ESSAY *In The Hands of Sassona Norton* *by* Hilarie Sheets

IN THE HANDS OF SASSONA NORTON, the human form takes on deeply metaphoric dimensions. Her larger-than-life size bronze sculptures—some full-length naked figures, others cropped heads, hands, or legs—all embody some kind of gesture of reaching. Muscular, torqued, dynamic, they yearn for something lost, they grasp for something more. This idea of longing, rooted in the pain of absence but fueled by the ambition and belief that the future holds promise, is an essential component of the human experience. The artist describes it as a duality between where you are and where you want to be, and it is the psychological underpinning of all her sculpture.

That Norton can capture such moments of transition and emotional ambiguity in a medium as immovable as bronze is another intriguing duality in her sculpture. In *Fleeting Light*, for instance, a large-scale naked female figure with a powerful build and massive feet is anchored to a rocklike pedestal. Her upper body is thrown back almost violently with her arms outstretched and her face caught in an open-mouthed cry flickering between joy and sorrow. The movement of the figure seems dictated by the light of the window illuminating the entrance gallery where the sculpture is sited, and indeed Norton conceived of the piece with this interaction in mind. The sculpture is not only a vir-

left: *Fleeting Light*, 2005, PLATE 7

tuoso study of human form but also personifies the feeling of desire and eminent loss in that last moment of beauty before the light fades.

The human figure has always been Norton's subject, even as a little girl growing up in Tel Aviv with an early propensity for drawing. She has a vivid memory of a time when she was five years old and figured out something fundamental about how to draw. She was drawing a girl in a dress with a stomach shown, but then she realized that when you look at a clothed person the stomach isn't actually visible, so she erased it. Norton calls it an "aha" moment of understanding that you have to draw what you see, not what you think is there.

Although her youth was dominated by making art, for which she was recognized by her teachers, it was not what she initially pursued professionally. Her father—a businessman she describes as a frustrated architect who always looked for opportunities to renovate buildings—and her mother wanted her to be a high school teacher. She studied literature and theater at the Tel Aviv University, and pursued painting on her own time. While teaching high school in her early twenties she had a one-person show of her canvases that was highly praised in the local press. After several years of teaching she decided to shift into journalism, writing an art column in the largest Israeli daily newspaper while continuing to make art.

During this period she met an American art collector who ultimately asked her to come with him to the United States. She did in 1974, and they married and settled in New York City. Norton enrolled in the Art Students League and for the next five years spent eight hours a day working in the studio there as a painter in what she characterizes as the most concentrated form of art education she'd ever had. Instructed by artists including Stanley Boxer, Bruce Dorfman, Marshal Glaiser, and Leo Manso, from day one she was treated as a professional artist who was expected to produce serious work.

While the climate of the New York art world at that time favored abstraction—be it Minimalism, Color Field painting or Abstract Expressionism—Norton bucked the trends and concentrated on the human figure which for her felt like the most accessible vehicle for expressing her view of life and the world we live in. While many of her teachers were abstract artists, they never tried to push her in a different direction. The challenge for Norton during these years was finding her personal artistic vocabulary within an age-old figurative tradition.

Scale was something she began to play around with. Painting the figure larger-than-life was a way that Norton found to visually convey a sense of strength and weight that appealed to her. In her paintings, twisted outsized nudes, unmoored in the vacant space of the picture plane, push up against the edges of the canvases. At a certain point, instead of doing increasingly gigantic nudes, Norton chose to concentrate a single element of the figure, predominantly hands, that she could blow up as big as she wanted.

Norton felt that hands are as expressive as a face but have a universal quality that faces do not have. They are anonymous, nameless, and therefore more abstract than faces while at the same time they offer a greater range of movements. Norton really began to find her voice in her series of paintings from the early 1980s—shown in solo exhibitions at Gallery 84 and Sutton Gallery in New York—that depict massive, faceted hands in a repertoire of clenched, emotional gestures.

The sculptural presence of these forms is palpable. It is tempting, with the hindsight of knowing Norton's trajectory as a sculptor, to look at the entities in these paintings as three-dimensional beings trying to break free of their two-dimensional constraints. Indeed, Norton recounts the repeated experience of running into people who were familiar with her paintings, yet would ask her how her sculpture was going. She would be taken aback and clarify that she was a painter not a sculptor, but today finds it interesting that people remembered the paintings as sculptures.

Painting Title, 1995, Oil on Canvas?, dimensions

Then in the late 1980s Norton's husband became ill. He was sick for several years and Norton closed her studio and became his caregiver. He died in 1993 and for some time after Norton was recouping from her devastating loss. As difficult as his death was for her personally, though, the hiatus in her working life opened a new window for her creatively. When the time was right for her to go back to art making, she knew it wouldn't be painting. As she describes it, the spell of comfort and inertia and familiarity had been broken and she could start fresh.

She found an instant affinity with a new medium the day she decided to walk in to a local art association near her home in New Jersey and take a three-day course on sculpting. It was the first time she had ever worked with clay and it felt completely natural for her. What's obvious to her now is that she had always seen the world in terms of shapes and weight—a kind of spatial way of thinking that she inherited from her father—rather than color, the language of painting. She immediately loved the directness and solidity of sculpting in clay with her hands. Norton then spent a month learning more about the sculpting process at the Sculpture Center in New York.

Since 1999, in a large garage she renovated into a studio, Norton has embraced the medium most suited to her temperament, producing an impressive and cohesive body of work in bronze. The first piece she completed is titled *Beyond Reach*, a man's naked torso that echoes classical Greek and Roman marble fragments of the idealized male form. Yet Norton's figure has the realism of a much older man, sinewy and weathered. The surface of the bronze is heavily worked and abraded, yielding a tactile impression of human skin that stands in marked contrast to the hard, sleek areas where she has abruptly ended the sculpture—chopping it through the mouth

and at the upper arms all lifted upwards. In open-ended terms, it speaks to the dichotomy between the physical and the spiritual, between isolation and aspiration.

From there, Norton reworked themes familiar from her paintings, such as hands, in three-dimensions. *Between Questions,* for instance, is a single oversized hand that can stand upright on its wrist with thumb and forefinger raised as though interjecting a new point or lie sideways in a kind of denouement. Creased, mottled, veined, it's a compelling object that tells different stories from different angles. In *To Whom Do I Pray,* two gnarled, anguished hands, cupped in supplication, open upwards and metaphorically emit a silent cry. This piece was recently purchased by Henry Buhl, whose well-known collection of photography and sculpture focuses on the theme of hands and all their associative power.

In another piece titled *Into the Wind*, a pair of meaty, callused hands—pressed together at the wrists and palms—open their fingers outwards, like limbs of a tree being buffeted by the wind. There's a sense of both release and inability to hold on that shifts with changing vantage points. Turned and displayed on its side, one hand looks as though it has stumbled and is falling while the other tries to support it. In all these works, the hands seem almost stand-ins for fully realized figures.

This sense of the part speaking for the whole is particularly strong in the piece *I Thought I Was Dancing*. Two stumps of lower legs knock together awkwardly with the toes of the oversized feet curling up bashfully. It reads as an abstraction of two figures in a first moment of intimacy, tentative and sweet, groping to get it right. Norton is clearly interested in how concentrating on segments of the body can deliver a powerful emotional punch. *The Edge of Rest* consists of two crossed lower legs braced by a hand, each abruptly severed mid-limb. It is ostensibly a position of repose. Yet one foot is flexed in agitation, suggesting that a state of calm is hard to achieve or maintain. The tension of the piece is only exacerbated by the surreal termination of the limbs, with the slick ends patinated a hotter tone than the rest of the softly modeled bodily surfaces.

In a pair of works titled *Unquenchable Thirst* and *Memories of Sweetness*, each has a huge disembodied head of a man hovering over a set of hands. In one, the face turns toward cupped hands for a drink; in the other, he reaches out for a kiss. The heads are attached to the hands at only a single point, requiring a special structural support. This lends them a floating quality that belies their considerable physical heft and adds to the sense of drama and surprise. Clearly the same man, the heads function as complements. As the titles indicate, the pairing embraces present and past, an active thirst for something that exists only in the realm of memories.

Norton's full-length figures, which are all naked women, are startling both in their monumentality and their conscious lack of prettiness. For one thing, she has chosen to portray them all bald, which has the effect of making them look more exposed and vulnerable while at the same time projecting strength. That together with their disproportionately large hands and feet and rippling musculature give them formidable presence and a feminine-masculine duality that speaks to general human experiences. The baldness and lack of any other details that might have tied these figures to a certain period also helps give the works their timeless and universal qualities.

Siting becomes important with these works. Rather than find a suitable place for a completed sculpture, Norton usually sculpts with a specific location in mind that dictates the conception of the piece. When she installs the sculptures outdoors, she often integrates them with fountains or pools of her own design. *First Rain*, for instance, is a towering figure poised on a rock at the center of a circular fountain. Head bowed meditatively, arms outstretched and palms raised, the figure appears to be conjuring the dance of the water with the gesture of her hands. For *The Last of Summer*, Norton designed a reflecting pool in the shape of a cross. The huge female figure lying with legs bent at the center of the cross, a position inherently loaded with the idea of suffering, arches her upper body and reaches out dramatically with her oversized hands.

The unidealized realism of these figures brings to mind the work of the French sculptor Auguste Rodin (1840-1917), whose sculptures such as *The Burghers of Calais* (1884- 1895) were groundbreaking in how they depicted human anguish. As a teenager in Tel Aviv, Norton can remember the emotional impact of seeing a Rodin sculpture of a wizened older woman. She has found the tactility of his bronze surfaces and the exaggeration of certain features and gestures to be an important touchstone. Her sculpture *One Last Word*, of a woman sharply contorted in body and emotion as she looks behind her to say her final word, echoes the kind of postures of Rodin's *Burghers*, the six 14th-century martyrs who sacrificed themselves for their city and in his sculpture look back in fear rather than heroism.

The ambition in Norton's figures is impressive, both in their size and their complexity. *An Hour Before Dawn* has a Herculean-toned woman curled protectively over her legs. Yet she extends one open hand, indicating the tension between maintaining autonomy and accepting the potential for love. The torsion in the figure's pose is incredibly difficult to pull off technically—noteworthy because Norton is largely self-taught in the medium of sculpture.

Norton uses the lost-wax process to make her sculptures, a laborious method employed since antiquity that is still the best way to cast all the detail of modeled clay in bronze. For her, a piece starts as an image in her head. If it's going to be a full figure, she knows it will be big and emotional. Rather than do any preparatory studies—either drawings or small maquettes—she starts right off building a full-size armature in aluminum. Creatively, she responds best when working with the actual scale. Manipulating the pliable aluminum is her method of drawing and the point where crucial decisions are made.

Once she has the armature—basically a giant stick figure that indicates the movements of the future sculpture—she has a welder copy it under her supervision in steel, which is strong enough to brace and support the weight of clay. She then fills out the steel armature with chicken wire and injects spray foam into the cavities that dries, fleshing out the figure. At this point, Norton pads the armature with clay and the real sculpting process begins. On a full figure, she might spend four to six months on the modeling. It is in this hands-on stage that Norton feels her mark is most directly imprinted on the material.

When she determines that the work in clay is complete, Norton has a mold made. Because of the large size and the complexity of extended limbs in most of her figures, the mold maker usually cannot do a single mold but rather makes numerous plaster molds of different sections. Then the molds go to the foundry and are cast in wax. Norton comes when the wax sections are poured and then starts to rework their surfaces using a heat gun and her hands.

Once the wax segments are complete, the foundry builds a gating system with pipes around each piece and dips it into a ceramic bath to create a ceramic shell. The pipes serve to support the wax and provide a drainage system for when the ceramic shell is put into the furnace at a very high temperature. The melted wax pours out—thus the "lost-wax"—and is replaced by molten bronze poured in. When the bronze has solidified, the ceramic shell is broken off. Once all the sections are welded back into a whole, Norton comes in and again mottles the surface of the bronze with a grinder to achieve the look of suppleness that is so important to her. She chooses the finished patina, but it takes layers of different acids applied to the work under torch to achieve the softness of the patina that she requires.

Surely Norton's most complex piece to date, one that required nine separate molds, is her Montgomery County 9/11 memorial that stands in the plaza of the county courthouse in Norristown, Pennsylvania, honoring those lost in the World Trade Center. For this, she adapted her theme of hands to enormous dimensions. Two craggy, powerful hands— raising up over eight feet tall—cup a radically twisted and rusted section of an I-beam salvaged from the wreckage of the North Tower as though it were a bird ready to take flight.

Norton's participation in this memorial project began with the chance reading in *Sculpture* magazine of a call to the sculpting community asking for proposals for a 9/11 memorial. The county had retrieved the I-beam section through the FBI and the two stipulations of the project were that it incorporate the fragment and that it would be sited in the front of the county courthouse. Norton was in London at the time and couldn't visit the site, but immediately had the idea of two giant hands holding the I-beam and resting on a piece of polished black granite, low and horizontal. She wanted it both to have a reflective quality and to be monumental and intimate at the same time.

In early 2003 Norton sent in her proposal with drawings and text about her choices. She didn't hear anything for the next year. Then from out of the blue she received a notification that she was one of the six finalists out of the dozens of applicants from around the world that responded to the original call. Each of the finalists was given a stipend to cover the costs of building a maquette and appearing in front of the committee of judges. Norton next went to Norristown to see the courthouse and as she describes it her heart dropped because she knew her design wasn't going to work. The courthouse is a neoclassical building with huge fluted columns extending vertically from the ground floor to the roof. Nothing with a horizontal emphasis would make sense visually in front of this building and the plaza itself was smaller than she had anticipated.

Norton then did what she learned later no other finalist had done, which was to view the I-beam in person. What must have originally stretched 18 feet was folded in on itself three times, contorted and torn, with an organic quality that belied its industrial origins. Norton realized that the gravity line fell outside of the I-beam and that it made sense to angle this fragment and the hands on a tilt. Once she made that decision, others quickly fell into place. She needed something tall so she chose to support the hands on a square column. She needed to anchor the column so she decided to have it come off the periphery of a round disc. She proposed ringing the circumference of the disc with the inscription:

September 11, 2001. The many who died. The many who fought to save others. Memories never die.

Two weeks after her presentation to the judges, she was notified that she had won $100,000 to execute the memorial.

Four years after the tragedy of September 11, 2001, Norton's memorial, standing almost 18 feet high, was unveiled in the courthouse plaza of Norristown. In this powerful monument, Norton pushes her longtime exploration of hands—of their capacity to express ideas of endurance, love, support, aspiration—to another level that eloquently blends the private and public, the personal and the universal.