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M.J. ANDERSON:

*Skin of the Stone*

MARBLE SCULPTURE • 1987-2001

THE ART GYM  
MARYLHURST UNIVERSITY  
FEBRUARY 25 - MARCH 30, 2001

## PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS –

M.J. ANDERSON IS ONE OF THE FEW ARTISTS CARVING LARGE-SCALE STONE SCULPTURES IN THE NORTHWEST. Writing in *Sculpture* magazine, Seattle-based art critic Matthew Kangas, called her “possibly the most important marble sculptor now working in the Pacific Northwest.” Anderson travels annually from her home on the Oregon Coast to Carrara, Italy, to carve her life-size and over life-size figurative works on site.

This is the first major survey of M.J. Anderson’s art. The exhibition includes approximately 45 marble sculptures from classically inspired female torsos such as the 1996 *La Simpatica* to multi-limbed torsos and abstract evocations of the body’s pulsing inner workings. Anderson’s works range in temperament from the serene and transcendent to the passionate and tumultuous.

Given the high cost of transporting and installing stone sculpture, the Marylhurst University exhibition would not have been possible without the generous support of the Regional Arts and Culture Council, and additional support from the Oregon Arts Commission, National Endowment for the Arts, private businesses and individuals.

We are particularly grateful to Faun Rae Hosey and Peter Butler, Robert and Ellen Reynolds, Reed and Christina Wilson, Alfred and Eileen Ono, Dee Poth, and Liza Jones, Davidson Galleries of Seattle, and Artspace Gallery of Bay City, Oregon, whose contributions helped make this publication a reality. We extend our thanks as well to collectors Françoise Grossen, Helen Hill, and Faun Rae Hosey for loaning important works to the exhibition.

Finally, my thanks to M.J. Anderson for her countless hours of transporting and installing sculpture on our campus, and more importantly for creating these sophisticated works and allowing us to show them at Marylhurst.

TERRI M. HOPKINS  
DIRECTOR AND CURATOR, THE ART GYM

THE ART GYM IS PART OF THE MARYLHURST UNIVERSITY ART DEPARTMENT.  
GREG STEINKE, CHAIR  
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M.J. Anderson: *Skin of the Stone, Marble Sculpture* • 1987–2001  
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*La Linea della Vita*, 1998, Moroccan marble, 32"x36"x6", Collection of the Artist

M.J. ANDERSON:

## *Skin of the Stone*

MARBLE SCULPTURE • 1987–2001

BY TERRI M. HOPKINS

M.J. ANDERSON'S MARBLE SCULPTURES are about classical expectation and physical reality. They are about the perfect body and the marked body. They acknowledge pain and disease and make the claim that the flawed body is capable of perfect desire – that Eros is blind and





is not repelled by the wounds and fissures that mark flesh over time. They are also about the links between the body and the spirit, between physical and spiritual ecstasy, and between the present and the distant past.

Anderson uses her sculpture to convey the strength women tap in order to meet challenges of their sex. She feels a responsibility to her gender to create positive icons that address women's lives.<sup>1</sup> *La Linea della Vita* (lifelines) is carved from blood red Moroccan marble. An umbilical cord-like rope intertwines with two upraised open hands. The image is related to the ancient image of the Mesopotamian goddess Lilith who holds a length of rope symbolizing the span of a life – a short, difficult, and vital span.

Anderson often chooses metaphors that suggest resilience in the face of adversity. In *Sacro Felice*, that resilience and related hope are explicit. One breast is carved away in a series of delicate strokes leaving a feathered surface. The resulting wing-like shape may refer to the angels of the old and new testaments – bearers of both good and bad news – or to Nike, the winged Greek goddess of victory. Other works imply more severe trauma. In *Clearcut* the female torso is split open from throat to crotch as if in the midst of surgery; and in *Taking the Veil Away*, both breasts are pocked and battered. Even so these sculptures do not concede defeat. Their stalwart bearing and robust forms remind us instead that women survive.

Anderson takes care to point out that the scar and wound-like marks in many of her sculptures were inherent in the skin of the stone.<sup>2</sup> The skin of the stone is that part of rock in nature or in a quarry that has been exposed to the elements for decades or centuries. This surface often has a rough, even scarred appearance. Only a few sculptures appear unblemished, like the young skin of *Ophelia* rendered in white

*Clearcut*, 1992  
Marble with paint  
23"x14"x7"  
Collection of Helen Hill



*Sacro Felice*, 1990  
Carrara Statuario marble  
28"x17"x12"

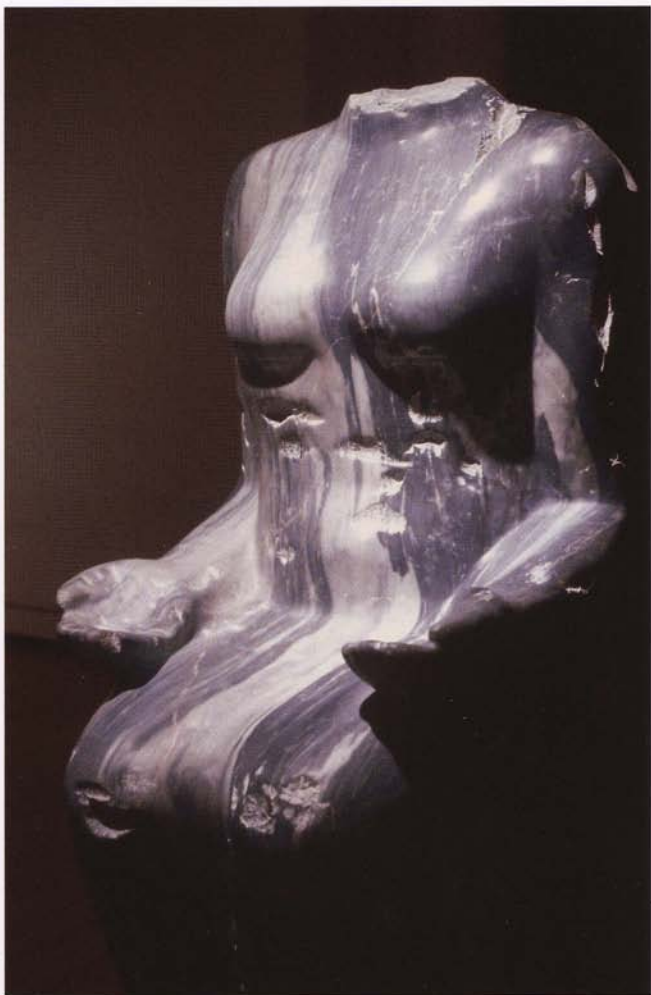
Carrara marble; but even *Ophelia's* back is raw stone.

When the artist chooses a block of marble with cracks and gouges, it is to make a particular point. Scarred marble is still translucent in its beauty and still durable. In addition, we associate marble with antiquity. Through her combination of material and classical form, Anderson's sculptures lay claim to a lineage of women of dignity and power – women depicted in stone in temples and churches for millennia.

There is a religious undercurrent to much of Anderson's work. She was raised in an Irish Catholic home and educated by the Sisters of the Holy Names. In addition to drawing from ancient mythology, her art addresses the human figure from within the rich tradition of Roman Catholicism. The woman depicted in *Of Compassion* sits palms open in a posture that suggests prayer. In *Redemption* a gold-leafed rectangle is carved out above the heart like a window to the soul.

Catholicism has engendered a long history of art in which the body is portrayed as a medium for spiritual transcendence. It is not an art for the squeamish or prudish. In an effort to understand the sacrifice and divinity of Christ, the believer may choose to imitate and meditate upon that pain through a combination of prayer, fasting, and self-inflicted suffering. In the twentieth century, the predominantly Protestant American public has had a great deal of difficulty dealing with contemporary art by Catholic artists, including Andres Serrano or even Robert Mapplethorpe. Their work, it has been argued, grows from a Catholic acceptance of the body and its functions in relation to religious experience.<sup>3</sup> During the Baroque period paintings and sculptures depicting religious ecstasy were common. In many of these images the boundary between spiritual and sexual fulfillment is blurred. Bernini's mid-seventeenth century sculpture of the *Vision of the Ecstasy of St. Theresa* is a good example of an artwork in which the saint is portrayed in a pose suggesting not only spiritual but also sexual release. Many of Anderson's works, including *Fire*, *El Fuego*, and *A Matter of Degrees*, suggest a similar convergence of physical and spiritual passion.

In several recent sculptures, including *Lavabo* and *Within the Night Sky*, the torso has multiple breasts. In classical mythology the goddess Artemis, twin sister of Apollo, is primarily associated with the hunt, chastity, and the protection of children. However at Ephesus, the location of one of her most important temples, she was depicted with six pendulous breasts and



*Of Compassion*, 1994-1998  
Bardiglio Marble  
52"x19"x25"



worshiped as an orgiastic goddess.<sup>4</sup> Anderson's sculptures often suggest this combination of feminine power and sexuality. In this century, multiple-breasted figures also suggest the cancerous – the mutating body. In our times, the breast as symbol of nurture and desire coexists with the breast as a symbol of our vulnerability to the toxins that surround us.

Although most of Anderson's sculptures refer to the female form, several new works clearly depict the male body. *The Vital Nature of Man* is a more than seven-foot-tall figure with multiple tube-like forms protruding from his head and chest. Humorously, or perhaps out of deference to American discomfort with depictions of male frontal nudity, none protrudes from that most vital of areas – the groin.

*Lavabo*, 1997  
Moroccan marble  
14"x16"x14"  
Collection of the Artist







*Many Voices*, 1996  
Moroccan marble  
20"x15"x7"  
Collection of the Artist

At the same time, many of M.J. Anderson's sculptures are androgynous anatomical inventions. They present the torso, or the internal workings of the body – pulse chambers (a term Anderson uses to refer to the four chambers of the heart), vessels and tubes. Both male and female bodies are full of tubular forms – e.g., aorta, vena cava, trachea, bronchia, nerves, and intestines. Anderson's anatomical inventions present interlocking, interdependent forms that conspire to house the intellect, the passions, and the soul, and sometimes more than one soul. The tangle of male and female forms in *Many Voices* suggests that men and women are, for better or worse, inseparable.

Anderson's most recent works include several small abstract sculptures



*Conjecture*, 2001, Statuario marble, 9"x11"x7" Collection of the Artist

that retain references to the body. All are carved from Carrara marble. Together they sum up many of her concerns. Some present anatomy humorously – *Polymorph* appears to be an abstraction of a phallus at rest. *Conjecture* with its mix of limbs and openings, continues her interest in human sexuality. *Pathway*, a vertical piece with four pulse chambers one on top of the next, seems to be both a metaphor for the path of blood as it nourishes the body, and perhaps the upward longings of the spirit. Finally, *Prayer Flag* with its combination of torso-like stacked pulse chambers and a wing-like flag reminds one of the earlier sculpture *Sacro Felice*. The body in this latest work is no longer represented by a depiction of the female form, but instead by Anderson's pulsating vertical abstraction for the heart. The sculpture is an elegant metaphor for the relationship between desire and hope.

#### FOOTNOTES:

<sup>1</sup> Conversation with the artist, February 2001

<sup>2</sup> Conversation with the artist, January 2001

<sup>3</sup> Eleanor Heartney, "A Catholic Controversy?", *Art in America*, December 1999, pp. 39-40

<sup>4</sup> Mike Dixon-Kennedy, *Encyclopedia of Greco-Roman Mythology*, ABC-CLIO, Inc., Santa Barbara, California, 1998, pp. 47-49

*The Vital Nature of Man*, 1999  
Bardiglio nuvolato marble  
88"x34"x24"  
Collection of the Artist



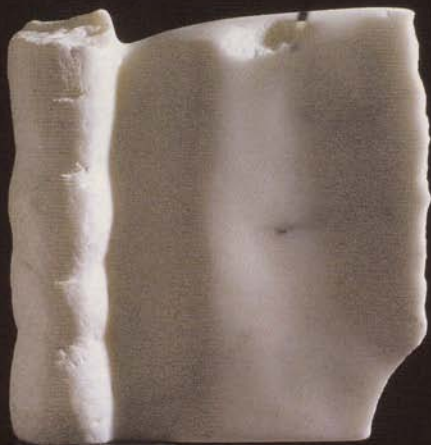






►  
*Redemption*, 2000  
 Carrara marble and gold leaf  
 27"x12"x9"  
 Collection of the Artist

◄  
*A Matter of Degrees*, 2000  
 Moroccan marble  
 20"x12"x10"  
 Collection of the Artist



◄  
*Prayer Flag*, 2001  
 Statuario Marble  
 13"x13"x4"  
 Collection of the Artist