

Reflections on My Talks with Sassona Norton

By Steven Miller

When I first saw the sculptures of Sassona Norton, I was struck by how forthright they are. The sculptures are neither shy nor demure. Although they have a poetic side, they are quite strong. The same might be said about the artist.

Experience has taught me to be wary of artists' talk about messages in their work. Most artists prefer to let the work speak for itself. Often, the more they talk - the weaker the work becomes. This is not the case with Sassona. Far from it. In fact, I have found my conversations with her to be quite revealing. While every piece holds its own alone—as should always be the case—Sassona's comments are always instructive. Without any introduction her work is engaging. But the artist's commentary can make it more complex and self-revealing.

In looking at Sassona's sculptures it is clear that she has a strong personal way of viewing life, and her figures are her ideal expressive vehicle. The work is about human emotions: feelings, thoughts, yearnings, desires, and insights. Sassona has deliberately chosen the human body as the simplest and most obvious forum for three-dimensional discussions with herself. Upon the conclusion of a piece, her particular internal conversations are exposed, literally and figuratively (pun intended) for all to respond.

Sassona deviates from the tradition to which she is connected by the choices she makes in both concept and execution. For starters she rejects the traditional singular emphasis on beauty or a narrow formulaic perspective. In spite of the evidence of remarkable knowledge in anatomy the work is neither cosmetically pretty nor anatomically academic. These are story-telling works of art rooted in a special and personal truth that offers a more complex psychological narrative than the one expressed in previous centuries. The work is very well connected to the twentieth/twenty-first century experience of living with uncertainty and ambiguity.

As Sassona often says, she is interested in expressing the co-existence of solitude and reaching out, strength and vulnerability, loss and longing, and the experience of time passing. I am particularly struck by the aspects of longing and time, and the connection between the two. Bronze is heavy, solid, static and unchangeable. To express the dynamics of time Sassona sculpts her figures caught in the midst of a movement. Even when they stand still they seem to "jump off" in a very delicate balance between being

anchored here and moving elsewhere. "I am interested in the dialogue between reality and wishes", Sassona said in one of our many talks, "and I like the challenge to express a constant process in material that does not move". That statement led us to a discussion about longing, the other aspect that attracts attention.

Longing, it turns out, is a main emotional component in Sassona's sculptures. Although she often talks about the "fundamental human condition," and strips her sculpture from any attribute that will anchor it in a specific time, she gives voice to one of the most prevalent characteristics of the individual condition in our era, namely loneliness. But when she combines it with expressions of longing, an unexpected sense of hope emerges. A bit unconventionally, Sassona does not think about longing in melancholy terms. "Longing", she said, "is the propelling power behind change. If you are dissatisfied with the reality of your life — without longing, you will have no desire to alter it. You might as well lie down, shrivel and die".

In speaking of the nude as her chosen subject, Sassona says her pieces are naked rather than nude, an interesting differentiation that expresses vulnerability and exposure rather than a more idealized naturalism. Yet to my eye they are hardly overtly naked. They lack the feeling of being unclothed. Their sensuality is not suggestive. Perhaps it has to do with the absence of distracting anatomical detail and the artist's emphasis on wonderfully articulated surfaces and a certain patina. More likely it has to do with the overall force of each piece and the expressions it emanates.

Adding to the nude/naked conundrum is the fact that Sassona's figures are bald. I asked her about this very obvious choice. She said: "If they had hair, what style hair would it be?" Good point. As we see in movies, hairstyles, especially for women, immediately document the time when the movie was made. This tends to happen with sculpture too, unless it is attempting to be "timeless". Sassona also noted that the baldness gives her figures greater vulnerability.

Our conversation about nudity, nakedness, baldness and styles helped explain to me why Sassona chooses to sculpt mostly women. "It is not because I am one", she says. "Men's baldness would not have made the same statement as women's in terms of vulnerability. I am interested in creating the drama of contradictions between that and strength. While the woman's reaching out spells yearning, the muscularity of her body expresses power. The latter was atypical of women in the past. Consequently it connects it to a social and personal achievement of our time. I could not accomplish this particular dialogue by sculpting a man".

Contrary to many sculptors who work in the figurative tradition, Sassona rarely uses a model. She envisions the pose and might engage a model for few hours to determine the logistics of movements. "I use the model", she says, "only as a visual dictionary for some anatomical details that change when a certain movement takes place". No resemblance to the actual model will ever be present in the finished work.

Another unusual feature involves Sassona's decision to start sculpting in the full size of the finished work. Most sculptors make drawings or build maquettes first. Sassona does not engage in any such preparatory processes. "A lot of the final modeling and shaping is spontaneous and organic", she says. "I can create it only by working with my hands, without any tools. It means that I need a large surface to work on which cannot be pre-created in a smaller size". She smiles when I tell her that this is somewhat precarious: her work must be envisioned entirely in her mind ahead of time, not an easy task based on the large scale that she uses. "This adds to the excitement of the discovery", she says.

Scale is a very important element of Sassona's work. All her sculptures are larger than life. The figures are over life-size, she explained in one discussion, for the same reason they are muscular: to express strength. The calculation of the scale is deliberate. While the figures are larger than life, they are not overwhelmingly so. It is crucial to retain a level of approachability for the viewer. The work should have a sense of monumentality and drama without being unreachable.

Because of the tremendous weight of the clay, the sculptor cannot start sculpting without first creating a support system or armature. When Sassona and I discussed her process, it was immediately clear that her armatures had not only to be strong, but also capable of creating the gestures of the particular piece she was making. Indeed, in their simplicity, Sassona's armatures — large, heavy and welded from steel bars — are quick line-drawings that capture the essence of where she wants to end up with a piece. "Clearly", she explained, "it is essential that the armature is mechanically well built and placed exactly at the center of each of the sculpture parts in order to support them properly. But there is another aspect. As naked as it is, the armature must stand on its own in artistic terms as if it were an independent piece. The movement must be expressed in its right proportions and dynamics. Otherwise the finished piece will be a failure".

While many sculptors terminate their involvement once a clay phase is finished, Sassona keeps sculpting after the sculpture is produced in wax, and spends long months working at Argos, the foundry she uses in Brewster New

York. "Very often" she explains, "what is acceptable in clay looks harsh in wax. The hardness of wax changes the quality of the texture. At times, I end up with such a different look that I may opt to create a new mold in order to preserve the changes".

Sassona pays close and careful attention to the bases her sculpture rests upon. For her large complete figures, the base is part of the work, often replicating the idea of a rock or other natural formation. Because the base is also cast bronze and has a similar patina to the sculpture, there is hardly any artistic separation between the figure and what it is on. The base is part of an overall composition that both separates the sculpture from the world around it and connects it to that world.

In the case of Sassona's figure parts—legs and feet, hands, heads, etc.—she maintains a careful and precise division between the base and the piece. In some cases only a tiny part of the sculpture touches the surface of a base. This gives the piece its own space, independent of what holds it up.

At its essence, Sassona's sculpture is as much about temperament and emotion as it is about shapes, volumes, materials, voids, and weight. Her handwriting is evident on modulated surfaces that are as impressionistic as they are expressionistic. Her pieces are absolutely charged with individual personality. They are both the story of one person and many — a timeless, enduring achievement.