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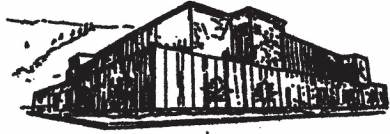
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**TRANSFORMATIONS/INVESTIGATIONS:
FIGURATIVE WORKS IN BRONZE**

by

Elizabeth H. Downs

B.A. University of Montana, Missoula, 2001.

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Arts

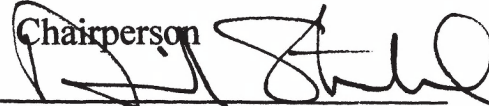
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Downs, Elizabeth M.A., May 2002

fine arts

Transformations/Investigations: Figurative Works in Bronze

Director: Steve Connell 

Through small bronze statuettes I have manifested my recent thoughts and concerns about personal life changes that I have been experiencing. Each piece is a self-portrait that has become a vehicle for my expression. My reactions to each phase of life varies, and in turn, each piece in expression and in gesture. The connection between human and non-human organic forms is of particular interest to me. The medium of bronze incorporates certain transitions and transformations that affect, and are affected by, design and process. I have been influenced by historical and contemporary artists and movements, and have taken certain themes and translated them to relate directly to me and to my art.

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INTRODUCTORY STATEMENT=

With the female form I seek to manifest my personal concerns about major life changes. Moving on from childhood to adulthood and from the academic to the professional phase in my life is of main concern at this point.

I chose small bronze statuettes as a vehicle for my expression. The process of bronze casting and the beautiful result of the finished pieces make it the most intriguing and fascinating medium for me.

Each figure is a self-portrait because my personal thoughts about change are represented.

The relationship between human and non-human organic forms has become of great interest to me and this is where my work will continue to grow. In this paper I will investigate the historical and contemporary uses of personal expression in works of art and how my work has been influenced.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND=

The technique of describing one sequence of events while alluding to another has in the past been a key element in works of art. Allegory, which is one way to tell an alternate story other than what is literally depicted, was a main component in most works of art in the Baroque era.

The popularity of allegory in the Baroque age was, in part,

influenced by the words of Cesare Ripa's *Iconologica*. First published in 1593, and again ten years later, *Iconologica* supplied several descriptions of personifications, which included virtues, vices, and even continents, which could be embodied in the visual arts, mainly sculpture.¹

Gianlorenzo Bernini was highly influenced by the words of Ripa when he carved his *Time Unveiling Truth* in the 1640's. Bernini rendered truth as a nude female because in Latin, most abstract qualities are feminine and because "every virtue is a species of the true, beautiful, and desirable."² She is nude because according to Ripa, "her nature is simplicity."³ And the globe at her feet is symbolic of truth springing from the earth, and because she loves light, she holds an image of the sun in her right hand. Bernini chose the theme of the virtues of time and truth as a snub to his critics at the time, as he was out of papal favor.⁴ Bernini typically used his sculptures as a vehicle to express his own feelings. This is where my interest with Bernini began. My fascination with Bernini accumulated and my work was greatly influenced when I first saw his unprecedented masterpiece the *Apollo and Daphne* (Plate1).

The story behind the *Apollo and Daphne* is from Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, which, in addition to Virgil's *Aeneid*, was interpreted allegorically by the Greeks and Romans. Thus, these stories, along with their allegorical commentaries, became staple parts of Classical education up until the 19th century. This aspect of Classical education

¹ Bruce Boucher, *Italian Baroque Sculpture* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1998) 20.

² Bruce Boucher, *Italian Baroque Sculpture* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1998) 22.

³ Bruce Boucher, *Italian Baroque Sculpture* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1998) 21.

⁴ Charles Avery and David Finn, *Bernini: Genius of the Baroque* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997) 234.

explains one reason why allegory was so integrated into the appreciation and interpretation of art. Other reasons would involve the encouragement to “lisez l’histoire et le tableau.” These were the words of Nicholas Poussin, which meant one should view a piece of art (in Poussin’s case painting) symbolically in addition to literally. This encouragement came not solely from Poussin but also mainly from the Church. Christians were encouraged to read the Old Testament as a symbolic precursor of the New Testament. In the Baroque age, allegory was present in sermons, literature, and especially in art.⁵

Just as I am influenced by the Baroque, the Baroque was influenced by Hellenistic art, which I also consider to be one of my influences in regards to movement, anguish, and expression. Hellenistic art (produced in the Greek world from the second half of the 4th century B.C. until probably the 1st century B.C.) was the main influence on Baroque sculpture in regards to movement and expression.⁶

One of the influential Hellenistic sculptures for Bernini was the *Laocoon* (100 B.C.). This piece is a narrative, monumental sculpture that depicts the twisting, agonized figures of Laocoon and his sons as they are devoured by snakes. The characteristics of this piece are seen in many of Bernini’s sculptures, particularly his mythological pieces. Each one is narrative, momentary, and full of emotion and passion of the soul.

For Bernini’s model for his *Apollo* in the *Apollo and Daphne*, Bernini turned to the *Apollo Belvedere*, a long famous Hellenistic

⁵ Bruce Boucher, *Italian Baroque Sculpture* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1998) 20.

⁶ Sir Lawrence Gowing, *A History of Art* (New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 1995) 150.

statue. Bernini stressed the importance of the study of the ancient sculptures over studying from life.⁷ Hellenistic art was also known for its lively symbolism, which was also incorporated into the *Apollo and Daphne*, for it is an allegory.

Through the centuries after the Baroque there was a great decline in the expression of feelings in art. The expressionists of the early 20th century brought meaning into art by seeking to describe their feelings, rather than represent actual objects. Their subjects often tended towards universally tragic themes. Because of the time in which this movement evolved, the horrors of the Nazi regime were a popular subject. Artists such as Ernst Barlach and Julio Gonzalez were Expressionists who were interested in the use of the human form as a means for expression.⁸

The decline of truth and meaning in art toward the end of the 20th century involves the fragmentations of meanings in our society today. Today there is a lack of any consenting universal truth in the Western mind, which is an outcome of different beliefs, religions, and attitudes. As a result, the underlying meanings of allegory, as described by Dante in his *Allegory of Love*, have been doomed. Back in the time of Dante (14th c.) the people read his *Divine Comedy* with common understanding and agreement. The theme was the gradual revelation of God to the Pilgrim. Because there was a general consensus of religion, and the understanding of the world, and life, universal truths came readily to people.

Tim Holmes, a local sculptor from Helena, Montana is the

⁷ Charles Avery and David Finn, Bernini: Genius of the Baroque (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997) 57

⁸ The 20th Century Art Book, (London: Phaidon Press, 2000) 28+169.

contemporary artist who has influenced my work. Tim Holmes focuses mainly on the human form, particularly small bronze statuettes of the figure. He tends toward small-scale works to keep them on an intimate level. Although many of his pieces are small, each focuses on monumental themes. Through the figure Holmes seeks to portray greater human themes that are of particular interest to him, such as the struggle for freedom and horror at inner and outer evils. Holmes's intention is to make others aware of his concerns. *I Shot an Angel by Mistake*, deals with the theme of remorse. He believes that we all, at one time or another, wish we could turn the clock back and undo something that we feel bad about doing. His more recent works address Holmes's fascination with beauty. Holmes's pieces are conceived and executed when he has thoughts and concerns about a particular issue. This is precisely the aim for my work; I have taken the same ideas and translated them to relate to me directly. The allegory of the Baroque has been expanded into contemporary, personal themes.

MATERIAL AND TECHNICAL CONCERNS

I chose the medium of bronze to carry out my thoughts. The beauty and sensual nature of bronze was the first aspect that I was drawn to. Bronze is also very versatile with a process of casting that involves many transformations within it. Through the process of bronze casting I am again influenced by Tim Holmes. He, too, is focused on the transformation that occurs during the creation process. He is concerned not only with the transformation from metal to flesh,

but also with the transformation within the artist as the image is brought to life.

As I work on a body of art, the attitude and aesthetics of each piece differs as my emotional state changes. My feelings about making the life change that I am concerned with is at times challenging and at other times comforting. Because my feelings vary, my sculptures vary as well. Similarly, each piece goes through changes as the transformation is made from wax to metal.

Throughout the process of casting a piece through the lost-wax process, many transformations can be observed. Once the initial wax piece is completed spews and vents must be attached. To clarify, spews are wax shafts that are connected to the piece to assist the molten bronze into the mold and the vents allow the air to be pushed out as the metal goes in. The main difference between the two is the placement on the pour cup, which is where the metal is initially poured. The spews are attached to the bottom of the cup so the metal goes straight into the piece and the vents are attached to the upper sides of the cup to force the air out. This is all done to avoid problems associated with the metal not reaching every portion of the mold and air being trapped within the piece. The wax piece takes on a whole new form once it is spewed, then another transformation occurs once the piece is invested, or enveloped in a sturdy ceramic shell mold. After the spewed wax sculpture is invested, the piece has taken on yet again, a whole new form. At this point only the gesture of the original form is visible, for it is below several layers of investment. When it comes to pour time the mold is burned out, this is when all the wax from the original piece and spews is melted away and all that is left is

a hollow shell. Once the bronze is poured in, cooled, and the piece is broken from its mold, it has all the same qualities of the original spread piece except that it is now heavy bronze. The now metal spreads need to then be cut off and the bronze piece is cleaned up and polished. A patina, which is a chemical that reacts with the bronze to alter the color, can be applied and finally the beautiful piece can be displayed. It is the transformation from a nice wax piece, to an unattractive mold, to a beautiful bronze piece that is especially important and interesting to me. My finished pieces represent transformations in my life just as they have gone through their own.

I have experimented with all different mediums to portray my emotions, and none compared to the result of the bronze. I first began with the 2-d mediums of painting, drawing, photography and printmaking. But I was unsatisfied. I then moved on to 3-d sculpture, which I soon found to be my niche. I used plaster castings of myself, and incorporated different mixed media to first investigate the use of the human female form to convey my concerns. I was not aesthetically pleased with the plaster castings because they were too literal. I then moved on to carve a wood sculpture that incorporated the female form. This piece became my main influence to use organic, non-human, earthly forms in contrast with the female form. When I came to discover my passion for bronze, I combined the ideas of my previous sculptures to come to an aesthetic conclusion that was most fitting. Certain transformations occur through the use of each medium, but none is as dramatic as that in bronze.

BODY=

Once I found my influences and my medium. I was able to take my ideas and put them into a concrete form.

My figurines are allegories of my concerns and emotions associated with emotional growth and with facing a major change in my life. For example, in *Reach*,(Plate 2) a nude female form is growing out of an organic form, while another organic form resembling a vine is twisting up and around the figure, consuming her. The human form and the organic forms become one and grow together. Here, an allegory is made involving the similarities of growth between human beings and that of a crawling vine. When a vine grows, as it climbs upward toward its goal it must surpass blockades in order to continue on its course. Sometimes it may come into contact with architectural components that force it to branch out, and grow around so it can continue towards its goal. Just as the vine, I must make professional and personal decisions so I can arrive at the next phase of my life in a smooth and comfortable manner.

Not all growth is positive, I do want to grow and mature but I also fear it because my future is uncertain at this particular time. Because of these feelings I created *A Rejection of Growth* (Plate 3). This piece expresses my fear of growing up. The human form is growing with the tree. A metaphor is made here between the growth of a big tree and the growth of a human being. A tree begins life as a tiny little sapling. It then grows and grows and meets its full size. At this point the tree stays the same size and gets older and older until it falls over and dies.

In opposition to growth, throughout our lives we do not always feel as though we are making progress, we feel stuck in a slump. Sometimes we may even feel trapped in our current situations. *Helpless*, (Plate 4) is an example of these constricting feelings that are faced in life. The female nude is trapped inside a pile of rocks. Her hands are bound; her legs are part of the rock formations around her. She is without eyes or a mouth to further express the extent of her helplessness. There is nothing she can do but wait to be released from what binds her. The rocks, in addition to being a metaphor for confinement in this piece, also are a notion of stability and structure in others.

In *Take a Stance I and II*, (Plates 5 and 6) the structure and stability of the rock formations are also included. Because of the change in gesture and facial expression, the attitude has changed and become positive and content. In the first piece, I manufactured the rock shapes on my own; in the second I worked with the versatility of casting bronze and took actual castings of rocks. I took this idea of casting actual earthly forms into my other pieces and this is where I will continue my investigation.

Each piece incorporates some form of an organic structure in contrast with the human form. I have chosen to render my figures in this way because all living things go through phases of growth and change, similar to our lives as human beings. Just as a tree, a flower, or a vine can be chopped down or plucked from its roots in an instant, a human life can be taken. Life can be short and we must work to overcome whatever it is that ails us, so we can be happy and content. Death is the hardest truth to face and it is the most universal truth,

everyone must face it.

Each female form is nude, except for in *Take a Stance I*, because she is still going through stages of growth. In *Take a Stance I*, clothing is appropriate because I felt stable and settled in my life. *Take a Stance II* reflects the same feelings, but because I was expanding the process by casting actual rocks she remained unclad.

An artist's work should reflect how they feel at the time of creation. I am maturing and I have mixed emotions. I am about to enter the next phase of my life and I have concerns regarding the uncertainties about that. Through my work I wish only to express my feelings and concerns about my life in regards to growth and change.

SUMMARY=

My work was initially influenced by the content and gestural components of historical works of art. I took the historical themes and translated them into modern day human themes of growth and change that relate directly to me. The contrast of non-human earthly forms, with human forms has become a metaphor in each of my pieces. Each bronze piece becomes a self-portrait in that I used them as vehicles to reflect my personal thoughts. The transformations that are made in my life are reflected in my sculptures through design and in process.

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Plate 1



Plate 2



Plate 3



Plate 4



Plate 5



Plate 6