



# Listening to Stones

A Conversation with

## Lika Mutal

BY JAN GARDEN CASTRO

OPPOSITE AND THIS PAGE: GAMI KLUTIER

Opposite: *Lunar Stone*, 2010. Travertine with calcarian algae, 106 x 106 x 38 cm. Above: *Stonebud Ocean*, 1990–92. Travertine, 215 x 230 x 159 cm.

Lika Mutal knows the ages of stones. Her studios in Lima, Villa Salvador, and Pulpos, Peru, contain examples of ancient igneous formations that she has harvested from Peru's mountains and deserts and reverently transported—making sure that granite boulders weighing up to seven tons arrive without a chip or scratch. It may take years for Mutal to use a piece and up to a year to hand-polish a large work. Leaving parts of original golden-brown outer surfaces while revealing sparkling green-black interiors or mating stones of different ages and hues is part of her magic.



An avid reader, pianist, and music lover who has lived in Peru for more than 40 years, Dutch-born Mutal continuously refines the role of vision in her work, bringing out possible resonances inherent in the stones themselves. Recognizing the palpable presence of Mutal's sculpture, the Novartis campus in Basel changed the façade of a building to be more in harmony with her stone. Without criticizing sculptors who waste materials or rely on industrial equipment, Mutal creates work that honors and preserves the earth's ecology, environment, and substance. Stone not only represents millions of years of the earth's history, but also, in Mutal's hands, its transformations, resonances, beauty, and messages.

Mutal has had many solo exhibitions at the Daniel Gervis Gallery in Paris, the Nohra Haime Gallery in New York, and the Galeria Lucia de la Puente in Lima. In 2008, she exhibited 20 sculptures, including four monumental works, at the new Patricia Ready Gallery in Santiago, Chile. Her work is in public and private collections around the world, including the Centre Pompidou in Paris and the Kröller-Müller Museum in the Netherlands. Her awards include two prizes from the Fujisankei Biennale in Japan. Mutal has received international attention for *The Eye that Cries*, a memorial labyrinth and sculpture in Lima for the more than 60,000 victims of the armed conflict between government and guerrilla forces during the '80s and '90s. This work brought consolation and symbolic reparations to survivors, but it became controversial after its desecration by followers of the Fujimori government, whose methods of suppressing terrorism were often as violent as the terrorist acts they sought to control. The memorial is now supervised by a consortium of human rights groups.<sup>1</sup>

**Above:** *The Eye That Cries*, 2003–06. Memorial to the victims of Peruvian violence, Lima. **Below:** *Messenger*, 2007. Travertine with fossil, 147 x 147 x 48 cm.

**Jan Garden Castro:** *You speak eloquently about the genders, histories, and ages of stones.<sup>2</sup> Why are these understandings important?*

**Lika Mutal:** As a European, I was taught that stone was a lifeless material, while here in Peru, in traditional and popular lore,



TOP: LAMA KARMA CHOTSO

*Echo of the Wind*, 2007. Granite with wind- and water-eroded stone, 164 x 133.5 x 94 cm.

stone is alive. What it meant to my European mind was that one stone was a reliable material and with another you had to be careful. Later on, this was confirmed in a profound way by the Andean priests of the Q'ero nation when they told me, upon seeing the stones in my studio, that each was a direct descendent of a sacred mountain (Apu) sharing in all the properties of the mountain, and that they were called ancestral stones. One stone could teach you vision; another stone was a healing stone and would bring great blessings to the person to whom that stone would come. The central stone of *The Eye that Cries* is a descendent of Ausangate, the sacred tutelary mountain of all the pre-Hispanic nations in Peru.

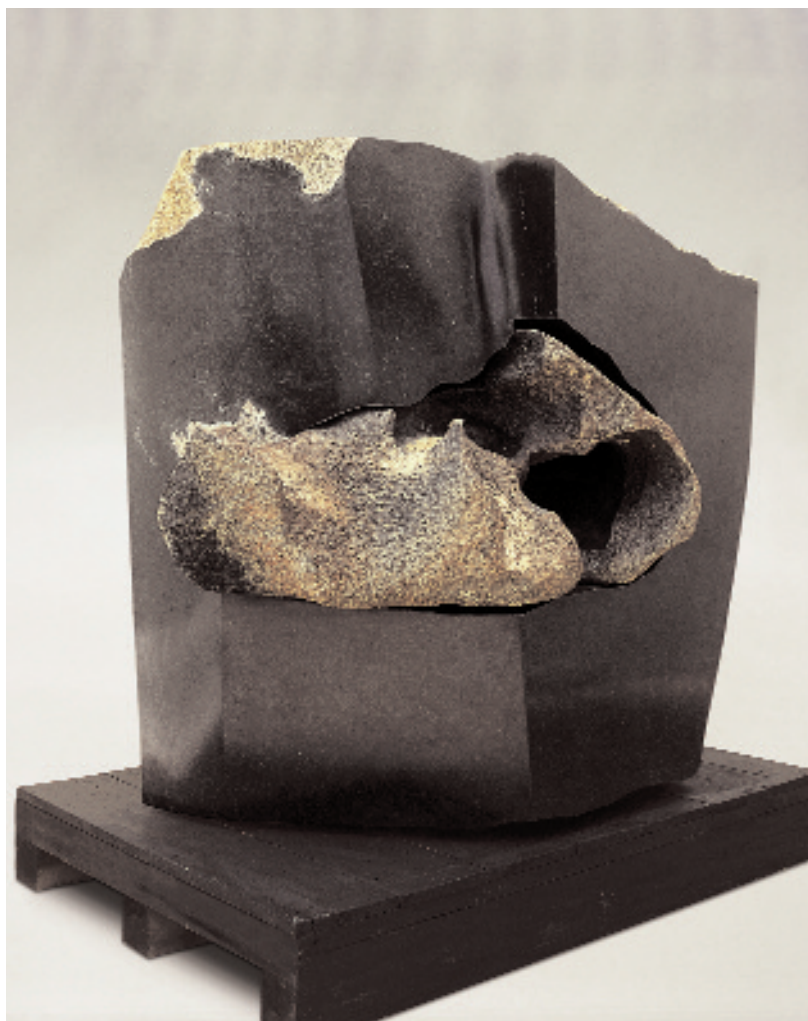
**JGC:** How did you find the Inkarrí stone and develop your friendship with Don Martin Quispe, an *altomesayog* or stone sage from the remote mountain-based Q'ero nation?

**LM:** It was Martin who told me that the stones in my studio are related. The Inkarrí is like a messiah. When Martin and other sages first came to my studio in Barranco and saw the stones and sculptures on my patio, one of them went into a trance and started to communicate with the stones. They called one a symbol of Inkarrí, and when I said that I was going to work in the stone, I was told not to touch it as it would be punishment for the stone. One man said that this stone was the center of my house. Then he bent over and touched the rim of the stone and said, "If you work Inkarrí here, maybe Inkarrí would grow." I interpreted that to mean if I put it on a mirror of water, it would grow through its reflection. I chose to surround it with flowers and plants, and it is the center of my house. It's a gray granite stone with a knife edge in three sections—like a mountain. I brought that stone from a quarry where I went with Don Juan Arias, a stone carver who taught at the School of Fine Art at Catholic University where I studied.

**JGC:** What did you study with Don Juan?

**LM:** He taught that the big challenge for sculpture was granite—the giant that you attack in its weakest spot. He would visit my studio to teach me direct carving with chisel and hammer—all hand-work. When I was done expressing ideas in travertine, the softest hard stone, he took me to a small natural quarry where there were hundreds of little granite blocks shaped by nature. You could read their history: the north face would be rusted, the south covered with moss; there was a different texture, color, and feel to each side of the stone. I would sit near one that had attracted my attention, then I would walk away, and if, coming back, I could still recognize it, I would take it to my studio. Then, in my studio, I would live with it for months or years until I knew what to do with it—how to enhance an aspect in it that would make it landscape, architecture, sculpture, by lifting a part out of the mass and polishing it while basically leaving the same stone. I started

*Hommage à Louise Bourgeois*, 2007. Marble, travertine, and natural stone, 26 x 37 x 34 cm.



to feel these stones as emissaries of nature. When a group of poor people turned the quarry into a shantytown, I had to look in other directions. In the north of Peru, I found a place of astronomical proportions with thousands of blocks of eroded black granite. The new stone carver with whom I visited the place would say, "It is an enigma—how these blocks of granite flowered here." It must have been the result of a giant cataclysm that broke the layers of lava into pieces.





**JGC:** *What about the seven-ton stone in your studio in Villa Salvador?*

**LM:** That was from a different place, which I found later when this quarry, too, became inaccessible because of huge avocado plantations that had been built around it. The stones in this new place were shaped by water and by wind. This stone is bigger than any of the others and has spectacular features; it says, “You may use me but you may not touch me.”

**JGC:** *A maquette shows where you plan to place it with other stones.*

**LM:** I’ve learned during the years that you cannot take what you like. You have to ask permission to use it. I do that through a small

**View of the artist’s studio in Lima.**

ceremony that the Q’ero have taught me to perform, making small bundles of coca leaves in a special shape enhanced with flowers of a special color. You blow your intention into the leaves, and then it is burned as an offering. At the same time, you feed all the stones—the ones you take and the ones you don’t take—with drops of *pisco* and *chicha* (Peruvian distilled wine and beer).

**JGC:** *In your earlier work, you turned some of the travertine into quipus, or “counting knots,” used for recording in the Inca Empire. How do quipus figure in Quechua culture?*

**LM:** A *quipu* is an object made of chords and tied with many knots. Each knot means something. It is believed that it was both a counting device and a way of writing. It inspired me because it represented an unknown language. Between 1978 and 1982, I was looking for a personal idiom, and to create knots that could move around one stone without being separate from the central ring was an irresistible challenge. It was very difficult to do. Don Juan would come in to teach me about weights and sounds. If the sound produced by the chisel started to lose its resonance, he would say, “You’re risking”—the stone could break. I always had to consider the relationship (among the parts) and keep in harmony the several weights (of the parts of each work).

**JGC:** *How do you connect “dream time,” the fusion of time, consciousness, and topography created by aboriginal songs, with your work?*

**LM:** I’ve written about this in an essay called “The Conscience of Space.” The work has taken me to realms where there are no defined separations between the conscious and the subconscious mind. I was raised in a culture where people called early religious beliefs paganism. I have come to recognize those beliefs as the religion or spirituality of nature. The cruel sacrifices of early nature



**Listening to See, 2011. Travertine with wind- and water-eroded granite, 101.5 x 101.5 x 68.5 cm.**

GAM KLUTER



Front and back views of *Isle de Paracas*, 2007. Natural stones, 21 x 17 x 8 cm.

religions have been discarded, while the *munay* or the charismatic and emotional intelligence of the universe is there for us to discover.<sup>3</sup>

**JGC:** *In the same essay, you mention Alfred North Whitehead and the quantum physics of Max Planck and Niels Bohr. What else has inspired your work?*

**LM:** Though I have learned much from pre-Columbian and other early cultures, nowadays, my work has to do with ecology. We can only discover the secrets of matter by being open to nature and by coming into our own higher consciousness of nature as it reveals itself to us.

**JGC:** *Mario Vargas Llosa says that your process shows the original nature of the stone and sometimes reveals that its inner core and polished face may show different hues, textures, or moods.<sup>4</sup> Listening to See is a sculpted globe of travertine into which you have set an ear-like stone shaped by the elements. The two somehow curl around each other.*

**LM:** I brought the old stone from the wind-blown place, and I used the travertine as its dwelling. Look at the circles in the old one, which continue inside the travertine. This shape is the echo of the shape inside the stone. Vargas Llosa talks about an amorous surge within the stone, a deep urge and mystery related to these old stones that represent nature, and I like that very much because I feel its truth. If you are silent enough and alert enough, a wordless

communication is established. This guides your doings in the stone, as well as your awareness about art, about life. It's an experience that guides you to new findings and levels that reach beyond matter per se. From matter, life was born. From life, mind. And being silent, or meditating, you come to learn that there is no end to these levels, which become non-material. There is higher mind, there is highest consciousness, and all of these layers inform each other. In our present world, we are stuck too much in the layer of mind and in the tricks it can perform: excess technology, violence, fanaticism. A mind that divides and does not feed from the lesson of oneness of matter does not evolve to another level. In my understanding about the importance of matter in all kinds of creation, there is a quality of "is," "now," and "being" — to create that presence and the light around it is like a mission.

*Jan Garden Castro is a contributing editor for Sculpture.*

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Katherine Hite, "The Eye that Cries: The Politics of Representing Victims in Contemporary Peru," *A Contra corriente, A Journal on Social History and Literature in Latin America*, Fall 2007: pp. 108–134.

<sup>2</sup> This interview took place in Pulpas on February 9, 2011. Mutal's essay "Stones are My Teachers" is featured in *Encountering Art, Different Facets of the Esthetic Experience* (Shigaraki, Japan: Miho Museum, 2001), pp. 23–36.

<sup>3</sup> Lika Mutal: *Del espacio sagrado, de las piedras soñadas, del munay*, exhibition catalogue, (Lima: Galeria Lucia de la Puente, 2007): pp. 37–44.

<sup>4</sup> Mario Vargas Llosa, "La tentación de la piedra" (1983), reprinted in *La tentación de la piedra* (Santiago: Patricia Ready Galeria, 2008).