

I visited Thiébaud Chagué at Taintrux in May 2012. He lives in one of the austere farmhouses characteristic of the region, with windows and doors framed with red sandstone. We are in the hauntingly beautiful Vosges, an area of France that has witnessed battles and bloody conflict over many centuries. The area retains a secret fairy-tale quality and Chagué's home is surrounded by meadows and encircled by small mountain peaks, dark with fir trees and with deciduous trees on the lower slopes, just coming into bright spring-time leaf. One surviving industry in this remote area is logging. It is a good place for a potter with a wood-fired kiln.

We drive to the nearby town of St-Dié, razed to the ground by German troops in 1944. It was rebuilt after the war as a place of parks, fountains and good housing. Chagué shows me the famous Usine Duval, a garment factory designed by Le Corbusier as part of this rebuilding process. At the nearby Musée Pierre Noel an exhibition dominated by fine African sculpture and masks includes a monumental piece by Chagué, *Béance*, and a pair of massive pierced forms by Chagué's friend, the Anglo-Nigerian potter Lawson Oyekan. Both artists look at home in the company of these historic and contemporary sub-Saharan objects. Nonetheless neither Chagué nor Oyekan borrow directly from other cultures. They are not neo-primitivists.

The awe and wonder that Chagué's work excites has more to do with being grounded in a place, or rather, a series of places. We visit the town's metalwork shop where young apprentices are being taught the skills of welding, cutting, raising and working metal. In this cavernous space Chagué's *L'Enfer* dominates. It is a majestic conoid stoneware form, split open and secured with turquoise coloured epoxy putty, its surface dotted with blobs of melted earthenware body. *L'Enfer* is cradled within a steel frame, made with the help of Fabrice Perrin who teaches in the workshop. Perrin accepts the strangeness of the collaboration without question. Indeed, throughout the day I spend with Chagué I am struck by his role within the local community.

Nicholas Bourriaud's term *esthétique relationnelle*, describing art that produces or prompts human relations, sociability and even conviviality, comes to mind. Of course, Chagué spends time alone in his studio, with its view of meadows and mountains. There he works obsessively on his sequences of *Cocoons*, *Fractals* and *Mandrakes*, to use his shorthand for his current repertoire of forms. But his natural playfulness and gift for friendship have led him into communities of all kinds. He has worked alongside the women potters of the Gwari village of Tatiko in Northern Nigeria. He is friendly with the Nigerian sculptor Kenny Adewuyi whose bronzes recall Giacometti's attenuated forms, and has

exhibited with him in St-Dié. He makes the firing of larger works performative and very public - most memorably in the garden of the Victoria and Albert Museum where in 2010 he created an improvised kiln around his mighty sculpture *La Soif et la Source*.

Chagué's *modus operandi* unselfconsciously employs contemporary strategies of interactivity, just as his old teacher Michael Cardew embraced *esthétique relationnelle* long before the term was invented. Chagué recently organised a community dinner and concert, with 250 people eating off his plates, each one playfully inscribed *assiette en glaise*. Like Cardew's Wenford Bridge his house is a collective where he, his artist wife Olivia, his three children and his two students Sandrine Bringard and Sylvain Thirouin eat and discuss together at a long wooden table.

Chagué's particular choice of raw clay, brought as dug from near La Bourne, is of interest. At high temperature it acts temperamentally. Forms split and shapes sag. This is not a concern for Chagué, indeed he relishes the uncertainty of the ceramic process. The clay is not purchased for its efficiency but for its tactility and materiality. He disregards conventional ceramic technology, and his work is fiercely sculptural. It is therefore surprising to discover that all his pieces are built from thrown elements. The discipline of the potter's wheel with its drive to repetition and symmetry appears remote from the dramatic, fractured nature of these complex objects.

For instance, the *Fractal* series are assembled from countless pierced tea bowl forms. Yet the *Fractals* appear to have fallen from the skies, looking like objects that have entered the earth's atmosphere from elsewhere. Other forms are more grounded in nature: the internal structure of the seed pod of the loofah plant inspires Chagué's double or triple *Cocoon* forms. The bifurcated *Mandrake* series reminds us of the plant's associations with magic and fertility and of its resemblance to the human form, or to a rough sketch of the human form.

The *Fractals* appear other-worldly; the *Cocoons* suggest natural growth and concomitant decay; the *Mandrake* series reminds us of Shakespeare's condensed description of man as a mere 'poor bare forked animal'. The *Fractals* can be displayed in an infinite number of positions, as if to underline their resemblance to natural objects. The *Cocoons* and *Mandrakes*, on the other hand, invariably require support, metal braced on the interior, epoxy putty to hold ribs and gashes together and metal rods and bases to allow them to stand vertically. In different ways, therefore, Chagué's oeuvre recalls natural objects that are willed into becoming art objects - like the rocks mounted on wooden stands

and placed by Chinese *literati* on their desks for contemplation.

Today we do not really grasp the significance of Chinese 'scholars rocks'. To understand the sources of Chagué's inspiration is a challenge also. He directs me to Michael Cardew's great essay *The Fatal Impact* in which Cardew writes on art and the child. According to Cardew

'being aware that the world is overflowing with some tremendous significance the child has to do something – or rather make something – as a kind of acknowledgement of the mystery. He does it by *making certain things mean something*, by giving esoteric names, properties and meanings to certain stones, sticks, animals or places. He invests them with supernatural significance and potency'.

Most children lose that faculty with adulthood, but, Cardew goes on 'there are always a few who for some reason do not allow that to happen. I wonder what the reason is: were they especially happy in childhood, or specially unhappy?'

Nowadays Cardew's conflation of the child and the artist, in which the child represents an innocent 'other' to which the artist should aspire, is dismissed as a form of orientalism. But Cardew expresses the urgency and concentration of children's creativity accurately. His imagery recalls Chagué's own childhood, when he first encountered clay in his grandfather's sculpture studio and was delighted by its 'bonne odeur' and when, fascinated with fire, he made 'some memorable fires – one in a dustbin, and a remarkable one on the carpet in my bedroom'. Looking at Chagué work – towering and recumbent forms, small, utterly convincing tea bowls, torn, complex, honeycomb structures – is to encounter that sense of urgency and the desire to make meaning out of things.

But, of course, Chagué works not as a child but as an artist, within a community (that includes fellow artists, students, villagers, townsfolk and metalworkers). And his work is rooted in a place, be it London or Tatiko, Kaduna or St-Dié. And the little hamlet of Taintrux, which he has made his home.

Tanya Harrod, June 2012

