

# THE STAR LEDGER

## 9/11 memorial and Morris exhibit in good hands

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ART

Sassona Norton, whose show of bronze figural sculptures just opened at the Morris Museum, has only been sculpting for six short years, yet she has already completed the first major public memorial to the victims of the 9/11 attacks produced by a professional artist after an international public competition.

Her memorial -- Norton was chosen from among 30 submissions made from around the world -- was inaugurated in front of the Montgomery County Courthouse in Norristown, Pa., in September. It consists of two eight-foot bronze hands tenderly holding an I-beam that has been so deformed and twisted it looks like a flickering steel flame.

It was a modest commission, just \$100,000 of county and private money (Norton spent all but \$10,000 of that sum to make the sculpture), way below the \$1 billion estimated for the memorial at Ground Zero itself.

The hands are reminiscent of 19th-century French sculptor Auguste Rodin, who often took fragments left over from his sculpture commissions and recomposed them into sentimental vignettes, frequently using just the hands. The best-known examples are probably "The Cathedral" and "The Hand of God," which is shown modeling the form of a nude woman.

Norton's hands hold up an actual piece of the World Trade Center demolished in the terrorist attacks. By all accounts her 9/11 memorial has been widely popular in Norristown and throughout the state.

The memorial fits with a certain traditional concept of a memorial, wholly appropriate to a state with the longest and deepest tradition of public sculpture in this country: Expressive, emotionally focused, limited in scale, and framed by the human touch, a symbolism that hands do quite well.

"I think the emotions are expressed and directed best by the hands," Norton said during a visit to the main gallery in the Morris Museum, a sun-filled room with one glass wall now filled with a score of her bronze sculptures. "Hands are the clearest way to express yearning. And yearning is the most powerful emotion there is."

What we have at the Morris is a fairly complete retrospective of Norton's sculptures, nearly half of them dynamically modeled hands or feet and the rest fully realized female nudes done life-size or perhaps a tad larger. Her 9/11 hands are represented by a large photograph hung on one gallery wall. What they share with all the other works here is a vigorously modeled surface and expressively exaggerated details, like gnarled feet and hands a bit too large for the figure. The erotic is not in evidence anywhere, though the sensual tension of bodies or limbs in convulsive movement is everywhere.

Norton, of Bedminster, is an Israeli-born American citizen who studied painting at the Art Students League in 1974, when she first came to New York. She was, in fact, a painter for most of her life, but her parents wanted her to get a real job, so she taught school until she met her first husband, an

American art collector.

We only know her painting by reproduction -- a small picture in "Sassona Norton," a hardcover published by the Morris Museum for sale in the museum shop -- but it seems very much of a piece: gnarled hands tightly clenched, done in shades of gray on canvas. While studying at the league, she was usually the only person painting or drawing the figure in a class filled with Minimalist or Color Field painters.

Norton's first husband died in 1993 after a long illness, and she gave up painting for a while. In 1999, she walked into an art association near her Bedminster home and took a three-day course in sculpting. She was hooked. She renovated a garage as her studio and has been working ever since, often, she says, 10 hours a day. Her second husband is a management consultant whose business frequently takes him to London, and Norton is a member of both the Sculptors' Guild in New York and the Royal Society of Sculptors.

The connection to Rodin is real, not just because of Norton's affection for body fragments, but in a Romanticism about the figure itself.

"I think the figure is an irresistible subject, first of all because we all come to it from a familiarity with our own bodies," she says. "So the figure is personal to everyone and can channel the most intense, personal feelings."

But Norton sees herself as a contemporary working in the ancient tradition of the expressive nude more than in any specifically 19th-century tradition. Rodin's contrasts between smooth, dark green patinas that indicate flesh and roughly modeled passages that suggest hair or other textures has been dropped. Instead, Norton kneads the whole surface of her figures with obsessively modulated wattles and gouges. Though her figures are female, she idealizes them with bald heads and generically modeled faces, tropes no 19th-century sculptor would indulge.

Works like "An Hour Before Dawn" or "The Last of Summer," with their physically contorted poses culminating in outstretched arms, enlivened with consistently agitated surfaces, are much more like the work of Rodin's favorite student, Antoine Bourdelle.

Perhaps the most successful statue here is "First Rain," a slightly larger than life bronze figure that strikes Norton's most classical pose, standing with a bowed head, palms turned upwards. The figure's neat little muscular form, with high, apple-like breasts, might be an early Aristide Maillol (1861-1944) were it not for the robust surface and muscular definition.

The contained, neo-classical pose seems to compress Norton's aggressive modeling -- the human figure struggling to break free, possibly the oldest tradition in sculpture that we have.