

# A Fertile Spirit

In the inner Melbourne studio of artist Shona Nunan, a beautiful sculptural hybrid is emerging which crosses cultural borders in a refined, simple language.

This report, by **Joan Swift**, supplied by Alison Pickett

**G**uardian figures and fertility goddesses are seldom sculptures associated with a name artist. Rather, they bring to mind the cultural tradition of 'primitive' societies. In contrast, the female form in 'civilized' art, has a history of being presented as an object from a male viewpoint.

Mixing traditional techniques of bronze casting and wood carving to express her delicate view of the human figure, Australian artist Shona Nunan, is carving a beautiful hybrid which, while echoing modern sculptures by Modigliani, Matisse and Giacometti, portray Nunan's own interest in the primitive forces of life that are at the heart of her work.

Most recently, she has been exploring the basic physical and spiritual needs in such pieces as her 'Guardian' figures: two elegant, tall bronzes standing on either side of a doorway, the woman, called 'Night' has her arms folded over her chest, protecting the unspeakable. The man, called 'Day', is tentatively reaching out in welcome.

In Nunan's hand, the human form is sometimes treated classically, rising elegantly from the earth to the poised noble head, while her other works use dynamic expressions remind us of inner feelings that we may have forgotten.

Nunan grew up in an artistic family, with a painter father who took long excursions into the Australian outback. The rock paintings of the aboriginal Australians are familiar and dear to her, imprinted upon her consciousness from early childhood. There is a tenacious strength reminiscent of the drought-resistant Australian eucalypti running through the limbs of her earlier tall figures. But perhaps the strongest influence on her work is the love and connection she feels for the ancient pieces of Etruria, a period of art that also in-



**Study of a Young Man**  
Bronze edition of six,  
113 x 32 x 18cm. 1989.

spired Giacometti and Hemingway. The elegant, flowing line that upheld an honest beauty in the clamour of classicism remains today both essential and graceful.

The horse and rider are used with passion in her work. The varying relationships between the powerful horse and the controlling rider are delightfully addressed. In one piece, the rider is depicted mounting or dismounting with a ball in hand, playfully entitled 'Placing the Moon'. Another, 'Manifestation', is a life-size work revealing a female rider, her skirted legs resting like wings on the stationary horse's back, while her uplifted hands hold, cupped, a bird about to fly.

Nunan has likewise assimilated influences from her travels through the world, and has worked in many countries including Italy, Holland, Sweden, and Papua New Guinea. Responding to the description of her work as a hybrid, Nunan says: "I am most happy that the new forms are derived from a collection of forms from other cultures. In the same way that dreams give us symbols with which to learn, other cultures give art a new language to enrich us."

It is the motivations and feelings of other cultures, rather than the purely stylistic conventions which find expression in Nunan's sculptural language. Assimilated, not as a process of loss, but of growth through change, a state of renewal rather than a protective response to culture as it exists. Although her work quotes freely from many sources, it is Nunan's personal experiences as a woman that provide the soul of her pieces. And she defines it succinctly. "I am rediscovering my womanhood through these works that honour the sacred, guard against invasion and proudly expose the fecundity of womanhood."