


Soul Mountains by Maria Bofill

 Museu de Montserrat

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The Soul Mountains can be considered a variation on the soul houses first discovered by W. M. Flinders Petrie in the early 20th century, which were ceramic models placed atop the tombs of ancient Egypt. Initially, these only consisted of tables containing foodstuffs, but later they would become ceramic architectural models that stored food and sheltered those who would consume it. At that time, it was believed that the soul would rise up from the tomb, through the earth above, and food and shelter would be needed before embarking on their journey. These ceramic shelters allowed them to stock up before setting off. Maria Bofill's Soul Mountains are similar, as they serve as spaces to contain our spirit, protecting it and feeding it as we journey through life. Not to be contemplated nor handled, these are spaces to be inhabited and explored –if not on foot, then with our imaginations. Sometimes, to make sure that we go inside and occupy them, Bofill adds tiny doors to these mountains: little paths of entry that she offers us.

Some of these soul mountains are literally miniature hills made of porcelain or refractory. They form part of the long human tradition of reproducing the world on a smaller scale. In Europe, we find the tradition of



the crèche or the *jardin de salon*, quite similar to the models found in Egyptian tombs. The splendid oriental traditions of miniaturizing living nature includes *suiseki* (landscape stones), *ikebana* (reproductions of landscapes using living plant material), bonsai (dwarf trees) or the Edo-period meisho gardens that reproduce famous views of the Japanese islands. These involve the creation of a possible world, one more beautiful, more benevolent.

At other times, Bofill's pieces capture the meaning of these mountains, but through other forms. This can be seen in the clouds, which might be considered a sort of metonymy in porcelain, as they represent mountains through continuity. Then there are the porcelain capitals or the sandstone columns, which also express what it means to be a mountain. These capitals provide a platform upon which to gaze into the beyond, and are often located on top of columns just like the stylite hermits who, perched on these supports, sought out isolation in order to bring themselves closer to heaven through meditation. Bofill's recent works relate to the miniature landscapes and porcelain labyrinths she has long constructed: spaces that hold a magical, hidden secret in her eyes; spaces that provide architectural elements that uplift you, allowing you to overcome walls and barriers in order to open yourself up to an infinite space.

Maria Bofill's works are archetypal in two ways. "Archetype" means 'original model', from the Greek "*arkhē*", beginning; and "*typos*", form or mould. An archetype, then, is not an individual element, but a model from which to be built. Maria Bofill's clouds, fish, mountains, and architecture are all archetypes, within which the attributes of their meaning are concentrated, symbolizing all possible beings within their class. Furthermore, Bofill's pieces are archetypal with regards to the relationship of ceramics and human activity. Bofill's entire career as a ceramicist has been a

search for the ceramic archetype. In order to achieve this, she has had to perfect her technique like a virtuoso whilst also freeing herself from it completely.

Bofill works with the original, functional shapes of ceramics: bowls, boxes, covers, plates... All are useful instruments, and she knows how to create them just like the finest artisan. From two bowls she makes an egg, a pebble, the stars, fish; with a box, she makes a cube, a pillow of air, a cloud, a house; goblets are in fact elevated bowls, capitals are goblets with a cap; labyrinths and ziggurats are plates without bottoms, one engraved within the other; landscapes are plates without an edge that contain things just as dishes do. On an even more basic level are the simple shapes, the beginning of all ceramic production, the clump or ball of clay, the rolls or filaments, the sheets or plates, nearly unaltered; in the raw, they already form creations: the

rolls are ripples of water, the sea, the clouds; sheets of porcelain are walls, arches, fields... It is as if over the years, Bofill has managed to distil the basic attributes of all manner of ceramic vessels, using them to create increasingly essential archetypal forms.

Recently, this capacity to attain the essential has reached a primordial stage, a sort of regression to a primitive level of ceramics, as depicted by the great mountains of refractory we see as almost shapeless masses of clay, announcing the beginning of everything, with half-marked fingerprints expressing the initial push, the formative step. In this stage lies the formulation of the highest level of artistic freedom attained by Maria Bofill.

Anna Pujadas, exhibit curator.

Maria Bofill

Trained at the Massana School, where she also served as a professor from 1965 until her retirement in 2002, Bofill has had a long career as a ceramicist. Having exhibited all over the world, she has been a visiting researcher at leading international ceramics research centres. As a professor, guest ceramicist and a researcher, she has visited Sunderland Polytechnic of Art and Design (Sunderland, England), Kyoto City University of Arts (Kyoto, Japan), Universidad Veracruzana de Xalapa (Veracruz, Mexico), Hartwich College in Oneonta (New York, USA), Triennale de la Porcelaine (Nyon, Switzerland), University of Haifa (Israel), European Ceramics Work Centre (Hertogenbosch, The Netherlands), Atelier de Céramique Artistique Méditerranéenne (Hammamet, Tunisia) and the International Ceramics Symposium in Siklos (Hungary), among others. She has received numerous awards, and her work forms part of several prestigious collections.

