



*Crust, Restoration, 1987*

In the act of reducing a block of stone to a sculptural form many shards are created and discarded. Okamoto has on occasion included this material with the finished piece. In the *Crust* series, pieces of the exterior of the original block are reassembled to form a hollow husk surrounding a void.

Sometimes the interior can be glimpsed; sometimes not. In *Restoration*, above, the reassembled husk is left hollow and eloquently juxtaposed against the inner core from which it was separated.



## ATSUO OKAMOTO

by Jesse Salisbury

Many excellent stone sculptors are active in Japan but there are few whose work is as conceptually interesting and as well crafted as the contemporary granite sculptures created by Atsuo Okamoto.

Okamoto became famous in Japan for his conceptual works in granite using the technique of *wari modoshi*. Roughly translated as splitting and returning, this technique goes back hundreds of years in Japan. In gardens three to four hundred years old giant landscape rocks were split into multiple blocks then transported and put back together like a puzzle to look like a large natural rock in the landscape. Okamoto works much like these ancient craftsmen in and near the quarries in Ibaragi where he has access to large natural blocks of stone, the knowledge of generations of craftsmen, and the inspiration of the quarried mountains and bedrock itself.

Okamoto is one of the few stone artists in the world to continue splitting with the *mame ya*, or 'bean' wedge, (so called because of its small size) instead of plugs and feathers, the more modern and universal technique. Plugs and feathers began to appear within the last two hundred years; the flat wedge is thousands of years old.

*Memorial Volume, Water 2004*

right: Interior of sculpture.

To split with *mame ya* a craftsman must carve oval notches in the stone instead of drilling round holes. Bare, hardened metal wedges are inserted in the notches and hammered to make the split. Even on larger splits the notches are carved no deeper than an inch and the resulting split is much more precise and sensitive than is possible with a drill, plugs and feathers. The carved marks themselves leave a beautiful pattern on the stone.

The process of *wari modoshi* has led Okamoto down a fascinating path in conceptual art. The ability to divide a large, heavy block into many manageable parts has allowed him to create and install large stone installations in museums and galleries throughout Japan and internationally. He is a very prolific artist, creating large numbers of unique sculptures that branch off into a variety of conceptual paths. *Crust, Memorial Volume, Unit, Cocoon, and Earth Call* are titles of pieces that inspired series.

One sculpture in the *Memorial Volume* series, is, in essence, the act of transforming a block of bedrock into cobblestones and finally into the pavement the viewer walks upon. One or more pieces include all the material, spalls and chips, everything (except the dust) that was removed to reveal the form.

Okamoto uses the negative and positive shapes created by splitting in a wide variety of ways. He has filled the inner spaces of split and reassembled stones with various objects, with water, with honey to attract



bees from nearby orchards, and he once placed a telephone inside a stone that rings and can be answered by someone standing nearby. Once Okamoto even ensconced himself inside a stone installation (from the *Cocoon* series) in a gallery.

In his *Turtle Project* parts of sculptures were sent around the world and after years in a foreign environment the pieces of stone were returned to Japan and reassembled. We can see the different colors of the stone created by different environments united in a single rock.

Atsuo Okamoto's enigmatic, provocative and prolific sculptures have been influential in the development of contemporary Japanese sculpture. ■

*Jesse Salisbury is a stone sculptor who has studied, worked and exhibited in Japan. He is a Stone Foundation member and organizer of the Schoodic International Stone Sculpture Symposium.*



*Crust, Shell of the Shape*



*Faraway Mountain, 2006*  
Twelve singularities from a singular block.



*Crust, Nest, 1989*



There was a time when Okamoto found himself unable, or unwilling, to impose forms onto material as he had been doing; a sculptor who couldn't bring himself to sculpt. Personal expression had no appeal, occupied as he was by philosophical considerations of nature and art, human civilization, the existential character of stone and his relationship with it.

Then he visited a white granite quarry. Dwarfed by the looming mass of bedrock, he decided to split open a block, to make a paving stone, just that. In the commission of that act a whole new empathy with stone, and new approach to it, commenced for him.

*Cocoon, 2005* This series started from my wanting to get into the stone, to be wrapped in the stone.

Each cocoon has enough space inside for my body.  
A O



*Stone Dimension, 1985*

Stone  
has two kinds of surface.  
one, recently torn from the bedrock  
is very rough, very aggressive.  
the other one is more tender,  
like that of a river stone  
which has lived in  
the world for  
ages

a  
stone  
exposing  
these two faces  
at once might transcend  
space and time and  
manifest  
Eros

A O



Crust  
In The Wall  
2000



Yamabito  
(Mountain Man),  
2005