

HEAD FIRST: EDUCATING A NEW GENERATION OF FIGURATIVE SCULPTORS

by John Ewing

The impulse to express oneself through the figure has called to artists throughout the ages. But any serious sculptor of the figure will acknowledge that in order to achieve its full potential, one must first develop skill with this demanding art form. “I express myself in sculpture since I am not a poet,” declared Aristide Maillol, the early modern master whose figurative works are among art history’s most evocative. Maillol studied in Paris at the *École des Beaux-Arts*, a pillar of turn-of-the-century academism. Today, young artists come to figurative sculpture from a wider range of interests and backgrounds. Yet, embracing the figure as a vehicle for artistic expression is something they all share. Fortunately, there are a number of institutions across the country where students can learn the art form and realize their passion. Below is a sampling of arts academies and thoughts on the figure from students and alumni in their own words.

Among this new generation of sculptors, some in the Northeast begin their journey at Lyme Academy College of Fine Arts in Old Lyme, Connecticut. Founded in 1976 by sculptor Elizabeth Gordon Chandler, Lyme Academy CFA offers a studio fine arts and liberal arts education. Lucian Goff, an Illinois native, will soon graduate from Lyme with a B.F.A. degree in sculpture from the department chaired by Brian Craig-Wankiiri. A love of observation and modeling quickly captured the imagination of the

young artist, who came to sculpture from an earlier career in art glass engraving. “To move from simple nude studies and portraits to creating work that feels fresh and engaging at a time when representation isn’t yet mainstream again is an enormous challenge,” says Goff, who cites among his influences the sculptors

Gehard Demetz and Katsura Funakoshi. His artistic goal, ultimately, is to “move beyond academic studies and create work that is relevant and contemporary.”

Morteza Khakshoor, a Lyme Academy junior and international student from Tehran, cites Rodin as an important inspiration in his pursuit of the figure. “Teaching figurative art is not possible in Iran, where a religious Muslim government runs the country. I think this religious limitation is why the main focus in Iranian schools is on abstract art,” says Khakshoor, who feels compelled to use the nude body as a means of self-expression, working in clay, plaster, papier mâché, marble, and, equally important to this young artist, drawing. Likewise, Kellie Pereira, another Lyme Academy junior, is drawn to the figure, specifically facial expressions, in order to evoke convincing emotions and the psychology behind them. “But I tend to look to both figurative and nonfigurative artists for

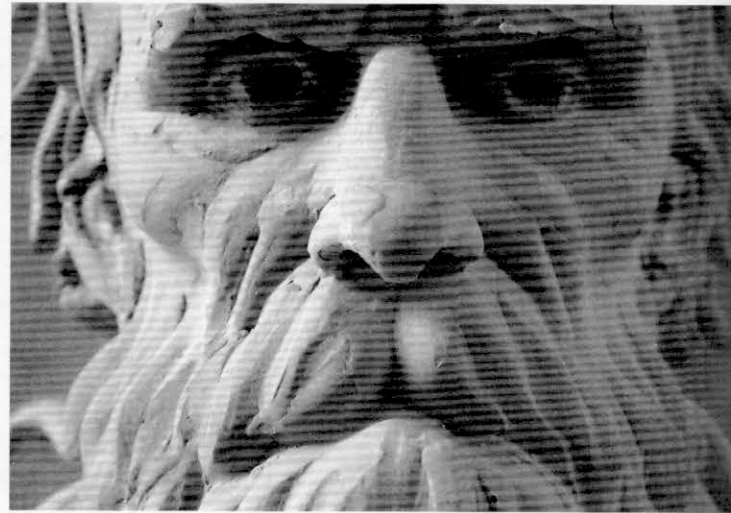


On this page: The Head by Morteza Khakshoor (2009), plaster, 44 inches high.

Opposite page: Paper Torso by Morteza Khakshoor (2012), papier mâché, life-size.



On this page, clockwise from top left: Ashleigh by Lucian Goff (2012), clay, 38 inches high; Portrait of a Bearded Man by Kellie Pereira (2012), ultra-calc, 18 inches high; Liberty by Emily Bedard (2010), oil based clay (model), 6-1/2 inches high; Metamorphosis by Emily Bedard (2009), plaster, 5-1/3 feet (including plinth).

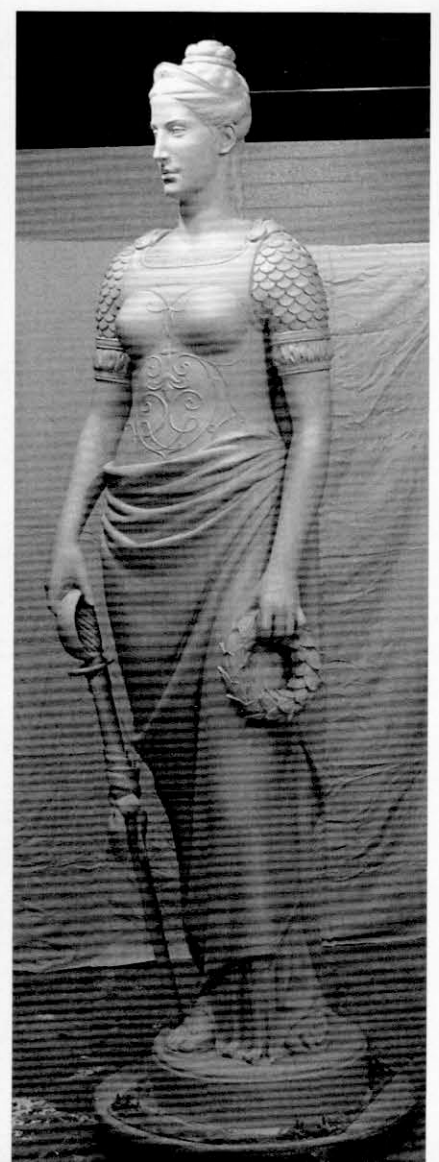
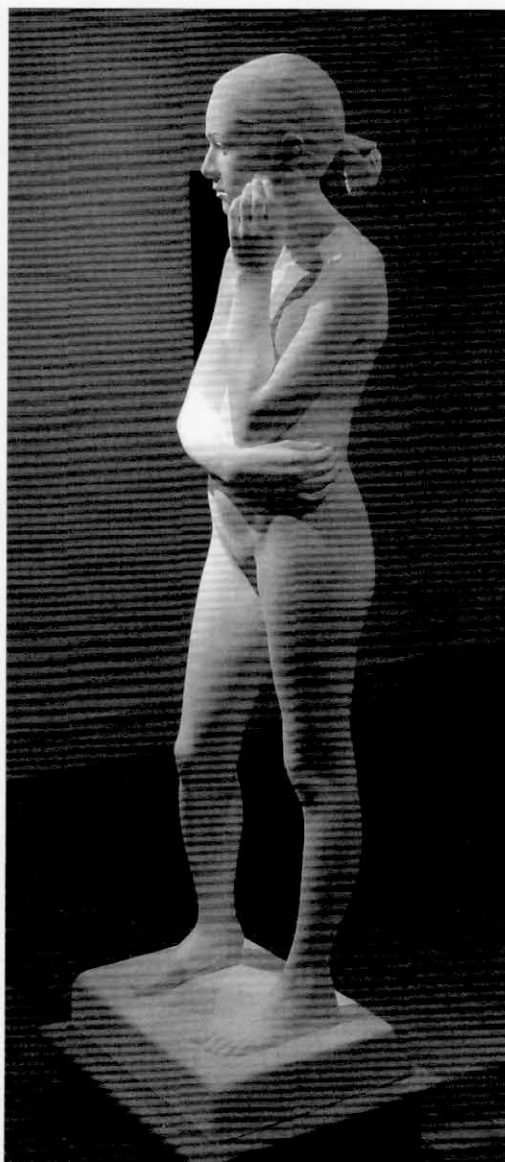
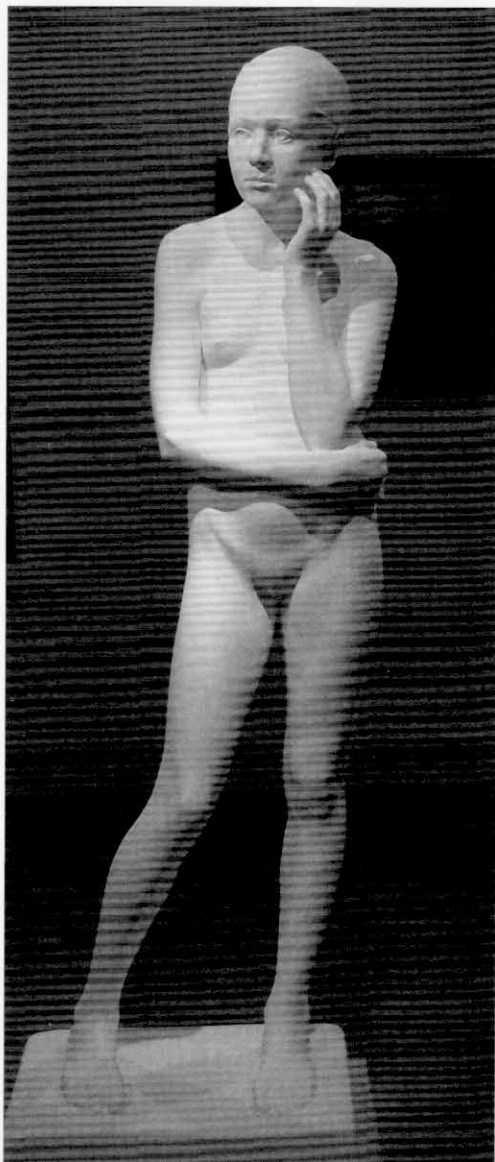


Opposite page, top: Bust of a Woman by Lucian Goff (2012), plaster, 6 inches high; left to right: Na Moda (2007) and Matriarch (2005) by Ben Hammond, bronze, 21 inches high.

inspiration. Richard Serra, for instance, is extremely effective in creating certain feelings within the viewer,” observes Pereira.

Lyme Academy alumni have busy careers right out of school. Emily Bedard, twenty-five years old and a Vermont native, mastered mold-making and casting at Lyme, and was commissioned in 2010 to recreate *Liberty*, a life-size female figure at the center of the Soldiers’ and Sailors’ Monument in Bridgeport, Connecticut. Honoring local men who died in the Civil War, this nine-

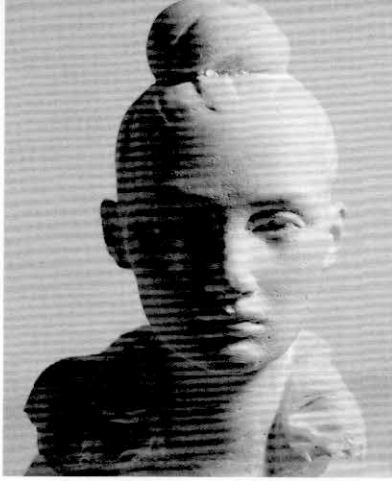
teenth-century monument was vandalized in 1969; Bedard’s replica of the original marble statue was cast in gypsum polymer reinforced with fiberglass. She also provided silicone life-casting services for *Our Beautiful Daughters*, artist Yoko Ono’s 2012 project and exhibition in India. “There is a greater spectrum of jobs available because there are so many skills required to be a sculptor. It amazes me how frequently I refer to my notes and handouts from every class. Mentors, like Brian Craig-Wankiiri,



have become my contemporaries and professional contacts,” says Bedard.

Lyme graduate Gavin Gardner, a Maryland native from a family of doctors and surgeons, attributes his mastery of the figure to a careful study of anatomy; his skill with bas-relief has garnered awards and commissions, including a pair of 4-foot by 5-foot comedy and tragedy masks in cast stone, inscribed *Komoidia* and *Tragoidia*, for the Baker Park Bandshell in Frederick, Maryland. Another Lyme graduate, Los Angeles-based Adam Matano, is often inspired by music, particularly, Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*, citing “its rawness and strong connection to nature and our primal being.” Not surprisingly, Matano excels at creating sculptures of animal forms subtly abstracted from nature and has exhibited such works at the Roger Williams Park Zoo in Providence, Rhode Island.

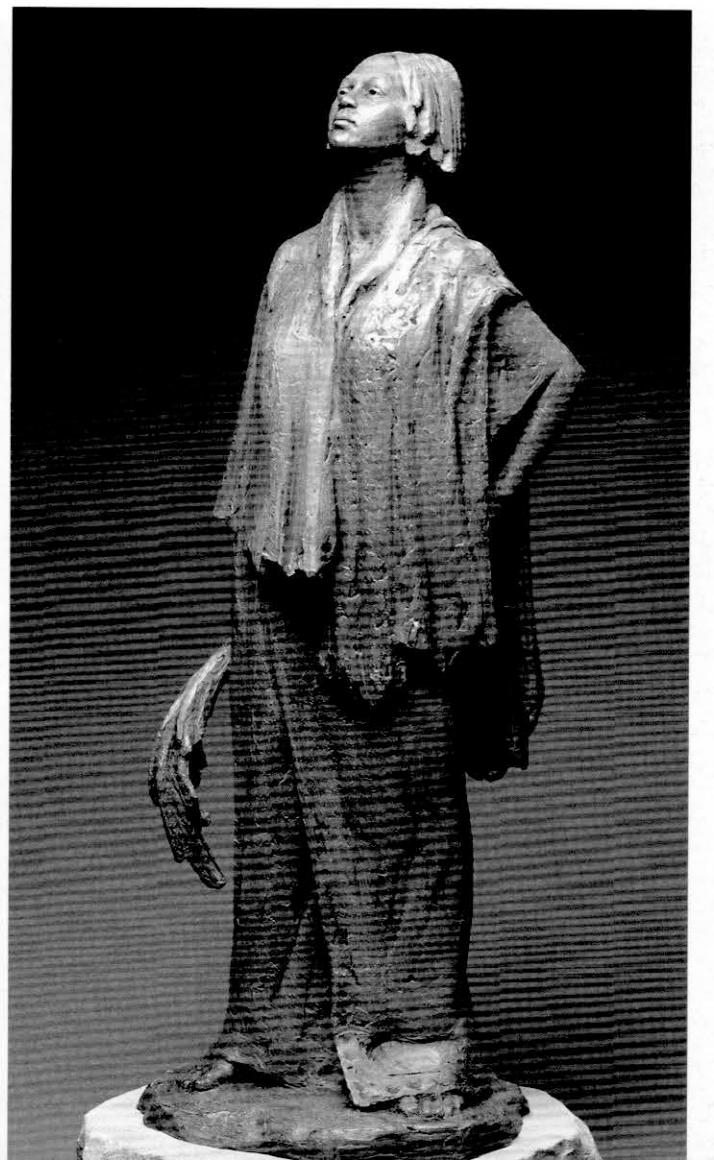
Out West, artists in Arizona can study at the Scottsdale Artists' School where they acquire sculpting skills in a wide variety of focused workshops, many taught by John Coleman. At SAS, founded in 1983, the history, landscape, and culture of



the Western region imbue the subjects and approaches of work by both faculty and students. Among the latter, Tyson Snow describes a desire to “depict the human form in all its beauty, perfection (and imperfection), its motion and emotion.” At just thirty-five years old, Snow's long résumé of commissioned sculptures, portrait busts, and bas-reliefs reflects this intention, with a body of work featuring Native Americans, fire-

fighters, cowboys, and historical figures. Another SAS veteran, Ben Hammond (also age thirty-five) began his journey toward figurative sculpture working in a foundry in Utah, then as an assistant/apprentice to Blair Buswell. Hammond has received numerous commissions for portrait sculptures and busts of Pro Football Hall of Fame inductees. “The figure communicates to the entire human race,” says Hammond. “If I want to say something, inspire, or move people, I shouldn't have to write a dissertation to explain my artwork. It should speak on its own.”

According to contemporary artist Anish Kapoor, “Sculpture occupies the same space as your body.” A nonfigurative sculp-

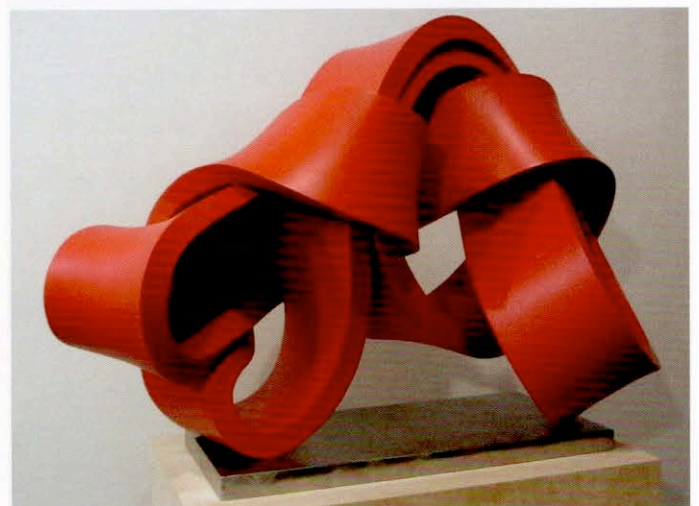


tor, Kapoor's dictum resonates with the next group of artists who study in New York City at The Art Students League of New York. Founded in 1875, the ASL is one of the oldest and most esteemed academies in the country, with a history of celebrated instructors, including Augustus Saint-Gaudens and Louise Bourgeois. Currently, the studio art program offers two sculpture categories: carving (in wood, stone, and other media) and clay modeling. Seiji Saito teaches the *Mentori* method of direct carving. One student, the Japanese-born Minako Yoshino, came to sculpting through a fateful accident:

"I was a figurative painter originally, but one day I found hundreds of marble blocks at a construction site about to be thrown away. I wanted to rescue them and had the idea to donate the blocks to a carving class at the Art Students League. I met master marble sculptor Seiji Saito, who told me it might be difficult because of limited storage and the cost of transporting the marble. 'But they are pieces of this planet,' I said. 'Earth spent millions of years to create them. I don't think humankind can take whatever it wants from nature and just throw it away!' Seiji replied, 'Hmm, how about bringing one piece of marble here



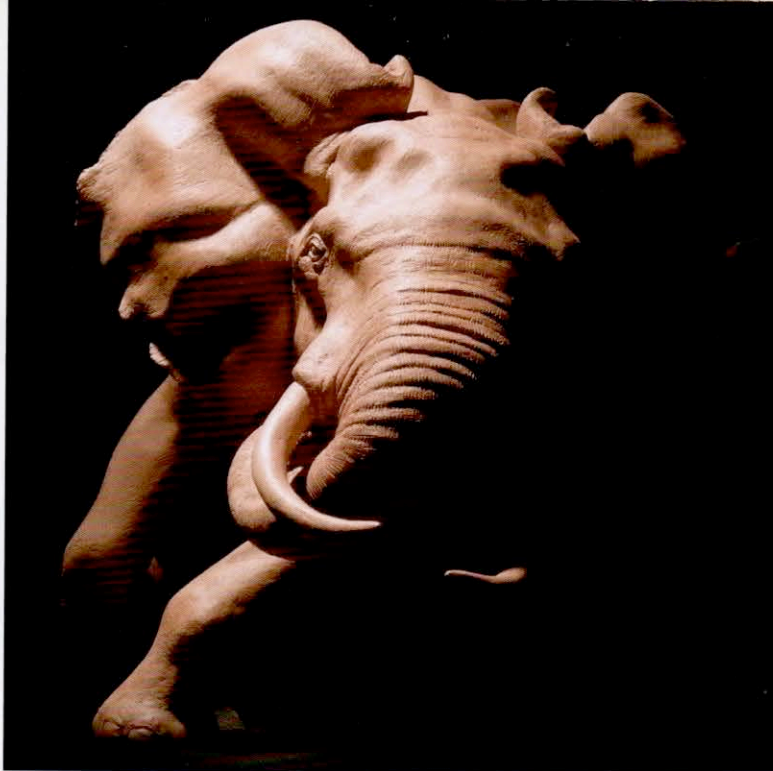
"... I feel it is my duty to continue what these artists have started, always pushing further in how we view and interact in the contemporary world."



On this page, top: Head Series: A Delicate Irony by Beñat Iglesias Lopez (2012), plaster, 19 inches high; *bottom left:* Kalos Kai Agathos by Gavin Gardner (2010), cast stone, 14 inches high; *bottom right:* Stand Up (Knot #5) by Yupin Pramotepipop (2012), aqua-resin on steel base, 31-1/2 inches high.

Opposite page, top to bottom: Elephant by Adam Matano (2012), bronze, 15 inches high; Mother and Child by Tyson Snow (2012), bronze, 11 inches high; The Final War Cry by Tyson Snow (2012), bronze, 20 inches high.

and try carving it yourself? You can invite other students to get a block, and each can decide how to move it and where to keep it.' I couldn't say no. Seiji showed me how to make a clay model before starting the carving. Then he picked out a hammer and chisel for me at the school store. That was the beginning of everything." Yoshino's marble figures and stone abstractions have garnered her a National Sculpture Society "Best Young Artist" scholarship and a travel grant to Europe.



emotional memory, transforming the perception of a physical object or image," says Rudenko, who cites the influence of artists Paul Gauguin, Francis Bacon, Marina Abramovic, and Polynesian sculpture.

Also exploring the psychological, recent ASL student Beñat Iglesias Lopez has created an ongoing series of busts modeled on real persons with the addition of hats, helmets, and masks. "These costume elements both conceal and reveal features and have

Best known among the early ASL instructors, "Ashcan School" painter Robert Henri contended in his 1923 book *The Art Spirit* that "some sculpture is warm, some forever cold." Critics of Modern sculpture have sometimes made such pronouncements along figurative/nonfigurative lines. In their view, two recent former ASL students could be said to make sculptural work that is both coolly abstract and hotly figurative in the same twisting mass.



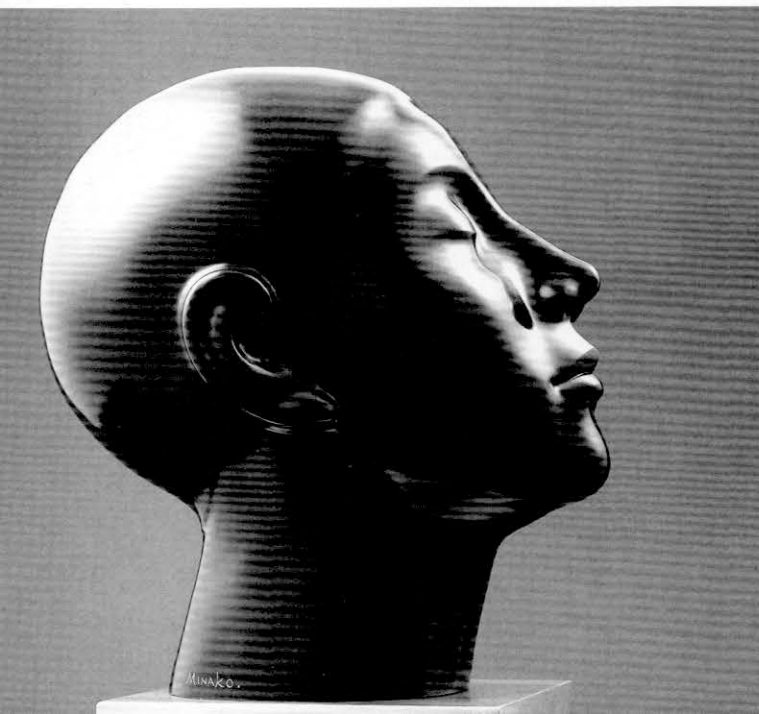
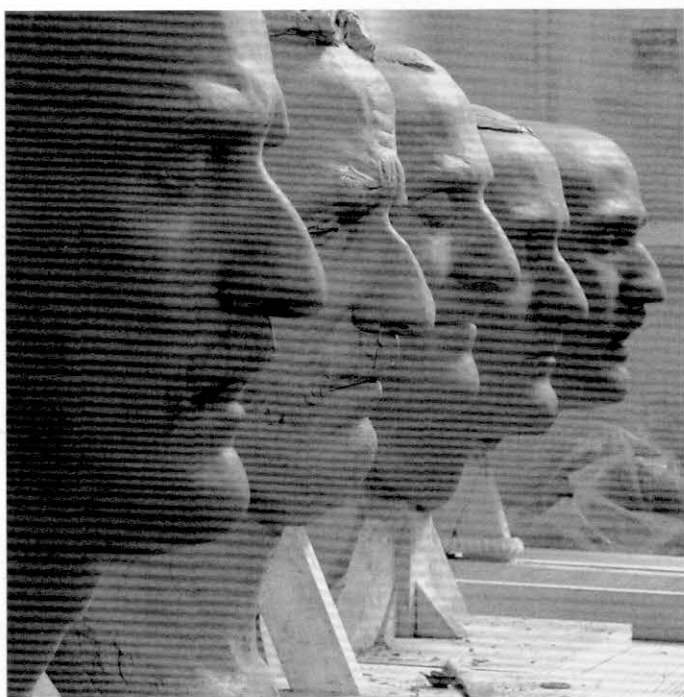
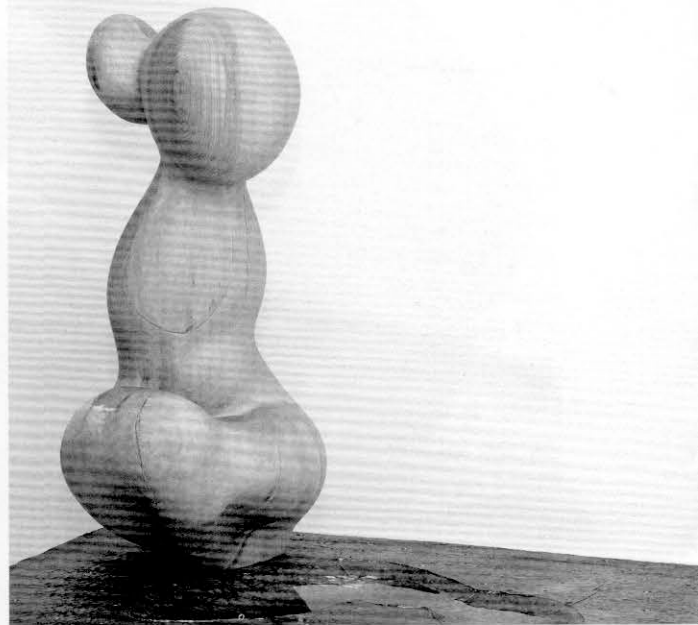
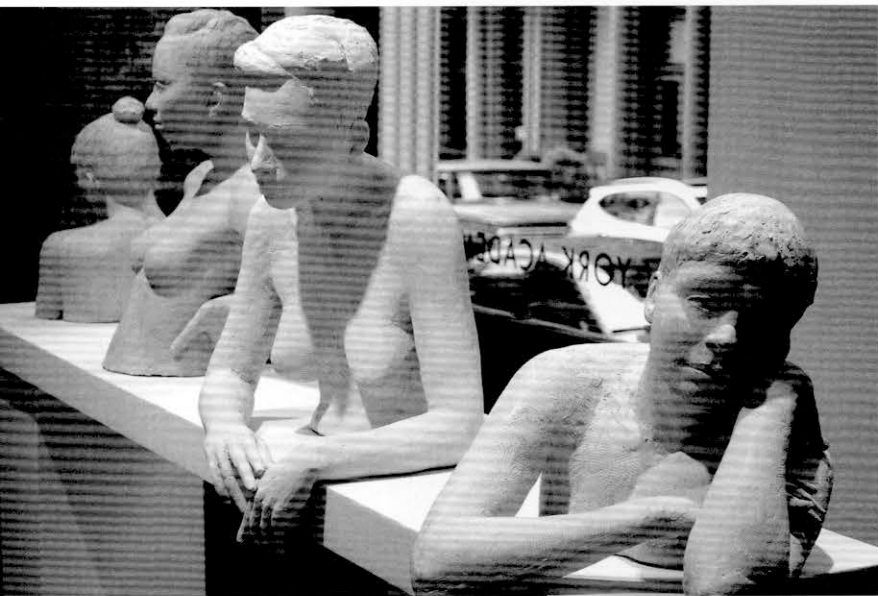
strong symbolic connotations," says Lopez, from the Basque region of Spain. "I want to draw an emotional response that prompts a dialogue between the sculpture and the viewer." Former ASL student Yupin Pramotepipop also transmutes the figurative and the nonfigurative with subtlety and ease. This Thai native creates sculptural works that resemble a complicated tangle of multiple elements. While exploring the concept and form of the knot, these abstract sculptures nonetheless have the

The Ukraine-born Olga Rudenko creates works in wood with bronze-cast elements that are "figurative" in a psychological sense rather than literally representational. "I see my art as an investigation of the female figure as it relates to sexuality and the search for identity. In my work, I seek to find new essences of the form, and I draw on how my dreams and experiences speak to



weight, complexity, and expressiveness of the figure. "Skill from the figure is related to sculpting the knots," says Pramotepipop, "and I feel the gesture and capture the likeness of the model as I'm making them."

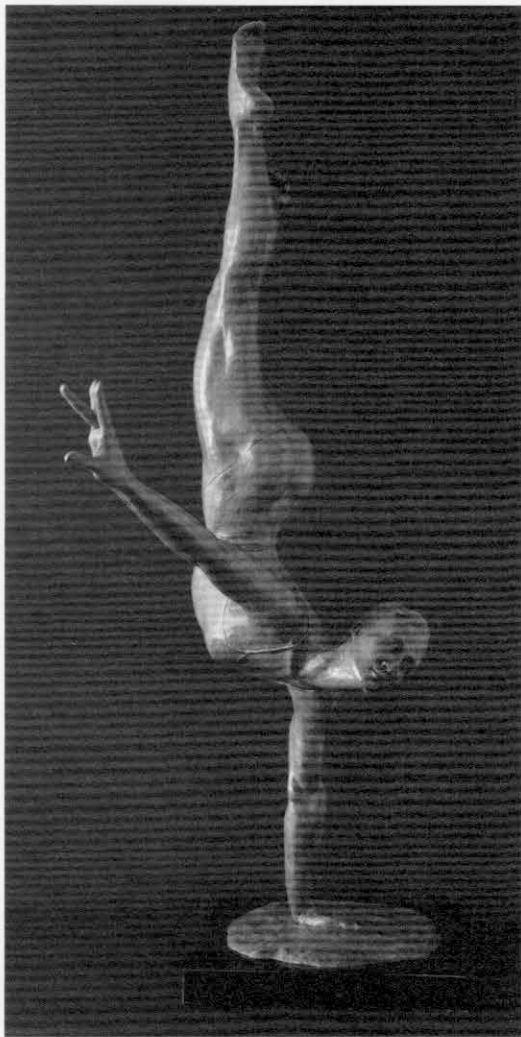
Rudenko, Lopez, and Pramotepipop have also studied variously at the New York Academy of Art and the National Academy School of Fine Arts, emphasizing the tre-



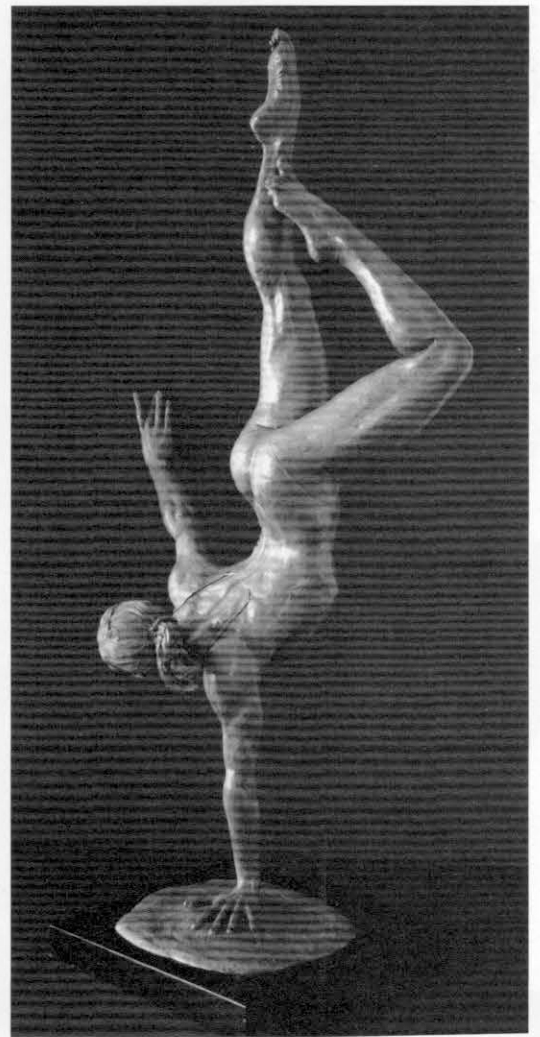
mendous concentration of educational resources in New York City. As a result, both instructors and students can move easily among these institutions for varied courses and contact with mentors. Rhoda Sherbell, for instance, teaches at The Art Students League, the National Academy School of Fine Arts, and in her own private studio art program. One of her students at the venerable National Academy, founded in 1825, is Beth Wessel, a 2010 silver medalist in the annual fine arts competition sponsored by the National Art Museum of Sport in Indianapolis, Indiana. Wessel models in plastiline clay. “I started working from live models, but now I find my favorite pieces are born in my imagination without benefit of a model’s pose,” remarks Wessel. “The human figure is everything and anything—realistic, abstract, beautiful, grotesque. It’s influenced by the external environment and internal emotions. I want to explore all the possibilities.”

The New York Academy of Art is a relative newcomer: It was founded in 1982 by artists, scholars, and patrons, including Andy Warhol and Tom Wolfe, who were “interested in fostering the resurgence of figurative and representational art.” Former NYAA student Joseph Brickey, a Utah native and Brigham Young University graduate, has placed the figure at the center of his deeply personal artistic practice. “The classical aesthetic links spiritual and physical realities...for me, that’s where art becomes more than ‘interesting’ and becomes ‘inspiring,’” says Brickey, who was awarded a sponsorship to study stone carving in Carrara, Italy, and has created sculptures and paintings for numerous LDS (Mormon) church temples worldwide.

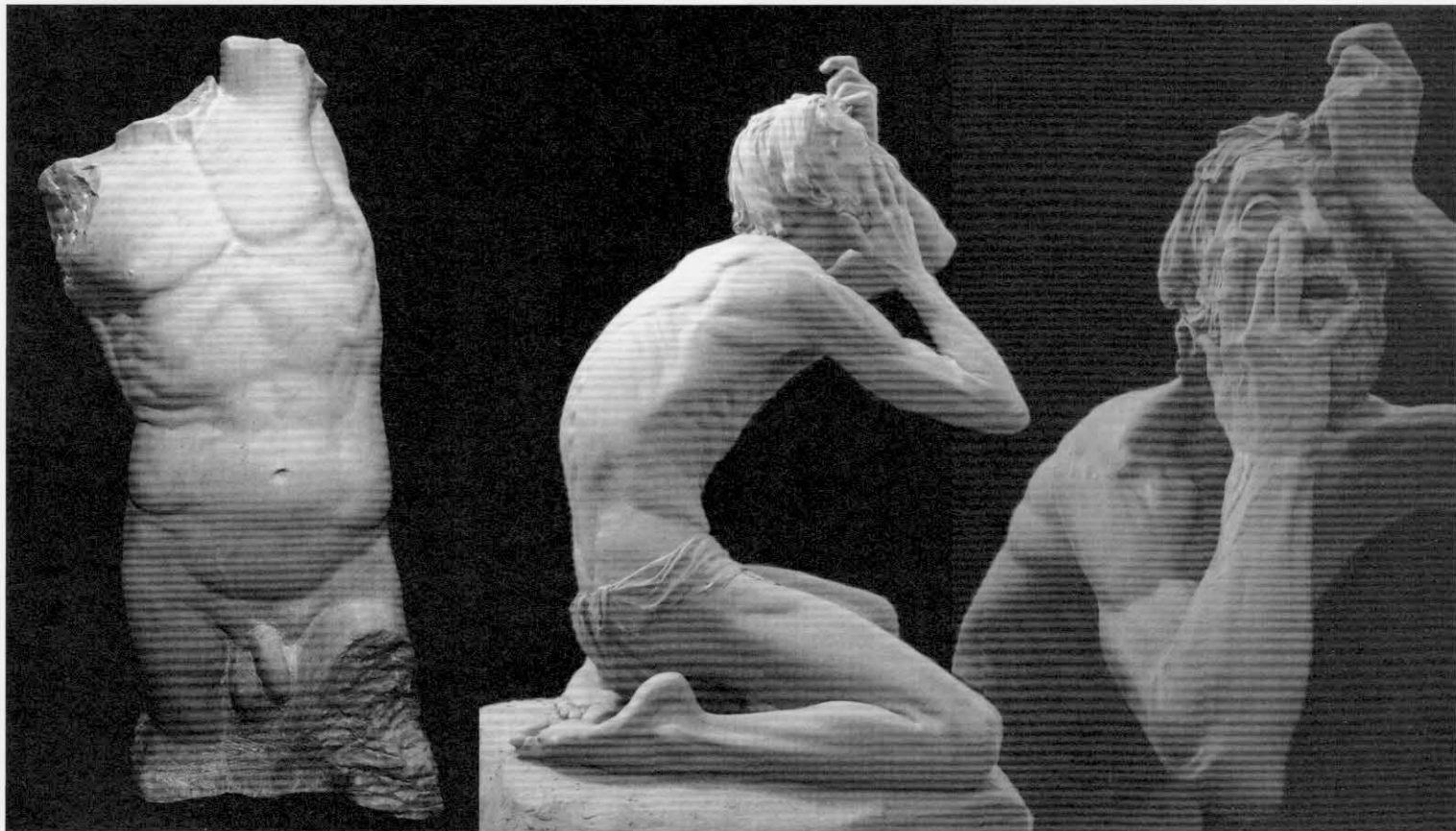
Other New York Academy of Art students reflect on the importance of the program’s weekly critiques with a rotating roster of instructors across disciplines, including artists Harvey Citron, Cynthia Eardley, Judy Fox, Laura Frazure, and Eric Fischl. Originally from Dallas, Texas, the artist Elyse Hradecky just received a M.F.A. degree in sculpture from NYAA. She notes:



Opposite page, top to bottom: Portraits by Elyse Hradecky (2012), plaster, lifesize; Head Series Sculptures by Beñat Iglesias Lopez (2012), clay, 18 inches high; Awaken by Minako Yoshino (2006), black Belgian marble, 14-1/2 inches high; opposite page, top right: Reflections by Olga Rudenko (2011), wood on copper base, 25 inches high.



On this page, top: In the Balance by Beth Wessel (2010), clay cast in bonded bronze, 44 inches high; bottom left: Torso-Virile by Joseph Brickey (2012), Carrara marble, 42 inches high; bottom right: Manifestation by Joseph Brickey (2012), clay, 50 inches high.




“Even though I was creating sculpture, my favorite artists were painters. Lucian Freud, Alice Neel, Frida Kahlo, and David Bates were some of the most important to me growing up and are the reason I am sculpting the figure today. Their paintings have such strong narratives. Just through portraiture, they are able to create an emotional space for the viewer to enter. I’m driven to do the same.” (Or perhaps, as Michelangelo famously observed, “Good painting is the kind that looks like sculpture.”)

Another New York Academy M.F.A. graduate, John O’Reilly from Columbus, Ohio, says, “I began drawing in metalpoint but soon realized I was becoming interested in the interaction between positive and negative space and objects in space, so the next step in my evolution was going to be sculpture.” Inspired by such artists as Ron Mueck and Evan Penny and their pursuit of realist detail, O’Reilly similarly challenges the illusion of the “real” in representational art, as in his sculptures of young or aged animals, humans (their heads and bodies), and anatomical dissections. O’Reilly notes, “As a member of a new generation of sculptors, I feel it is my duty to continue what



these artists have started, always pushing further in how we view and interact in the contemporary world.”

The above institutions, and many others like them across the country, are providing today’s sculptors with the tools, education, and understanding to do just that. Whatever their background, artistic motivation, stylistic taste, or professional goal, artists continue to be drawn to the figure with the urge to, by their own hand, make it their own. 

John Ewing is a freelance writer and editor based in New York City. He has written for *Modern Painters*, *ArtNexus*, and *Tema Celeste*, among other publications.

On this page, top: Untitled by John O’Reilly (2010), ceramic, 15-1/2 inches high; *bottom, left to right:* Wind by Minako Yoshino (2010), white Carrara marble, 19-1/2 inches high; Savior by John O’Reilly (2009), resin, 39 inches long.

Opposite page: Minako Yoshino in Seiji Saito’s class at the Art Students League, NY.

