

# MARIANNE WEIL

## BRONZE AND GLASS MYTHOLOGIES

By Joyce Beckenstein

Marianne Weil spends much of her time going back in time. Her elegant, haunting bronze sculptures, sired by the intense fires of a 7,000-year-old lost wax process, are contemporary kin to archaic ruins stretching from Stonehenge in England to the ruins in Argos, along the Greek Peloponnese. Weil travels extensively to such sites, drawn to their history and archeology and to the mythology embedded in prehistory's unsolved mysteries, a time when the god was a goddess. During that time, humanity felt a shared proximity to nature and coveted the goddess's life-giving powers, intuiting her spirit within swelling sturdy tree trunks, bulbous underground caves, and undulating mountains and hills. They wrote to her—embedding and incising snaky spirals, gouged out vulva-shaped wells, and lozenges and symbolic chevrons on temples, tombs, and ritual objects. Weil's art absorbs the mythic and spiritual soul of that era.

But mostly, it is the challenge of contemporary art that drives Weil. As Helen Harrison noted: "Weil is not interested in trying to re-imagine or replicate such prototypes. Instead, she uses them as springboards for her imagination, extrapolating from them the way an improvisational musician takes a theme and expands upon it until it becomes his or her own creation."<sup>1</sup> For Weil, prehistoric abstract forms, their mythic texts and archeological contexts serve as compelling models for her enigmatic works. Her disciplined mastery of the lost wax process continuously evolves generations of forms that coax both bronze and glass into sculpture that seamlessly transcends time.

Born in Mt. Kisco, New York, in 1952, Weil traces her interest in archeology and art to her childhood. "My brothers and I always built tunnels and caves," she recalled, "and I visited Stonehenge at age sixteen. I originally thought about studying

government and attended American University, but then found my way back to Goddard College in Vermont, where I learned about bronze casting. By nineteen I knew I wanted to be an artist."<sup>2</sup> Between 1974 and 1991 Weil travelled routinely from New York to Italy for apprenticeships and independent studies. During those years of intense training—learning to carve marble and to forge bronze sculpture—she also received

her MFA from the School of Visual Arts, NY in 1986. These residencies, studies, and travels inspired her mature works, dating from the 1990s. Subsequent travels to ancient sites in Spain, Northern Portugal, Italy, and Greece continue to evolve new stages in her art, most of it produced in her studio/home, a converted barn located at the far reaches of Long Island's East End. She commutes to City University of New York, College of Staten Island, where she is a tenured Associate Professor of Sculpture.

Weil came of age during the 1970s, a particularly rambunctious period in U. S. history. Feminism was in full swing: Gloria Steinem and Letty Cottin Pogrebin published *Ms.* magazine, the Supreme Court decid-

ed the landmark abortion rights case, *Roe v. Wade*, and men and women across the country marched and voted in an effort (unsuccessful) to have Congress pass the Equal Rights Amendment. Lucy Lippard referenced the relationship of feminism to parallel groundbreaking movements in art during that time:

The origins of time and of counting seem in turn to lie somewhere between the cycles of the earth and the moon (with the human body as medium) and the lines of a journey, a life toward change. If these were the preoccupations of ancient peoples, they periodically



Fig. 1. Marianne Weil, *Quoyness III* (2005), cast bronze, 6" x 6" x 2"

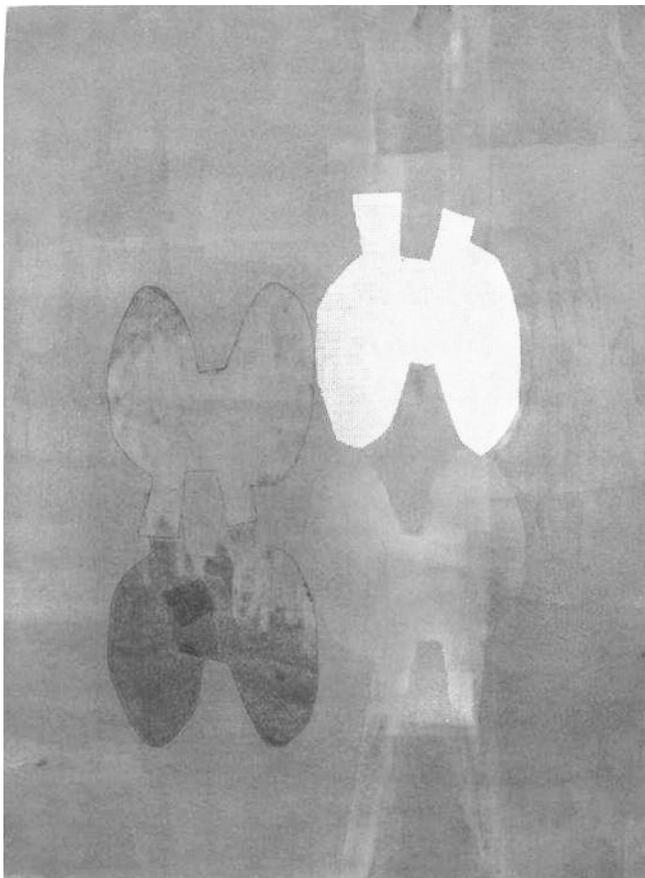


Fig. 2. Marianne Weil, *Los Millares III* (2007), monotype, oil on Arches, 22" x 30".

resurfaced in the history of art—most recently in the work of the Minimalists and Conceptualists of the 1960s and '70s ... [their] obsessions with basic geometry ... laid the ground for "primitivizing" artists to explore more complex areas of myth and history.<sup>3</sup>

Weil is neither a minimalist nor a conceptualist, though elements of those genres are undeniably embedded within her abstractions. Feminism, however, fueled her courage to venture into male-dominated realms: forging metal, carving in stone, and traveling as a twenty-year old to Italy and Spain where, at the time, women were seldom seen working in foundries or stone quarries. *Quoyness III* (2005; Fig. 1) a small bowl-like form, with an irregularly shaped rim, in keeping with Lippard's reference to artists absorbing mythic content into their work, recalls the kinds of daily ceramic objects once placed in tombs, filled, perhaps, with food for the afterlife. The surface is typical of the rich, multi-hued patinas Weil favors—amber to deep bronze, green and earthy coppery tones that catch and absorb light. The outer surface, punctuated with irregularly shaped openings, carries the eye through and beyond the form's exterior, merging interior and exterior space. For Weil, this interior space is as important as the outer surface because the scratches, marks, indentations, and openings she creates often suggest a conceptually gestating womb concealing a hidden form, idea, or inscribed message.



Fig. 3. Marianne Weil, *Los Millares*, ed. 6 (2007), cast bronze, 32" x 13" x 6".

In 2007 Weil spent research time at Los Millares, a Chalcolithic site<sup>4</sup> in Andalusia, Spain, dating from the fourth through the second millennium B.C. A community of approximately a thousand people, this ancient farming enclave is known for its concentric protective walls, and necropolis of *tholos* (mound) tombs. It is also believed to be one of the earliest metallurgy production sites for the manufacture of copper tools and artifacts. Weil's Los Millares series consists of monotypes, wall reliefs, and freestanding sculptures derived from her studies at this site. In the monotypes, Weil plays with different iterations of double-breasted or lung-shaped objects that in fact derive from an aerial view of the architectural substructure outlining the entrance to the Los Millares citadel. For *Los Millares III* (2007; Fig. 2) she inverts and then connects these forms, arranging them to alternatively suggest positive and



Fig. 4. Marianne Weil, *Panóias Espiral* (2010), cast bronze, 8" x 8" x 6".

negative space by virtue of their varied colors: white, grey orange, and deep red hues set against a background wash of variegated reds. They appear to court each another, like embryos performing a mating dance. In *Los Millares* (2007; Fig. 3), an edition of six freestanding sculptures, the conjoined couple evolves as a single anthropomorphic female figure with ample breasts, indented waist, and curved hips. A central opening suggesting a vulva and the rounded entrances to the *tholos* tombs, simultaneously functions as negative space drawing the viewer towards, in, and around the sculpture. Here the washes of vivid reds used in the monotype yield to striated patinas of golds, umbers, and dark greens. These sensuous, earthy surfaces echo the round protruding surfaces of moss-covered cave interiors where the goddess herself was thought to reside. Weil gives her shape and form as a muscular torso capable of catching and holding light that millennia ago seeped through her yawning underground passageway. *Los Millares 0* (2008; Pl. 10), a third iteration of what began as an architectural imprint, again changes character completely when, with its mottled patina of shiny gold, it rests as a formal arrangement of shape, texture, open and closed space against the wall's neutral surface.

In 2008 Weil visited Panóias, a Roman sanctuary in northern Portugal. Resting on a remote hillside facing the Douro River, this huge outcropping of granite provided the ancient Romans with enormous slabs of stone into which they dug deep rectangular pits, holding tanks for sacrificial animals. Unlike the rounded, biomorphic forms of her *Los Millares* series, the works emanating from this Roman ruin, *The Panóias Cycle* and *The Dig*, echo the geometries she discovered there.

*The Dig* (2010; Pl. 11) consists of twenty squarish bronze plaques patinaed to a vibrant turquoise. Each plaque holds a collage of various textures replicating the designs on ancient ceramics: water waves, spirals, fish netting, lozenges. But like



Fig. 5. Marianne Weil, *Mindful* (2011), blown glass and cast bronze, 11" x 7" x 3".

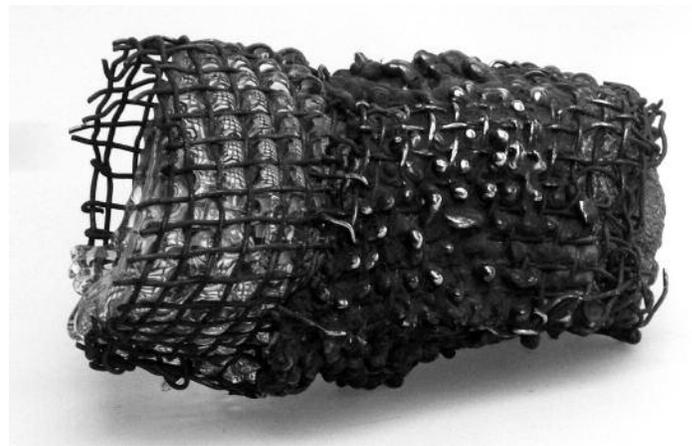


Fig. 6. Marianne Weil, *Fragment* (2014), cast glass and cast bronze, 5" x 3" x 3". Collection Sally Gelling.

her choice of turquoise background—a “manufactured” color compared to the earthy tones of her earlier work—the collage of patterns attached to these plaques are culled from kitchenware: soda caps, Teflon pans, waffle irons, and grid designs pressed from potholders and loosely woven fabrics into wax. It is interesting to note here the persistence of primal forms: the way the ubiquitous designs carved and etched into prehistoric objects prevail through time and turn up in everyday objects. According to Lippard: “Certain forms have survived the intervening millennia as the vehicles for such vital expression. The concentric circle, the spiral, the meander, the zigzag, the lozenge or diamond shape.... the passage and the labyrinth ... are still meaningful to us even if we cannot cite their sources and symbolic intricacies.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, millennia from now, the bottom of today’s Teflon frying pan may well be imbued with the same mythic mystery we read into the spiral forms writ large five thousand years ago on giant stones surrounding the ritual chamber at New Grange in Northern Ireland, another site Weil has visited.

Content, form and process are inseparable in Weil’s art. The textural qualities of her bronze works derive their palpable essences from wax models that rely as much on her touch as they do on her sculpting tools. Pressing fingers into soft, warm

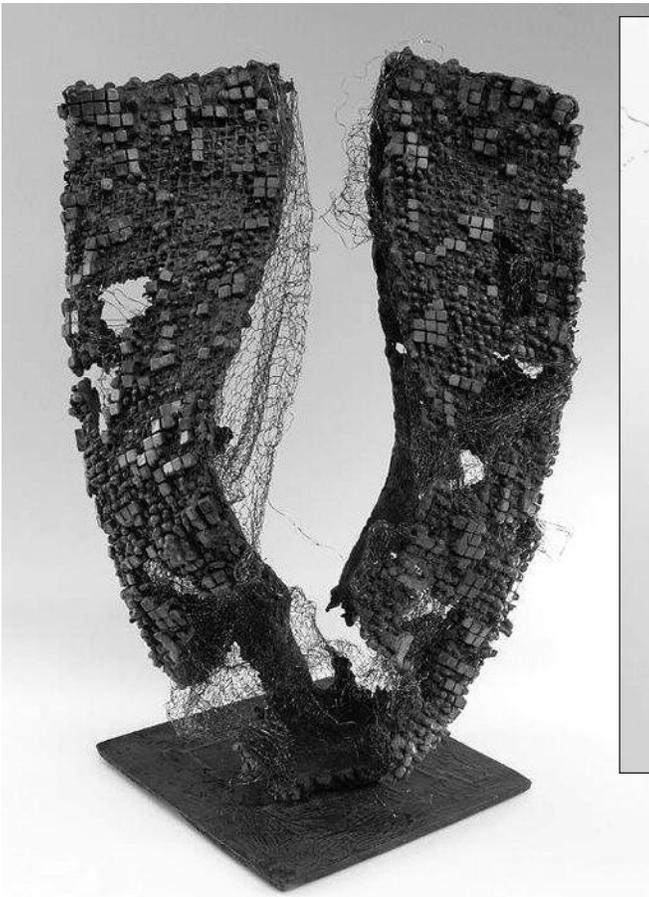


Fig. 7. Marianne Weil, *Argos Revisited* (2017), cast bronze with copper mesh, 17" x 12" x 8".

wax, having it creep beneath her nails, feeling it peel in strips thin and thick—it is sensuous work that settles with permanent ease within her molten surfaces. Consider the compact box-like form, *Panóias Espiral* (2010; Fig. 4). Its contrasting smooth and grooved mottled surfaces, bathed in warm washes of coppery light, begs to be touched; it asks the hand to trace its contours as the artist did when she formed it. A circular opening recalling the oculus of a *tholos* tomb sits off center, its edges opening like flower petals to reveal deep within a dark womb of interior space, a coiled spiral, symbol of the goddess's regenerative powers. Once again, interior space is as important as what first catches the mind's eye. For Weil this discovery, this mystery, operates as the kind of driving force Marija Gimbutas describes: "The main theme of Goddess symbolism is the mystery of birth and death and the renewal of life, not only human but all life on earth and indeed the whole cosmos.... This symbolic system represents cyclical, not linear, mythical time. In art it is manifested by the signs of dynamic motion...."<sup>6</sup>

And so it is with the evolution of Marianne Weil's art, whose current works combine bronze sculpture with blown or cast glass. It is a courageous combination, full of chance, rife with ruinous accident and splendid surprise. Weil first thought of combining glass and bronze in the 1970s during a residency in Italy, and still has her first attempt—a bronze frame edged with



Fig. 8. Marianne Weil, *Argos Revisited* (2017), detail, cast bronze with copper mesh, 17" x 12" x 8".

broken glass to prove it. She inserted glass within the frame, wrapped it in wax, and secured it with wire before covering it with the firing investment—a plaster shell surrounding the sculptural mold. The glass shattered, ruining the investment material for future recycling. The foundry workers had a fit, and Weil says, "I gave up the idea. But that was thirty-five years ago. Part of the

discipline of making art is not to abandon the idea. I was haunted by the glass and bronze work I was doing in 1979."

She renewed those efforts in 2010, and her subsequent explorations and experiments with these materials have (like her travels) taken her to places she has not yet visited. Each of her new works continues to wed biomorphic imagery, bursting with life, to inorganic material. For *Bullseye* (2010; Pl. 12) she first created a spiral metal sculpture and surrounded it with golden-colored blown glass—the resulting work resembles an ancient fossil preserved in amber. For other works, such as *Mindful* (2011; Fig. 5), she blew glass into a chevron-patterned bronze cone shape: it suggests a gelatinous life form emerging from a cocoon. By 2013 she switched her process from blown to cast glass. *Rim* (2013; Pl. 13) for example, exists primarily as stand-alone sculpture, a mass of cobalt blue glass muted, softened, and texturally enhanced with soft orange applications of sand and powder. *Fragment* (2014; Fig. 6), another variation, consists of an openwork container of wire mesh into which Weil poured molten glass: it blurs the lines between interior and exterior space as it "bubbles," seeping through openings, creating yet another world of animated texture.

But as is usually the case with Weil, the best is yet to come with the next phase of her process. That now involves new pieces inspired by her recent study of archaic Greek architecture in Argos, with its crumbling walls and remarkable amphitheater, and her recent guest residency at the Emily Harvey Foundation in Venice. In these works Weil again plays with contrasts, this time reversing the inherent fragility of glass and the expected indestructibility of bronze. Now, instead of pressing textures into wax, she presses the wax

through a variety of openwork forms, such as wire mesh, and then later adds new shapes to the wax armature. When combined with solid molten glass, the resulting beadlike wire and bronze netting seems as ephemeral as delicate gauze, the glass a solid mass binding fragile form. Densely packed, the forged wire and bronze forms replicate the irregular texture of crumbling architecture with its time-gouged spaces; when loosely knit, the results resemble delicate chain-like fabric, reminiscent of medieval armor. The possibilities seem limitless, as indicated by two of her most recent works, *After C. Sabbadino 1557* (2017; Pl. 14) and *Argos Revisited* (2017; Figs. 7 and 8).

While in Venice she was invited to do a work based on the cartography of the Venetian lagoon. She discovered a sixteenth-century map by Cristoforo Sabbadino that, surprisingly, appeared as an aerial configuration of the lagoon. As she similarly based her earlier Millares works on an aerial outline of the Spanish citadel, so did she use this unusual example of Renaissance cartography as a model for *After C. Sabbadino 1557*, a luscious emerald green “sea” of glass. Patches of bronze netting suspended within the glass form suggest disintegrating masses of land preserved forever within the depths of this molten “lagoon.” For *Argos Revisited* Weil created a flowing and delicate shawl-like spray of metal and copper netting oozing sparkles of coagulated and encrusted bronze.

Other unfinished works made from metal grids similarly are punctuated by openings—accidental to the casting process or incidental to her creative process (the two intersect)—that recall the incrustations and decay of ancient walls. They await a decision: whether to evolve them as new hybrid glass and bronze forms, or leave them, like *Argos Revisited*, as bronze freestanding sculpture, the place where Weil began. Has she come full circle? If so, it will only likely last until her next excursion. •

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## Notes

1. Helen Harrison, catalogue essay, “Marianne Weil, Los Millares: Recent Bronzes and Monotypes,” (New York: Kouros Gallery, 2015), 4.
2. All direct quotes attributed to Marianne Weil are from my interview with the artist in her studio in Orient, New York, August 7, 2017.
3. Lucy R. Lippard, *Overlay, Contemporary Art and The Art of Prehistory*, (New York: The New Press, 1983), 77.
4. Chalcolithic derives from the Greek word meaning “copper age” and refers to the early agricultural period between the copper and bronze ages.
5. Lippard, *Overlay* 10–11.
6. Marija Gimbutas, *The Language of the Goddess: Unearthing the Hidden Symbols of Western Civilization*, (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), introduction, xix.

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