

Shona Nunan, **Sentinels on Wall**, no date given, bronze, 30 x 14 x 11 cm. All photographs: Courtesy of Sandra Walters Art Consultants and the Artist.

Figures of Grace

The elegance and simplicity of the sculptures by the Australian Shona Nunan are not defined by the visual and physical sensibility of a single culture or aesthetic. Her work is as much a meditation on the spirit as it is a study of the human and animal physical form.

By Ian Findlay

The creative depth of Australian contemporary women sculptors is thoroughly impressive. Over the past two decades, they have shown an extraordinary new sense of confidence and maturity. The dramatic work of a number of Australia's older generation of women sculptors—Inge King, Jutta Feddersen, Marea Gazzard, Rosalie Gascoigne, and Brigid Cole-Adams—is already well known internationally. But this generation has now been joined by a new group in their thirties and forties, which is producing a wide range of exciting and innovative work that represents new approaches in old and new materials to creative, social, philosophical, aesthetic, and personal concerns. Included in this group are artists such as Shona Nunan, Bronwyn Oliver, Lyn Plummer, Fiona Orr, Maria Kuczynska, and Ann-Marie Reaney who are making sculpture in

a wide range of styles, from the abstract to installation, from multi-media assemblages to the figurative. Among these sculptors, Nunan, 38, stands out as an exceptional artist whose work has matured greatly over the past decade.

The impression on the viewer of Nunan's human and animal figures is an intensely immediate one. The sense of a universal quality to her work is not incidental, but an integral part of her overall desire. Whether in wood or bronze, large or small, the stretched figures demand respect by their very presence. "Looking at Nunan's attenuated animals and beings is a curiously empowering and respectful process. Like ancient relics of past civilizations, they control our need to hurry by and captivate our imagination, our humanity," writes the critic Anna Clabburn. "This is Nunan's special skill: grasping something deeper than logic and more resonant

than intellect. A truly inspired sense of the physical."

Nunan is an entirely independent spirit who follows no trend or fad. The perceptions of the world in her body of work have been marked by her reflective nature and a willingness to accept change as an integral part of the creative process. This often underscores the acutely personal nature of her work which may appear, at times, uncomfortably so. "I don't believe in laws. I think everything changes all the time and it's all from your own perspective," Nunan said in an interview with the critic Anna Clabburn. "As I've grown older, I tend to believe in creative growing. I'm always there waiting for the inspirational moment. It comes more and more these days. It's a disciplined approach that's built upon my openness over time."

This openness has resulted in objects that are considered hybrid by many

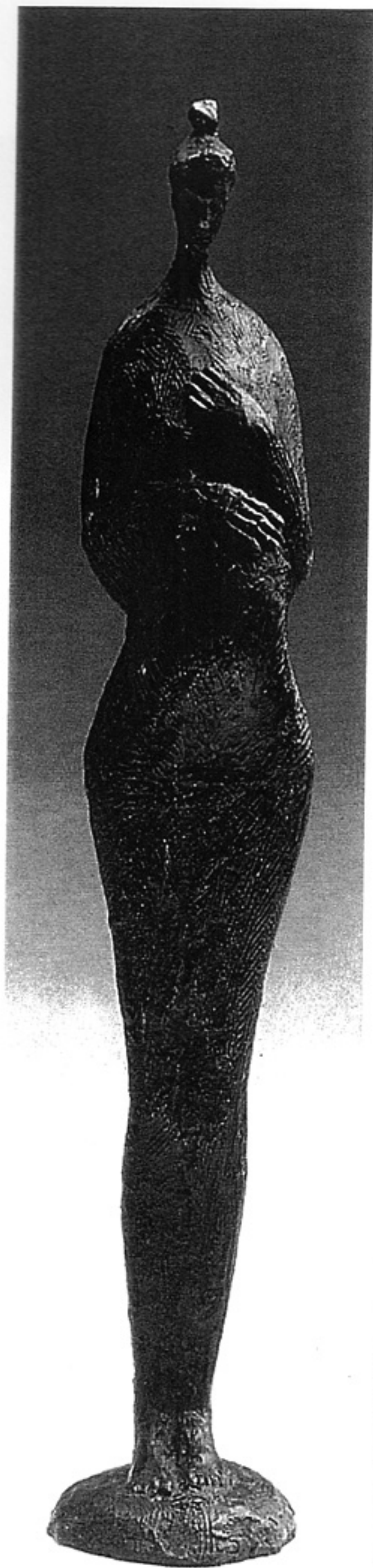
people. This reaction is partly due to a desire from the viewer to place what they see in a culture, time, or environment which makes the work more readily accessible. This is not something, however, with which Nunan is comfortable.

"Some people feel my work is hybrid because it doesn't seem to come specifically from the culture of my origin. In some ways the Aboriginal culture has been strong enough to disperse the tradition we came from 200 years ago. I willingly express myself in opening up to the spiritual search for identity," she says. "It means that I am open to influences that affect me and explain my need for travel, in wanting to absorb the world. So, being a hybrid must mean my work is rootless, and it is growing."

The major issues and themes in Nunan's work are essentially present in four major series: *The Horse and Rider*, *The Goddess*, *The Guardians*, and *Head Studies*. The works in each series have a strong similarity in line and form, as well as spatial and aesthetic qualities. The ideas of travel, fertility, dreams, memory, womanhood, protection, and the unknown, firmly expressed in each series, are not definitive statements but redefined and renewed as Nunan grows.

"The horse and rider theme represents to me the journey of life, with the horse, the vehicle, and the rider, the spirit. Together they make the dreaming manifest. Sometimes, they are at rest; sometimes yearning, sometimes awakening, sometimes at play as with *Placing the Moon*," says Nunan. "The goddess evolved from a period of recognition of myself as a woman and the celebration of the accompanying sense of the life cycles of fertility and creativity. They are abundantly woman in breasts and hips and stomach, on mountain tops and walls, protectresses of earth. *The Guardians* came about from an inner need to protect the self. They guard against invasion of the inner sanctuary. They emerged in the forms of night and day. Night is *yin*, the unconscious, intuitive, creative, the female principle. Day is *yang*, open, intelligent, investigative, logical, rational, the male principle. Sometimes my work is dualistic and I'll have male and female pairs whom I call Guardians or Sentinels. I am not yet clear about the latest of my themes in my head studies, except to say that the head is the expression of the inner self. All knowledge and understanding is through the head and I am able to express the individuality of life more in this way than in work which has a different intent."

All of Nunan's works has an astonishing stillness and majesty to them. They



Shona Nunan, *Meditation*, 1994, bronze, 44 x 7 x 8 cm.

confront us full on and nothing is hidden emotionally. While Botero plays with volume in his vast rotund works, Nunan's figures are stripped down; the exception in her work, the more rotund *Placing the Moon* (1989), where a certain fleshiness is present in both horse and rider. Nunan and Botero, however, are not as sculptors primarily interested in the obvious physical presence of their subjects; their line and form does not represent an observation about the physical aspects of people and animals, but epitomizes the spirit, the inner world of the subject. The pregnant *Meditation* (1994) does not require the sculptor to create a large voluminous figure to suggest fertility or the patience required of the female before birth. In the same way the pointed, lean, angular frame of *Horse* (1989) speaks of speed and spirit without forcing the physical form.

Male and Female Sentinels, *Young Man*, *Day and Night Sentinels*, and *Sentinels on Wall*, though they are clearly defined as to sex, there is nevertheless a marvelous sense of androgyny about them, but for Nunan it is not consciously about sex. The similarity in line and form, spatial and physical presence found in Nunan's human and animal forms is not something contrived for the sake of expressing an idea or philosophy on the sameness of life. The formal frontal positioning of her work is an intentional gesture to viewer-subject confrontation. There must be a clear view of the figure where nothing is hidden, nothing to impede any connection to understanding. The object and the space in which it exists must be free of artifice if the viewer is to come together with the work and to see the links with self, the present and the past.

"The connection in my treatment of human or animal forms is my perception of the sameness of life," she says. "Everything is just as it is with exactly the same living essence. There is no separation of life. The androgynous quality to my pieces is not intentional. I am not really interested in the sexuality of a piece, unless I'm wanting to express my sexuality strongly, as in my goddess figures and amphoras. My work is not about a specific male/female principle since there is no real difference between any human being. I am not aware of myself as being female or male in my thoughts so I do not perceive a great difference other than a physical one between men and women. I feel the constant physical expression is very literal and actually not telling the story of what we are about."

Nunan's women, full-breasted and heavily hipped, as in *Waiting Women*, (huon pinewood, 1993) speak of fertility and open sexuality. But so do her male figures in relationship to the females. Though the notion of fertility may be

predominately associated with women. Nunan is fully aware that there is another dimension to it and that consciousness of it is changing in Western society.

"Fertility is a part of the feminine principle but that does not put it in the domain only of women. Men and women have *yin* and *yang* in their character and it is up to each individual how they express each side," she says. "Up to now most cultures in the world have been paternalistic and the feminine fertile spirit has been suppressed. There are interesting changes happening now with more and more people eager to engage the fertile, spontaneous and creative sides of themselves, in business, in art, in daily living."

Nunan's work suggests influences from many different cultures, from the primitive and the modern, from Africa and Mexico to the Middle East, from tribal and aboriginal art to ancient Etruscan, Greek and Roman forms, from Southeast Asia to China, to the works of Giacometti and Modigliani, all have played some role not only in forming Nunan's work, but in facilitating her growth as a mature person and observer. However consciously Nunan has drawn on the varied influences one might perceive in her work, she has created a magical synthesis of line and form, of space and volume, of

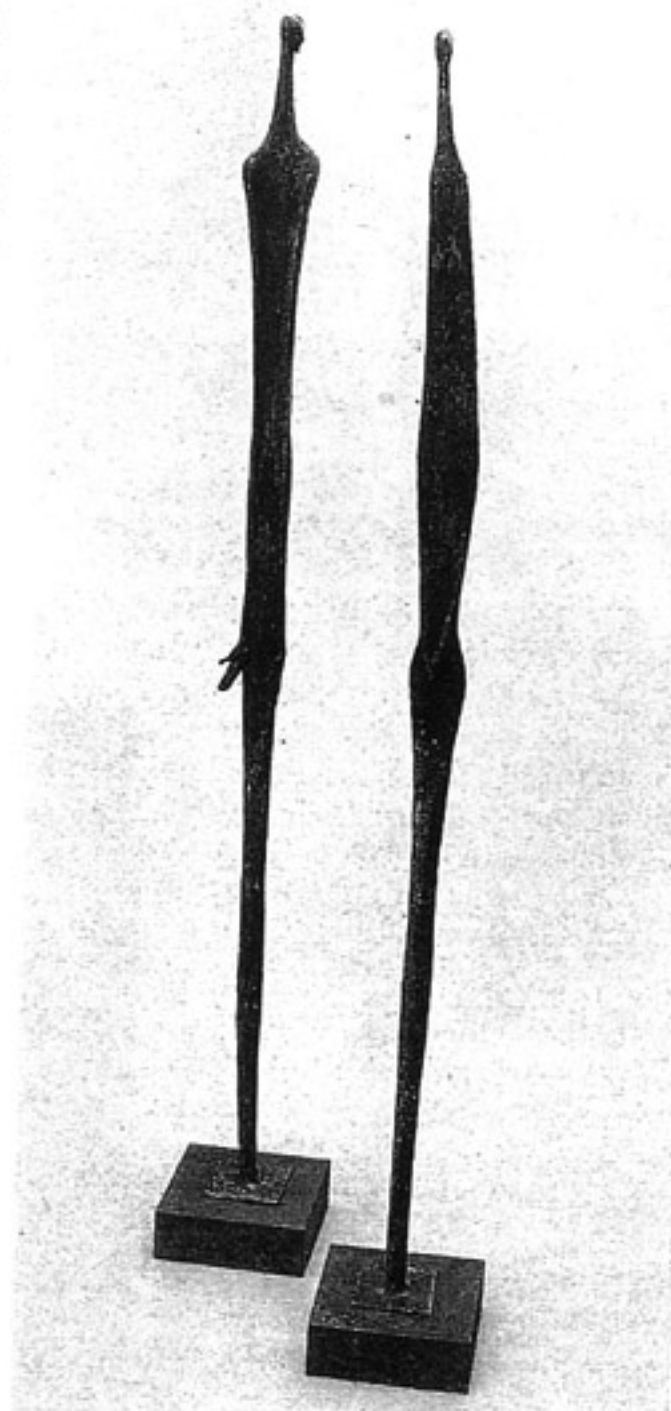
place and surface textures that cross cultural time. Travel has been an essential ingredient to both Nunan's personal growth and her accomplishments as an artist. Clearly Nunan is consciously observing on her travels but not consciously absorbing the forms with which she comes into contact. The end result of her practice suggests an unconscious reservoir of images and emotions that comes into play only in the act of creating.

"I am aware that I take things from different cultures and that they are expressed in my work in different ways. I have a language in my work that is expressed irrespective of what culture I am in—I just find a new way to say it from the stimulation I receive from traveling," she says. "For instance, one of the themes I have been absorbed in over the past couple of years is the feminine principle, the abundant, creative, fertile woman, the earth. Initially, I expressed my contact with this inner woman through the little earth goddesses I created on top of hilltops. Her shape was inspired by anything bulbous that I saw: twigs, seed pods, and drawings from them eventually metamorphosed into the Venus figures of Europe.

"Traveling has extended the language of these little women and a stay in France, where there was contact with antiquity and age-old archetypes, brought into being the vessel shapes that are becoming my new *Amphora* series. Indonesia added to this theme from drawings I did of the women in their sarongs carrying platters and bowls and vessels on their heads. There is no conscious understanding of this when it happens, but it becomes clear later where I have taken influences from. I know the process is a synthesis, an amalgamation of many things coming together."

That the primitive and the modern come together in Nunan's sculptures is clear. But it is not an obvious representation or a copy of another past or a culture. It is an articulate expression of Nunan the artist who seeks the common thread that crosses the cultural and aesthetic boundaries of sculpture to make a statement for today. But it is not merely the physical connection with the past of which Nunan is concerned, it is also the spiritual.

"The commonality of the primitive and the modern is that they relate to the now and they are an integral part to the perception of a society. What separates them is knowledge," she says. "Primitive art has a passionate understanding of life as it is experience whereas a lot of modern art is academic and devoid of the experience of living. Great modern art is primitive in that it evokes the depth of the human experience. Human beings relate to art when they understand it; unless the



Shona Nunan, *Male & Female Sentinels*, no date given, unique bronze, 167 x 12 x 12 cm.

depth of the experience is akin to the work of art, there will be no relationships or understanding. People who live on the surface, materialistically, will not understand a primitive art piece because it is raw and essential.

"My knowledge is that people are innately spiritual. The physical body is simply the vehicle to express individuality of the spirit. We are all creators making up marvelous fantasies for our lives. The trouble is many people believe in the reality of what they have created and this has kept them immersed in a physical world of cause and effect. A lot of my work is elongated and uprising and I attribute this to the spiritual yearning to be what we are, to be less acquiring and materialistic and attached to what we make."

Working in both wood and bronze has offered Nunan different challenges, occasionally frustrating. But each material has to be approached on a different level, without this the materials won't surrender their secrets to the sculptor. What is important, however, is that having worked through the process of confronting her materials there are numerous surprises and changes awaiting the disciplined sculptor.



Shona Nunan, *Young Man*, 1989, bronze, 113 x 32 x 13 cm.

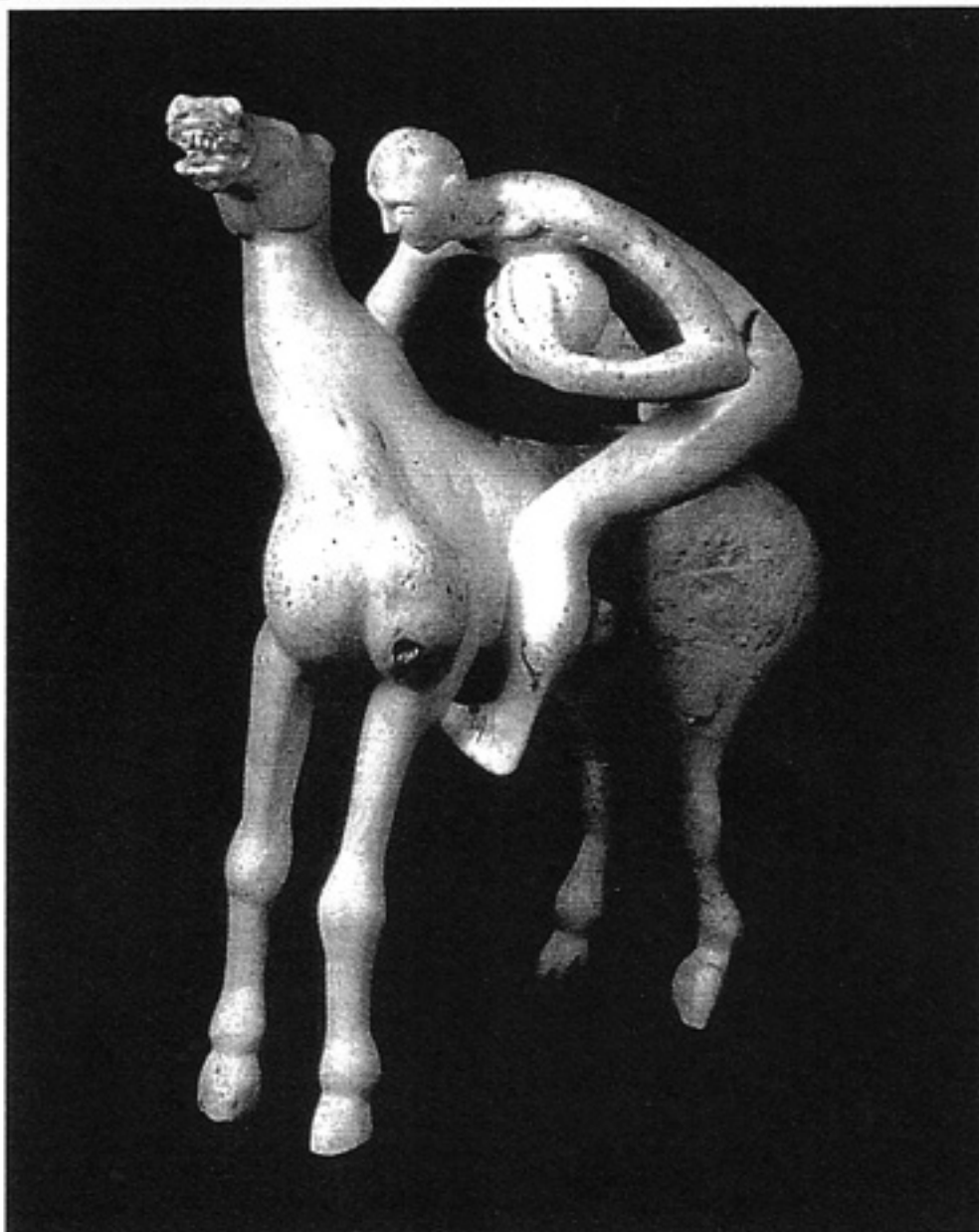
“Wood and bronze are my two favorite materials. Wood allows me to create my elongated forms because of its stringy and tenuous nature. The act of carving leads me into the realms of my subconscious mind. I am not really conscious in how a work arrives—I am often surprised at how a form will just emerge, and where a hole will take me to,” says Nunan. “When I carve, I first look at the forms in the wood and allow my imagination to go for it. After that, it is all surprise. The living quality of wood has also taught me to ‘hear’ the wood, where to chisel it. In my early years carving, I engaged in a gung-ho carving mentality and that meant lots of tears and struggle, really bashing the timber. A Papua New Guinean friend found me one day slumped in frustration over my sculpture, in tears and infuriated with my female limitations of strength. He taught me that carving had nothing to do with strength but everything to do with listening to the wood, how it rings, when it invites, when it dully refuses your entry, the messages that teach you to be less intrusive on the wood, more sympathetic, more animistic. The process of working with wood is a lot slower than modeling as I do for bronze.

“I find the technique accompanies the creative process the whole way with carving whereas modeling is purely an artistic process, immediate, fresh, spontaneous. Technicalities with casting seem to come later and do not interfere with the actuality of creating. Perhaps because of this I am more conscious of a meditative quality when I work. A sense of never being limited by the physical or tiredness. The process is peaceful, with the mind drifting in and out of consciousness to occasionally address academically a problem area. After the work enters the casting stage, I still like to keep control of most of the technicalities, even though it is easy to hand over to someone else. In this way I ensure that the art is never lost.”

Nunan, born in 1959, studied sculpture at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology. She began exhibiting in 1976 in group shows, while her first one-person show was in 1987. Her individuality has likened her to a number of well-known sculptors, the most famous of whom is Giacometti whose slim figurative work make an immediate visual connection with

Nunan's. Where Giacometti's surfaces are raw, Nunan's are, for the most part, relatively smooth. The claims of direct influences are not Nunan's—though she notes Picasso as one important guide—who is conscious of more than one influence in her sculptural life.

“If I am influenced by another sculptor's work, it is a slow synthesis that evolves with other influences. Consciously I try to remain uninfluenced by other artists even if I admire their work,” says Nunan. “I hold dearly each artist's unique responsibility to give to the world their own individual viewpoint. I know what makes the greatness of an artist, not the building up on the back of evolution. At



Shona Nunan, *Placing the Moon*, no date given, huon pine wood, 96 x 44 x 73 cm.

the moment, I feel most influenced by cultures and artists I have never been to or met. The two enormously intricate cultures that capture me are Africa and South America. I am intrigued by the joyous rhythm and color and vibrancy of South American and African art that I have seen. I am engaged by the stillness and expressionless poses in sculptures that are so emotive yet without any artifice. It proves to me that the shaman spirit of art making, that connective tissue between feeling and creation, leaves an indelible mark. Picasso has had a profound affect on my history as an artist, too. It took a long time for me to understand his work but I could never ignore it. He broke rules and transported art to heights that had never been ex-

plored, defacing the known ways of seeing [in the West] and yet providing extraordinary insight into humanity. His way of creating has been something for me to emulate. His influence has been to care less about what people think, to live passionately, to live selfishly, and to create abundantly.

“I don't accept traditions, laws, or methods or there being only one way to set somewhere. I trust the spontaneous gesture built on inspiration that seems to come from nowhere. I am greatly perceptive of greatness in an artist's work, contemporary or old. It does not make me want to emulate their work, just them; how did they release their individual greatness.

Great art work in a culture comes from one inspired individual. A culture dies when there is no freshness, just the law, the traditional mores that make artists create the same over and over again.”

Traveling, drawing, and memory all play decisive roles in Nunan's work. Neither one dominates the other. The three work together. “Drawing has always been important to me as an art form in its own right. When I draw my ideas for sculpture, however, they are rarely art. Usually they are scribbles or a jotting down of a memory, and sometimes they are just research drawings of areas that I visit,” she says. “I find my scribbles are usually intuitive to something in me that I need to express in my art. Whether I formulate them in a finished drawing or a sculpture doesn't matter. Sometimes, I need to draw for arts sake because I can't fully express what I need to say in sculpture.

“Memories are the emotional experiences that one has that create knowledge. For my work and being a visual person I store an enormous amount of reference material by engaging in what I see and what I experience. Memories of who I am and what I have experienced emerge all the time in my work. Knowing that memories are emotional recordings impresses on me the importance of living with passion because I need that greater depth for my work.”

Currently Nunan is working on a new series entitled *Amphora* which expresses “womanhood in the vessel form.” Fertility and guardianship, mediation, and spiritual awareness are subjects which continue to occupy Nunan. Each offers infinite possibilities for artistic as well as personal growth and discovery. Δ