumerians for waterproofing buildings. There are large natural asphalt deposits in many places around the world: in Trinidad, Venezuela, California, Argentina, Syria, Canada, Cuba and Egypt, as well as in Switzerland's Val de Travers. The asphalt used industrially is a mixture of bitumen – a by-product from crude oil refining – and aggregate. Asphalt is a fascinating raw material. It is easy to pour, spread and polish; it is environmentally friendly, re-usable and aging-resistant. Well-known architects such as Mario Botta long ago discovered the magic of poured asphalt in modern architecture.

Asphalt Art

Aeschlimann's asphalt pyramids introduce an exciting new phase of his work. The pyramid, with its angles rising from the four corners and converging at the summit, symbolises unity and the hierarchical structure of the universe. Aeschlimann, civil engineer and visionary artist, became obsessed with the pyramid - a universal symbol whose perfect form fascinates people of all cultures. Like many modern artists he is seeking new effects that have never been achieved before. He sees his experience, his obsession with asphalt in new associations. What if one built a pyramid in asphalt? Traditionally, asphalt is used horizontally, as a surface for paving roads and squares. For years, the artist was obsessed by the idea of using the versatile raw material, with its unique aura and energy, to create vertical forms. Aeschlimann laboured away, experimenting over and over again. In eight years, he devised 240 different recipes for asphalt, none of which were appropriate for vertical use. Then, finally, one worked. Thanks to a special composition with stabilising additives, Aeschlimann achieved a new asphalt stability. For the first time, poured asphalt could be worked vertically. The breakthrough was a success.

The Casting Process

To cast the large pyramids (1.80 x 1.80 metres and larger), metal walls are welded together leaving a space in between. The steel pyramid, which weighs a ton, is then sunk top down into the ground. The 220° hot asphalt is poured in from above: the mould is filled layer by layer. The work proceeds under great tension for 12 to 14 hours non stop. In this phase,

speed is essential because the asphalt must not set. With every new layer, the lower sediments are compressed more compactly together. Underground, the asphalt at the top of the pyramid becomes denser. At irregular intervals, the artist sprinkles shiny quartz flakes into the material. Once the mould is removed and the pyramid is turned right side up, the quartz flakes shine through its edges contrasting with the blue-black matter of the poured asphalt.

Bringing the Material to Life

During the casting phase, different layers with diverse structures are created producing the variegated surface which will be subsequently revealed. No two areas are alike but the entire wall is homogenous in effect. The ridges and indentations add a special tactile charm. - Heinz Aeschlimann is a poet who extracts new qualities from "his" asphalt which he dares to use in entirely new ways. The chthonic element also plays a role: the bond with a material wrested from the earth, consisting of elements buried for millions of years and now extracted and processed by man.

The new creations, the asphalt pyramids, are austere and radiate an urban, metropolitan grandeur. The outer surface is determined by the inner structure of the asphalt and its casting in the special underground mould. The pyramids have an evocative power. The monochrome asphalt surface with its blue-purple-grey-black effects absorb light and energy and pass it on to the viewer. The monochrome asphalt material confers an hypnotic power on the surfaces. The walls of these pyramids have nothing in common with traditional sculpture: they represent the universe around us, they symbolise an infinite spiritual space in which the numinous also has its place. Depending on the mood and lighting, the pyramid's suggestive magic also expresses itself as restrained beauty with an intense colour which causes visitors to stop in meditative contemplation.

Once freed from the earth and the mould, the inverted asphalt pyramid emerges as a secret, magical whole. The upward running walls evoke a boundless celebratory space created by the pyramid's converging angles which draw the sight heavenwards. The quartz flakes sprinkled in by the artist become signs and traces – the annunciation of something concealed. Associations spring to mind here too: visions of ancient temple walls shrouding and dissimulating hallowed areas or of closed doors concealing labyrinthine corridors to the inner. Aeschlimann's pyramids release their poetic quality when the dull, lustreless matter of the black asphalt starts expressing itself with incomparable force. Bringing matter to life, making it meditate and express itself – such is the masterful feat of the magician Heinz Aeschlimann. - Aeschlimann the artist loves working with heat and fire. His favourite tool is the welder he uses to work steel. He loves the smell of furnace-hot asphalt. During the

production process, Aeschlimann disappears into his own visionary world. It becomes clear just how decisive the crafting process is to the creation of these works: after all, the Greek word *téchne* means both art and craft. The archetype Prometheus comes to mind; by giving man fire, he made civilisation possible. Fire – inner and outer – is dynamic, it melts matter, makes people move, gives birth to the new. Asphalt art is born.

The new cast asphalt works of Heinz Aeschlimann are currently on exhibition in the Pavillon Park: "Asphalt-Art" in Art-St-Urban (Switzerland), at "OPEN10", at the Lido in Venice (Italy), in Sarasota Florida, "Sarasota season of Sculptures", where Heinz Aeschlimann was elected by an international jury to show two of his new pyramids (November 2007).