

**F**OR THOUSANDS OF YEARS, ever since mankind was first able to chisel stone or push huge boulders into impressive formations, the desire to create monuments has been almost as elemental as the need to worship or find community or engage in warfare. Different cultures looked to outsized, heroic sculpture to fulfill varying needs. The pharaohs and other rulers in ancient civilizations wanted enduring testaments to their power and stature, colossal statements that would elevate them to godlike dimensions (and perhaps remind the general populace of its inferior position in the grand scheme of things). The Greeks celebrated their pantheon, combining the human and the sacred in some of the most sublime and enduring works of art in all of Western civilization. With the Romans and later, the Renaissance, came the notion of celebrating the individual in memorable public fashion: perhaps on a horse, as in the equestrian monuments of Marcus Aurelius or

Donatello's likeness of Gattamelata, the great Venetian soldier, in Padua. Later public celebrations of individuals — one thinks of Houdon's marble statue of George Washington or Daniel Chester French's portrayal of Lincoln in Washington, D.C. — continue the tradition of paying special homage in stone or bronze to leaders whose accomplishments transcend the contributions of ordinary mortals.

But the notion of the monument as a memorial to specific events has a far less linear development in the history of art and is, in fact, a fairly recent phenomenon. The word "memorial," drawing on the same roots as the word "memory," asks something different of the viewer than the sculpture intended to celebrate the heroic individual. Such monuments, whether large or small, public or private, are meant to provoke reflection and remembrance. There is a long and venerable history attached to grave markers and tomb sculptures

meant to honor the dead. These embellish the sites where family and future generations can reflect on loss, transience, and perhaps the hope of resurrection in a future life. From the delicate reliefs on Greek grave stelae to Michelangelo's tomb sculptures for Giuliano de' Medici to scattered examples of more recent funerary monuments (and there are very few worth a second glance, one exception being Augustus Saint-Gaudens late 19th-century memorial to Clover Adams), these are works that invite contemplation of the nature of life and death and ask us to remember the person whose remains are laid to rest here.

These are all, however, testimonials to individuals. What of the memorial that bears witness to a larger and more terrible loss, to an event that took a huge toll in human lives? You will seldom find any kind of sculptural tribute to all the souls lost in the epic battles of history before the 20th century. If Waterloo was to be remembered, it's in statues and paintings of the Duke of Wellington. Similarly, the triumphs and defeats of the American or French revolution commemorate the heroes of those bloody wars or celebrate idealized individuals, as in François Rude's boisterous relief of *La Marseillaise* on the Arc de Triomphe in Paris. It's not until the late 19th century that the idea of paying tribute to ordinary mortals lost in the horrific upheavals of history takes hold in the public and artistic imaginations. Augustus Saint-Gaudens' memorial to Robert Gould Shaw and his regiment, unveiled in Boston in 1897 and completed three years later, commemorates for the first time a group of real people who marched off in the service of their country and never came back. Borrowing the ancient prototypes of the sculptural frieze and the equestrian monument, Saint-Gaudens depicted the young colonel Robert Shaw leading his regiment of black soldiers, some of them former slaves, underneath a hovering figure of Nike, the goddess of

Victory. But Shaw's men were not victorious. Three months after leaving Boston, in the summer of 1863, the colonel and most of his recruits were killed in a frontal attack in South Carolina and buried in a mass grave.

Saint-Gaudens' breathtaking memorial signaled something new in the history of art: the memorial not for an individual or for a brave leader, but for a group of people wiped out under devastating circumstances that were certainly not of their own devising. They were victims of history, and as history marched on into the next century, when the technologies for eradicating ever larger groups from the planet became ever more devastating, the need to remember those lost to warfare or other forms of global hatred has seemed especially acute. And so there are Holocaust memorials of many kinds for the millions murdered during the Nazi regime, and monuments for the soldiers, sailors, doctors, nurses, and others sacrificed during two world wars, as well as the conflicts in Korea and Vietnam. For the most part — the stunning exception being Maya Lin's Vietnam memorial in Washington, D.C. — these sites of remembrance have been figurative in approach. The reasons for that are many and varied. For one, the paradigm of the human figure is the one most easily grasped by the largest number of people; it doesn't take a "trained" eye to appreciate the statement being made. For another, figurative sculpture has a long and venerable history and connects us with the past in a deep and fundamental way. And, perhaps most importantly, it's difficult even to hint at the human dimension in work that is too abstract or oblique.

With the horror of September 11, 2001 has come the daunting task for artists to construct memorials to a new kind of slaughter, even more senseless than war or concentration camps. Plans for new buildings and memorials at the site itself, the former World Trade Center, have been predictably fraught with political and

aesthetic controversy. But the many communities in the city and surrounding suburbs who suffered losses in the terrorist attack have also felt the need to honor their dead, and these tributes are now taking shape. In the time-honored manner of such civic projects, competitions are held, artists submit ideas, and commissions are awarded.

Sculptor Sassona Norton answered one such call when Montgomery County, Pennsylvania, advertised for artists to put forward proposals for a memorial that would incorporate a piece of wreckage from the attacks — a bent and twisted I-beam retrieved from the fiery collapse of the North Tower. The concept that won her the contest was disarmingly simple but layered in meaning. A pair of gigantic bronze hands nearly eight feet high cradle the looped and scarred fragment, itself a weirdly and eerily abstract kind of sculpture. The hands holding the girder are raised on a slanted rectangular shaft atop a circular base 16 feet in diameter, and the base is inscribed with the words:

*The many who died.*

*The many who fought to save others.*

*Memories never die.*

*September 11, 2001.*

The words flow continuously, circling the periphery of the disc. But the separate thoughts have no fixed sequence, and the viewer can start reading the inscription from any point of approach, adding a dynamic of personal experience as well as of perpetual motion.

Norton has worked as a painter for most of her career and is a relative newcomer to sculpture, a medium to which she first turned her full attention in 1999. In that short span of time she has produced an impressive body of work, especially remarkable because she is able to work on both an intimate and a monumental scale. Hands have long been one of her favorite

subjects, whether sculpted as objects of interest in and of themselves or combined with expressive heads. She is not the first artist, of course, to realize the emotional potential of hands divorced from the rest of the body. The 16th-century German artist Albrecht Dürer produced ad nauseum on greeting cards and devotional items; French Romantic painter Théodore Géricault painted ghoulishly severed arms, hands, and feet; and the great Auguste Rodin modeled innumerable hands in just about every conceivable “pose.” In choosing to show just hands, Norton aligns herself firmly with a modernist tradition in the making since the late 19th century. Ever since the radical cropping of figures and scenes that lies at the heart of works by Manet and Degas<sup>1</sup>, and continuing through the exercises in fragmentation by Cubist artists, we have no difficulty accepting a part of the body as a metaphor for the whole.

The hands Norton sculpted speak volumes. They are unabashedly masculine — the nails are chipped, the veins are prominent, the skin is weathered and wrinkled. They would seem to belong to someone who might have been at the site soon after the disaster — a fire fighter or policeman or rescue worker. But the way they cradle the girder conveys the utmost delicacy and respect, and in this cautious embrace, the I-beam becomes a flying, slippery shape, almost alive, something that could fly off on its own (or, alternatively, get crushed to death) if not handled carefully.

Norton has said that her first conception for the memorial was for a more horizontal orientation, incorporating a reflecting pool with the hands rising out of the water. When she saw the space of the plaza where the sculpture now stands, and took into account both the architecture of the 19th-century Greek Revival courthouse behind it and the demands of a relatively confined area, she modified her initial ideas to show the

hands and girder lifted upward. It's a momentous choice, even a life-affirming one. As critic Rosalind Krauss pointed out in an essay on the contemporary photographer Cindy Sherman, "the plane of verticality is the plane of Préganz, the hanging together or coherence of form . . . . Further, this vertical dimension, in being the axis of form, is also the axis of beauty."<sup>2</sup> From certain angles, the work also has a dramatic, diagonal, Baroque sweep, reminding us of the composition favored by such sculptors as Bernini, who used this kind of upward slanting to convey the desire for flight in works like Apollo and Daphne. (More recently, this was the axis used to great effect in the Iwo Jima Monument, which was based on a dramatic photograph of American G.I.s struggling to plant the flag on the first Japanese territory conquered during World War II.)

Norton says that one of her most important decisions in planning the monument involved the position in which the I-beam was to be held. "The torn and twisted metal seemed so organic that no part of it was square or even," she observed in her specifications for the memorial. To create a better sense of balance, she would have to install it at a slight tilt instead of at the conventional 90 degrees, which further suggested the angle of the hands and the supporting shaft. And it is that tilting movement throughout the memorial that engages the viewer and creates the illusion that the girder could shoot off into the sky, even as a slight curve in the metal provides a necessary counterpoint and directs our gaze back toward the outstretched fingers of the right hand.

Like most truly compelling three-dimensional works, Norton's memorial demands to be looked at from different perspectives, and the circular base encourages movement around the sculpture. The meaning for the viewer is left open to interpretation. Norton has spoken of the twisted I-beam as containing a dual

symbolism, like that of the Christian cross: "It's an instrument of torture, of horror, turned into a symbol of tenderness, love, and hope," she told a reporter in 2004. The I-beam, in its most functional sense, is also a supposedly sturdy and vital part of building design, one of the elements that holds the architecture together and makes it suitable for human occupation. To see it mangled and charred beyond recognition is to wonder at the force and heat that could reduce it to its present shape, no more steadfast than a bobby pin subjected to high temperatures and bent into a loop. And to see it cradled between a pair of outsized hands has the effect of reducing the girder to human dimensions. This piece of supposedly durable steel is as vulnerable as we are. Lifting it upward conveys a sense of hope and seems to imply that even disaster can be muted and overcome "in the right hands."

But what the work says to the individual who encounters it will ultimately depend on what the viewer brings to it, whether that's a personal loss from the 9/11 atrocities or a love of art history or a desire for catharsis through the act of looking and reflecting. Its success as a sculpture seems assured; its power as a memorial remains within the hearts and minds of those who need to grieve, remember, or find solace.

<sup>1</sup> Linda Nochlin, *The Body in Pieces: The Fragment as a Metaphor of Modernity*, London, Thames & Hudson, 1994, pp. 25–47.

<sup>2</sup> Rosalind E. Krauss, *Cindy Sherman, 1975–1993*, with an essay by Norman Bryson, New York and London, Rizzoli, 1993, pp. 93–94.