Truth, wisdom & power| Figurative woodcarvings

Roger V. Wing
The University of Montana

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd
Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Recommended Citation
Wing, Roger V., "Truth, wisdom & power| Figurative woodcarvings" (2000). Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers. 3956.
https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd/3956
Permission is granted by the author to reproduce this material in its entirety, provided that this material is used for scholarly purposes and is properly cited in published works and reports.

**Please check "Yes" or "No" and provide signature**

Yes, I grant permission  
No, I do not grant permission

Author's Signature: [Signature]  
Date: 12/20/2000

Any copying for commercial purposes or financial gain may be undertaken only with the author's explicit consent.
Truth, Wisdom & Power
Figurative Woodcarvings

by
Roger V. Wing

B.F.A. The University of California, Santa Cruz, 1990

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

The University of Montana

2000
In loving memory of my mother

Ingrid McCowen Wing

December 26, 1941
~
October 17, 1999
Table of Contents

Illustrations iii

I. Introduction 1

II. Historical Background 3
   Shinzo 3
   Enku and Natabori 6
   The "Primitive" Influence 8
   Western Influences 9
   Boldness and Originality 10

III. Material and Technical Concerns 13
   Wood 13
   Direct Carving 14
   Exploration 16
   Power Tools 28

IV. Body 21
   The Glorification of God 21
   Interconnectedness 22
   Figurative Sculpture 24
   Body Knowledge 25
   Paradox 28
   My Interpretation of Shinto 29
   Spirituality 30
   Sculpting as Shamanism 31

V. Conclusion 33

Select Bibliography 35
Illustrations


9. *Seated Figure*. Bronze by Alberto Giacometti, twentieth century.


It is a mistake for a sculptor to speak or write very often about his job.
It releases tension needed for his work.
— Henry Moore on Sculpture

1. Introduction

My woodcarvings are intended to remind the living of the Unseen, the spirit-world beyond ordinary perception. The Unseen is the source of inspiration for my thesis exhibition *Truth, Wisdom & Power*. My aesthetic and technical approach is similar to that of *shinzo*, the carvings housed in Japanese Shinto shrines. Shinto sensitivities echo and give voice to my own appreciation for wood, natural phenomena, and the Unseen. Animist worship of ancestral spirits through woodcarvings is a powerful aspect of many past and disappearing cultures. In modern Japan, the ancient proclivity to revere nature spirits and the dead survives alongside modern “world” religions. *Shinzo* represent native spirits, *kami*, in a particularly Japanese way with simplicity, insight, and relaxed joy. My work is informed by Shinto aesthetics as well as by other Japanese traditions. The direct rendering of my works, made visible by the chiseled surfaces, reflects the spirit of Japanese Zen. Like the itinerant Japanese carver-priest of the fifteenth century, Enku, I wish to express a range of complex attitudes through swift and decisive chisel marks. Japanese cultural traditions, particularly the rustic variations, have had a major influence on the development of my art.

My technical and aesthetic sensitivities parallel *shinzo* in the following ways:

- The use of wood, largely unadorned and carved from a single block
- The compactness of the figure, conforming to the growth of the tree
- The direct and simple abbreviation of detail
• The subtle inflection of gesture
• The use of woodcarving as a spiritual intermediary

Each of these elements enhances my ultimate aim and the purpose of my art, which I have reluctantly come to call, "The glorification of God."

Through carving, I reanimate once living material. The natural character of the wood adds dimension to a representation of the human figure. I use the trunks of trees to approximate human trunks. The intended result is a hybrid of the living and the dead. Distorted scale, rough handling of unpainted wood, and the simplification of forms contradict purely naturalistic representation. The process of carving reflects the spirit of the works. Chiseled surfaces visually suggest the repetitive, rhythmic, meditative act of chipping away, little by little.

Figurative woodcarving is an ideal intermediary between the living and the spirit-world. Carving articulates patience, effort, and attention. Human imagery creates a foundation with universal resonance. Wood evokes growth, health, and stability. Figurative woodcarving embodies my appreciation and understanding of the spirit-world beyond ordinary perception, the Unseen.
2. Historical Background

The most significant influence on this body of work are *shinzo*, the Shinto carvings of Japan, although a number of other influences have contributed to my current approach to carving. My deep interest in sculpture began at an early age. I viewed Michelangelo’s *Slaves* at the Louvre when I was eight. Later, I studied Greek figure carving, particularly of the Periclean Age, and made two study trips to Greece. When I saw Michelangelo’s ability to express spiritual understanding, and the Greek representation of gods and mythical creatures in stone, I realized the potential of sculpture to portray unseen forces using familiar imagery. Since my youth I have been an avid student of sculpture from every age and culture. From a broad field of influences, the folk carving traditions of rural Japan have become the focus of my research.

*Shinzo*

My studies of *shinzo*, the Shinto carvings of Japan, have informed and helped to refine my approach to carving. Less than 200 years after the introduction of Buddhism, Japanese carvers started to give native Shinto deities physical form as woodcarvings. Stylistic developments of *shinzo* followed the trends of Buddhist statuary and flourished in the Heian (794 – 1185 C.E.) and Kamakura Periods (1185 – 1333 C.E.). “Shinzo reveal the unspoken powers that have enabled Shinto to remain a vital force in Japan for well over a millennium” (Kanda, p. 91).

Japanese mastery of wood is unsurpassed. Many diverse and erratic styles of carving exist that are unique to Japan. Despite numerous similarities between *shinzo* and
Buddhist carvings, introduced from the Asian mainland in the fourth century, specific differences in shinzo demonstrate native Japanese preferences. Typically, Shinto carvings are simpler than their Buddhist counterparts. This lends them an air of humility and austerity. Shinzo are not meant for display. Even priests charged with caring for them see them very rarely. Their intended function is to provide a temporary home for numinous spirits, known in Japan as kami. "Kami may denote any person, place or thing possessed of a numinous or transcendent quality. Kami were also perceived as formless expressions of higher powers underlying life itself" (Kanda, p. 7).

The discovery of these mysterious, little-known Shinto carvings was thrilling. They are not created to impress or instruct the living. They are made to appeal to kami, unseen spirits that normally inhabit specific natural phenomena such as waterfalls, volcanoes, and particularly tall trees. Kami, also perceived as ancestor spirits, are believed to influence the affairs of the living. If the carving does not appeal to them, then kami will not enter the shrine to receive prayers and offerings of the living, and the shrine will not function. Therefore the role of these statues is very important.

Shinto carvers, in their efforts to portray the Unseen, faced the same questions that concern me. How does one appeal to the highest ideals? What are the eternal truths, and what are the truths that allow for a state of perpetual change? The carvers of shinzo adopted two strategies to address the inherent difficulties of depicting the Unseen in a physical medium. First, the images were individual, personal, and highly original. The most skilled carvers made naturalistic portraits to represent kami (Figure 1). These differed greatly from the idealized representations of Buddhist imagery (Figure 2). Less skilled carvers, such as unskilled monks or laymen fulfilling vows, created very humble,
simple representations (Figure 3) that did not emulate the sophisticated techniques and styles of Buddhist carvings. The carvers of shinzo, by imbuing their works with specific, personal importance, ensured the favor of kami.

The fact that the statues were not displayed or regularly seen by anyone was the carvers' second strategy for depicting the Unseen. Because the shinzo's appearance is unknown, each worshipper is at liberty to imagine the appearance of the kami they entreat. The image thereby remains in flux, different for each successive worshipper and able to satisfy his or her individual spiritual needs.

Like shinzo, my carvings are created as an act of personal significance and devotion, and to benefit the welfare of the entire community. This simultaneously self-absorbed and altruistic arrangement seems ideally suited for creation. A successful carving is one that attracts beneficial kami while also involving introspection, attention, humility, and imagination.
Enku and Natabori

Enku, an itinerant Japanese carver-priest of the fifteenth century is a related influence. By leaving the rough-hewn figure of the wood and carving only the essential features, he created some of the most astonishing and uniquely Japanese woodcarvings (Figure 4). Enku's enduring legacy is in the thousands of wooden images, carved in his own manner, depicting the myriad manifestations of the Buddha. He also carved historical figures and anthropomorphic animals. His carvings are still housed in temples, shrines, and family altars throughout much of Japan (Dozenko, p. 26).

Enku vowed to carve 100,000 wooden Buddhas. By all accounts he succeeded. The incredible proliferation of his carvings exemplifies the paradox of being obsessively self-involved, yet ultimately serving others. Enku's style is incredibly swift and facile, even crude. The great number of carvings by Enku, perhaps more than by anyone who has ever carved, represents universal values in a style that is strikingly individual.
Enku’s style is related to *natabori*, the so-called “hatchet-carved” sculptures. Although *natabori* are not literally carved with hatchets, they are far less refined than most traditional Buddhist carvings. The bare surface and patterning of the tool marks, however, produces a very appealing effect (Figure 5). *Natabori* are found in temples in out-of-the-way communities with modest economic means. Because of their rough appearance, it has been speculated that these sculptures were unfinished. Perhaps the direct approach appealed to the tastes of rural monastic communities and stood in stark, intentional contrast to the decadent carvings of the capital (Wing, p. 4).

Like Enku and the carvers of *natabori*, I carve in a direct fashion that does not cherish polished and refined surfaces. The marks left by the gouges enhance the carvings, while the natural character of the wood conveys the spirit of the tree (Figures 6 & 7).
The “Primitive” Influence

In Baule culture of West Africa, woodcarvings act as tangible intermediaries to the parallel dream universe. To improve his or her waking world, a Baule may commission a small wooden carving of his or her dream world partner and make offerings to it. The carved statue, usually a contemporary representation of a sexually desirable member of the opposite gender (Figure 8), becomes a rival for the affection given to one’s spouse (Ravenhill, p. 2).

By appeasing one’s dream world partner through offerings and attention matters go more smoothly in the waking world. This is an example of the use of art as a personal agent of change.

The influence of African sculpture opened to Picasso and to other twentieth century European artists the freedom to pursue new, more personal forms of expression (Duchamp, p. 138). This search for more direct and personal means of expression has liberated Western Art. The role of the artist, like that of the shaman or spiritual medium,
is to question collective beliefs. At present there is no general consensus or leading authority dictating our beliefs. Science, championed as the vanguard of all knowledge, has limitations. The formerly dismissed concepts of angels, aliens, and past lives are once again gaining credence and acceptability. "We have a society which is fragmented, authority which resides in no particular place, and our function as artists is what we make it by our individual efforts" (Moore, p. 88). As in traditional cultures, modern-day artists are once again shamanistic and concerned with ritual.

Western Influences

The influence of Japanese carvings accounts for many of my aesthetic and technical choices. The cultural context of my work naturally comes from other sources, closer to my own heritage. The works of many influential, contemporary Western artists present a preoccupation with the Unseen, the parallel dimension of ancestors, which is not unlike primitive mysticism.

The Irish writer, Samuel Beckett, is the Western artist most influential to my understanding of the Unseen. Uncertainty, doubt, and failure permeate his writing. He did not adhere to religious, philosophical, or social doctrines, nor did he follow literary fashion. Beckett did not seek favor from his contemporaries; rather he sought personal and universal truths that stand beyond transient cultural trends. He recorded a sparse existence, nearly devoid of hope or redemption. Beckett's Noble Prize-winning play, Waiting for Godot, portrays two characters endlessly waiting. They wait for so long that they forget why they are waiting. Life has become meaningless for them, and yet there remains a mysterious, overruling imperative that they must continue. In his masterful
trilogy, *Molloy, Malone Dies*, and *The Unnameable*, Beckett devoted lengthy, meaningless, unbroken, and nearly unendurable passages to the mysteries of the Unseen. His works reduce human existence to the barest threads of human perception and effort, yet something important, something irrefutable remains. It is this intangible “something” that is so intriguing and so critical. Yet to approach it one must refer to it tangentially, obliquely. Beckett mysteriously stated, “To restore silence is the role of objects.”

The Swiss sculptor Alberto Giacometti, a contemporary and friend of Beckett, was also obsessed with the notion of reducing reality to its bare essentials. He spent years seeking the means to express non-physical aspects through the physical medium of sculpture. Towards this end, he exerted a philosophy similar to the Zen Buddhist precept that less is more. “The more I take away, the bigger it gets,” Giacometti said (Sylvester, p. 59). Giacometti carved many of his early works out of existence, reducing them to such a state that they eventually crumbled – there was nothing left of them. Later, he created spindly bronzes that portrayed the physical world as a fleeting reality while suggesting a more permanent world beyond (Figure 9).

By reducing and denying the physical attributes of transient reality, Beckett and Giacometti affirm what is not, the Unseen. Like the sparse works of these men, I do not depict lavish portraits. My carvings avoid narrative allusions, specific context, and detailed rendering. By making my works personal without making their meaning explicit, they take on a universal aspect.
Boldness and Originality

Another characteristic exemplified by both historical and contemporary influences is capricious daring. Eugene Delacroix stated in his journals that daring is necessary for there to be beauty. “One needs great boldness if one is to dare to be oneself....The greatest boldness is to step outside of convention and of habit” (Delacroix, p. 651). The term that best epitomizes the spirit, menfoutisme in French and menefregismo in Italian, roughly translates as “fuck-all.” Reckless abandon is a feature of the most stirring contemporary art.

Spending time in the studio of a sculptor who evokes this characteristic was a great influence and inspiration. The spirit of Manuel Neri at work in his Carrara studio (Figure 10) is wildly enthusiastic (literally, “to have the gods within”). Contradiction and paradox are apparent in Neri’s work. When he seems to care the most, his approach to the work appears chaotic. He achieves passages of the greatest subtlety with smashing blows of the tool he affectionately calls his “ass-kicker.” Neri’s figures often appear scarred and maimed, yet they resonate the utmost poise and dignity. Only a person that is open to such paradox can achieve grace.

Neri awakened me to the power and majesty of ruins. Together we visited a superb exhibit of ancient Egyptian carvings. He was visibly moved by sculptures whose missing heads and limbs spoke of ages of decay. Pieces that were still fully intact held little appeal for him. He was more interested in the record of chance catastrophes, the noble
fragments that survived untold geological punishments. It is ironic that these sculptures, which have suffered extensive damage, seem deathless. I find this also to be true of old and decaying shinzo (Figure 11).

Another appreciation I gained while I was with Neri was for what he calls “dumb” art. He uses the term to describe the unpretentious quality of unschooled, non-narrative works. Their unassuming quality suggests that the sculpture’s stories have yet to be told; they come to life in the viewer’s imagination. This mute quality is apparent in the most humble shinzo (Figure 12).

The carvings in my exhibition reflect what I learned during my time with Neri. The strength and determination needed to create with originality, the majesty of ruins, and the nature of paradox are all present in my thesis work.

A carving such as *Conscientious Objector* (Figure 13) embodies these attributes. The carving appears to be split by an unfortunate accident. Even though I did not know the meaning of this piece until it was completed, I persisted, confident that what I produced would be original.
3. Material & Technical Concerns

Wood

Wood is a warm, familiar medium that invites touch. In many ways it is similar to human flesh. The annual rings of wood grain are a reminder that the growth of a tree is similar to the growth of a human. Knots, embedded foreign objects, growth irregularities, rot, and disease signify the many ways that trees, like humans, are susceptible to environmental factors. Even after completion, a woodcarving continues to change. Variations in climate cause shrinking and swelling that crack and warp the piece. Flaws accentuate the changing, growing, flesh-like nature of wood. For these reasons, wood is the natural choice for carving large human figures.

The unique quality of the medium creates many challenges for the sculptor. Unforeseen irregularities frequently force alterations in design. The interaction between the artist and the medium ensures that each piece is truly original. Because of the time and effort it requires, woodcarving is not practical or cost effective. Presently in the U.S., this primarily relegates the medium to hobbyists working within restricted genres. However, as a vehicle for contemporary artistic expression, wood has limitless potential.

There are a myriad of new possibilities for surface treatments and sculptural effects in wood. Each new type of wood suggests different possibilities. The availability of many woods, such as those with unique coloration or especially desirable grain, is usually limited to milled boards. I enjoy working with large, cheap, locally available softwoods such as pine, spruce, and fir that allow me to work on a large scale. The softwoods are well suited for producing repetitive patterns of broad tool marks.
The large scale of my recent works has allowed me to explore more fully the expressive range of different surfaces (Figure 14). I collect and forge tools of my own design to achieve new effects. I especially favor the scooped, wave-like pattern created by multiple passes of a large gouge (Figure 15). Heavy, flat chisels allow me to create smooth curves and crisp planes. A variety of smaller tools completes the range of effects. Many of my aesthetic aims are summed up in the variation of these marks (see Thesis Body). The overall contrast of large and small, smooth and gouged, and rough and finished marks enables me to direct the viewer’s attention and to create movement, tension, and emphasis.

Direct Carving

Direct carving, the process of discovering the sculpture within the raw block of wood, has a quality of honesty. It is more challenging than the mechanical reproduction of a scale model. Spontaneity and discovery are important elements of direct carving.
While I am working the final concept is intentionally unresolved. From the inspiration of the original block of wood, I make a series of sketches and a rough clay model. The model helps me to establish scale and proportions in the uncarved wood. This allows me to work quickly and decisively with a chainsaw, using the minimum number of cuts. Because I am not merely reproducing a model, I am actively engaged with the sculpture at every stage. Doubt and the uncertainty of the process force me to slow down and take time to ruminate on the content of the piece. The ideas come while carving, taking on a life of their own. The carvings change and respond to the moods and experiences of each day. Due to the indefinite, exploratory nature of this approach, I often lose my way. However, getting lost from time to time helps me to appreciate when I have found my way.

Because material cannot be put back, direct carving does not allow for radical revision. The clean tool marks, which leave a finished surface at every stage, become the vehicle for spontaneous expression. The marks of the chisel clearly express the sculptor’s process. In this medium it is not easy to hide mistakes or lapses of attention. Dull tools and inattentive strokes only bruise and splinter the wood. The integrity of both the material and the artist are revealed. Because each action is apparent and irrevocable, it must be decisive. To execute even one piece by direct carving involves tremendous commitment, patience, and physical effort. The sense of reward, however, is commensurate with the difficulty.
Exploration

I have explored various techniques and materials to better realize my aims as a woodcarver. At the beginning of my graduate studies I modeled a fully clothed, half life-size figure in plaster. Working in plaster reaffirmed my preference for wood and taught me some valuable lessons. This articulated figure, impractical as a woodcarving, confirmed that compact forms are best suited to wood. Sculpting in plaster gave me the opportunity to rework the surface and to explore various effects. It gave me greater confidence and helped me to understanding how I wanted to portray both the clothing and the expression of the figure. Leaving a degree of unresolved ambiguity, rather than refining every detail, allows each viewer’s imagination to engage with the piece more actively and fill in the blanks. The freedom to take risks in plaster enriched my woodcarvings.

Recently, I explored and exhibited a number of conceptual works in wood: a log, split in half and hinged like a book; a tree limb riddled with holes, to portray the process of disease; and two uncarved trunks, to imply untapped potential. These works elicited an excited response from some viewers but I feel that they diverged from my core interests. These pieces accelerated my learning and reconffirmed my commitment to figurative carving.

I also experimented with fragments of the figure. Working with fragments suddenly allowed me to work at a larger scale. I conceived a series of life-sized limbs – tree limbs becoming human limbs. The carvings Blessing, Reach, Pedagogy, and F*** ALL, Bird in Space (Figures 16, 17, 18 & 19) explored the expressive range of hands.
Despite efforts to lightly dismiss it, the latter sculpture received the most attention. Critics of the piece tried to pass it off as clichéd and trite. However, the same critics could not ignore it long enough to comment on other works. My explanation of how the sculpture represented my anger towards my mother’s cancer inspired a story in the school paper. A note from Scott Bardsley, one day before he was killed, further compounded the sculpture’s impact. It read, “Keep the finger. It’s more about art than anything. The more people tell you they know about art, the more you know they don’t.”

*Bird in Space* taught me much about the public reception of controversial art, primarily that neither public opinion nor scholarly criticism can be fully entrusted to declare what is art and what is not. The ultimate authority is the artist.

Although the human limb pieces were generally well received, each one felt strangely maimed or amputated, although this effect was somewhat mitigated by the wholeness of the uncarved portions. In the end, this experience stoked my desire to carve whole figures, life-size and larger.
I strongly considered the use of joined blocks to form a large figure. A highly evolved form of this technique is prevalent in Japanese woodcarving. The approach would have enabled me to work on a less restricted scale and with articulated forms, like that of my plaster study. This liberating possibility led me to research the methods used by traditional Japanese carvers. The Japanese carvers took generations to evolve the technique and to achieve the mastery of it. Although the technical challenge and fascinating process intrigue me, I prefer the more immediate, individualistic style of single-block carvings. Instead of joining multiple pieces to create larger figures, I find suitably large pieces of wood. Because the creation of a joined-block figure requires elaborate planning and design, the single-block approach allows greater expressive freedom and spontaneity.

Power Tools

Gas, electric, and pneumatic power tools are used sparingly in my approach. A chainsaw, disk sander, and pneumatic chisel expedite the later stage of carving by hand. Chainsaws are used to reduce large masses in two ways. Two or more connecting cuts remove the largest pieces (Figure 20). For more specific quick removal, parallel kerfs are made (Figure 21). A chisel and mallet or splitting wedge and maul effectively split off chunks that have been cut perpendicular to the grain of the wood. The longitudinal split that results from this method beautifully articulates the wood's growth characteristics. A disk sander creates a smooth and flat bottom, ensuring the visual and physical stability of the sculptures. A pneumatic hammer drives special gouges, both for quick removal and for cutting across stubborn knots and tricky end-grain.
The mark left by the air tools is nearly indistinguishable from hand tools. The piece *Good Grief* was carved entirely with the air hammer and a single, wide gouge. This aggressive approach conveyed the agony I experienced as my mother neared her death. The quickness of the method allowed me to convey very intense emotions with immediacy (Figure 22). Because power tools are noisy, dependent on an external power supply, and may cause nerve damage, I prefer hand tools.
The simple efficiency of hand tools make long hours of labor a joy. Well-designed hand tools, particularly those that are not mass-produced, in most circumstances are as efficient as power tools. A chainsaw or grinder can remove material very quickly but cannot convey the subtle, direct inflections of handwork. The correct use of well-sharpened hand tools quickly removes waste material and leaves a desirable finish. The need for numerous intermediate stages of sanding is eliminated. The surface of a sharp cut is not porous like a sanded surface. Water penetrates into abraded surfaces but beads and runs off of cleanly cut surfaces. Rather than requiring protective sealants, such carved surfaces merely need an occasional dusting.

Aside from the many practical arguments for hand-tools, I also prefer the work environment of chopping sounds and easily swept chips to the noise and ubiquitous dust made by machines. Hand-tools have an important ritual aspect, as well. I carve figures to give a human aspect to unseen forces. Human-powered carving is more in tune with the eternal aspects of the materials and my efforts to shape them.
IV. Thesis Body

The Glorification of God

I was reluctant to use religious terminology when referring to my art until a wise old man named Hal asked, “What do you think is the purpose of art?” Realizing the gravity of the question and wanting to please the honorable patriarch, I chose my words and drew a deep breath. Before I had uttered a syllable, he beat me to the punch, blurting out: “The glorification of God, right?” His words left me dumbstruck. I had never heard Hal speak of God and had not considered him a particularly religious man. What possible rebuttal could I make?

The response is complete in its simplicity. Further definitions and theories only confuse the matter. What else can we call the supreme, mysterious, life-giving energy of the universe if not “God”? To dedicate one’s actions as an artist to anything less would seem superficial. My reluctance to accept the term, God, stemmed from my experience that anyone who claimed to speak with authority about God seemed false. Words that acknowledge paradox and the problematic nature of concrete definitions seemed more true:

*Existence is beyond the power of words
To define:
Terms may be used
But are none of them absolute.*

— Lao Tzu, The Way of Life
God, the Truth, the Way, the Unseen, or any name one chooses, is elusive and veiled.

Since my conversation with Hal, I accept his simple, rhetorical question, "The glorification of God, right?" as the purpose of art. Rather than wrestle with fundamental questions that have no simple answer, I devote my time and energy towards creation.

**Interconnectedness**

My woodcarvings are a reminder of and a celebration of the Unseen, the world beyond ordinary perception. They are meant to transport us beyond ourselves so that we may see ourselves anew. We owe our present identities to choices we have already made and to the actions of our predecessors. Through experience, age, and the coming of new generations we give birth to new beings, shaped by our present choices. My carvings represent entities that have either passed on or that have yet to come into being. I seek to acknowledge the interconnectedness of what is and what is not.

By revealing hidden spirits through carved faces and bodies they become familiar
and approachable. Rather than invoking specific figures, the carvings portray general
types: an imposing man (Figure 24), a graceful woman (Figure 25), and a matron (Figure
26). They represent imagined figures from my past and my future. However, because
they are not specifically defined, the figures can evoke something new for each viewer.

I work with wood because of its natural character. I carve wood that has been
disabled, overlooked, or that has little value as lumber. Taoist sensibilities, pre-
Buddhist beliefs related to Shinto, value the useless.

_The cinnamon can be eaten and so it gets cut down; the lacquer tree can
be used and so it gets hacked apart. All men know the use of the useful, but
nobody knows the use of the useless!_

– Chang Tzu, Basic Writings

Flaws such as splits, insect damage, and rot that make the wood unsuitable for other uses
add character and a sense of history to my sculptures.

Knowing the source of my materials, where each tree grew and why it was cut
down, gives me insight into the spirit of the material. For similar reasons, Shinto shrines
are built with elaborate rites. Wood is selected from sacred, protected groves and each
stage of construction is presided over by priests. Similarly, I often carve wood from trees
that have grown in special places or that have been salvaged from sources associated with
my life. The wood for *Manifesting Power: Hal* and *Manifesting Power: Martha* came
from a spruce tree that blew down earlier this year in front of the Gallery of Visual Arts.
These two carvings represent for me well-educated, curious minds. It is fitting that the
tree from which they were sculpted grew in the center of a university campus. Works
such as these, mindful of the tree’s origins, are potent in subtle ways. They more fully
embody interconnectedness and thereby serve as better receptacles for spirits.
Because I wish to portray interconnectedness, it is important that my figures are approachable. Human figures in natural, relaxed poses and contemporary dress allow for a direct connection between the sculptures and the viewers. I do not wish to alienate any portion of my audience. The intention of the works is to create an impression that is direct and natural, rather than abstract, convoluted, or contrived. The carvings need only evoke spirit and liveliness.

**Figurative Sculpture**

Using the human figure as my subject suits my aims, but finding an approach to revitalize the traditional genre presents a formidable challenge. Modern aesthetics have radicalized the sculpted figure, but much still remains to be discovered. My early impressions and interest in sculpture stem from figurative works. The human figure for me is the richest, most engaging, and compelling subject. Figurative sculpture remains a provocative subject that demands attention.

Unlike many conceptual art forms, figurative art is not exclusionary. Because any person, young or old, can recognize human imagery, figurative sculpture will always have popular appeal. Its symbolic power is apparent in Mt. Rushmore and the Statue of Liberty. The limitations of literal interpretation, however, have turned many thoughtful artists away from the figure. To bring integrity and originality to figurative art remains a challenge.

The three contemporary sculptors, Louise Bourgeois, William Tucker, and Manuel Neri, demonstrate the vast range of figurative sculpture that has emerged in the
late twentieth century (Figures 27, 28, and 29). Their works challenge the conception of figurative sculpture and remind viewers that the genre is anything but exhausted.

I am devoted to the future of figurative art. The ways in which we collectively perceive the human body provide ample territory for exploration. Western figurative art has primarily depicted the transitory nature of the body. My works seek to display the body as a vehicle for transformation and growth, and as a means of expressing eternal human faith.

**Body Knowledge**

I use the term “Body Knowledge” to refer to innate understanding and learning accumulated through physical experience. My sculptures portray bodies that hold a form of divinity within their physical form (Figure 30). It is difficult to conceptualize and articulate a state of awareness that is rooted in the physical body rather than in the mind.
When one pulls one's hand away from a hot stove to avoid burning a finger, the action is not preceded by a thought. One does some things without thinking first. In fact, the act of intellectualizing a physical response often interrupts or otherwise impairs the body's natural behavior. However, the predisposition of the conditioned mind is to distrust physical sensations and to favor the intellect. But the mind can only conceptualize and organize what the body has experienced. What I call body knowledge is an accessible and balanced physical understanding, unclouded by indecision or confusion.

The body is the foundation for any inward, philosophical, or metaphysical journey. Mystical practices around the world have important physical components. The whirling of dervishes, the seated meditation of Zen practitioners, and the Sun Dance of the Sioux are all examples of traditions that approach mystical understanding through the body. My figures embody the perception of God.

Another aspect of body knowledge describes how we understand sculpture. Much of the viewer's response to a piece of sculpture is at the gut-level. The eyes see the form, but the body reacts to its scale, volume, and weight. Large sculptures, such as _Perceiving Truth_ and _Embodying Wisdom_, cannot be seen from a single vantage point, thus they compel the viewer to move around them. Seeing a work from many angles allows the viewer to conceive the total form more fully (Figure 31). Smaller sculptures are raised on pedestals to meet the viewer at eye level. In this way, even small works take
on a human scale and presence. Often the eyes alone do not satisfy curiosity. One’s
body remembers the physical and tactile sensations that accompany viewing a
sculpture. To touch it or feel its presence filling a room is a more real and affirming
aesthetic experience than the mere visual comprehension of a sculpture.

The discipline of yoga compliments different aspects of body knowledge.
Increased understanding of anatomy, posture, and gesture that accompanies the practice
of yoga is of inestimable worth to a figurative carver. Awareness of the body facilitates
the visualization of a pose. Instead of observing a model as a separate, discreet entity, I
imagine myself in the pose. Feeling the pose from within enables me to convey the
carving’s intention with greater insight.

Yoga increases flexibility, stamina, and promotes general health, all of which are
needed for carving. The physical component, however, is only the foundation for yoga’s
primary goal, the cultivation of deeper awareness. As the yoga practitioner becomes
more familiar with their body and more trusting of its abilities, he or she also becomes
more accepting and understanding in more general ways. Limitations, physical and
mental, are stretched until they no longer form a hindrance. To surpass known
capabilities, both the yoga practitioner and the carver must humbly accept limitations.
Neither practice can be mastered in a short time. Only patient effort and gradual
improvement can approach the aim of greater awareness.
Paradox

Through the works in my exhibition that are displayed, I have tried to suggest the paradoxical quality of the divine. The sculpture *Good Grief* is an example of this. Although the pain of witnessing my mother approaching her death was a tortuous ordeal, it also affirmed my bond with her and the values that her life embodied. The pain was terrible, but something pure and redeeming came from it. Henry Moore states, “It is these oppositions and contrasts in one’s nature that make a whole personality” (Moore, p. 105).

Carving is both an arduous and a joyous activity. It is slow and methodical yet it can be infused with spontaneous energy. Contrasting the human attributes carved in the round with shallow relief to accent the nature of the wood evokes a sense of human liveliness without disregarding the spirit of the material (Figure 32). Different tool marks on the surfaces of the carvings contrast the refined and the coarse. Folk art, which is made for personal reasons, stands in contrast to high art, which attempts to embody or challenge the ideals of a culture. My carvings, however, exhibit elements of both. Art that seeks to bridge the personal and the universal, the apparent and the Unseen, must exhibit contradictions.
My Interpretation of Shinto

Shinto, an ancient form of ancestor worship, predates Buddhism in Japan. Shinto practitioners recognize that because the ancestors and those not yet born influence our world, a healthy appreciation for them is necessary for the maintenance of a meaningful and sustainable society. Like Shinto practices that entreat the kami to visit local shrines to receive offerings from the living, I have carved my sculptures to serve as temporary receptacles for unseen spirits. Although I am not a Japanese Shintoist, I too believe that tall trees must be the preferred residence of ancestral spirits. In order to summon them away from such a home, one must create an equally desirable abode. I concealed one carving behind a partition to create a private space where kami could enter undisturbed by the gallery visitors (Figure 33).

The hidden carving was my offering to the Unseen. It is not necessary that the living see it. Visitors were invited to visualize a carving of their own that represented a kami, personal spirit, or guardian angel. I presented an open place, free of religious trappings and preconceptions for visitors to worship in whatever manner suited them in that moment.
Spirituality

The *Tao Te Ching*, also called the Way of Life, evokes the truth by metaphor and thoughtful analogy but never states it explicitly. The clear and unassailable testament of Lao Tsu’s philosophy still holds tremendous appeal. Because I initially assumed that this understated quality was particularly Eastern, I began to research other Eastern esoteric texts. I later discovered that all mystical traditions are necessarily abstruse. They employ subterfuge because claims of authority invite challenge. What counts the most is always elusive and well hidden.

The more we learn, the more we realize how little we understand. Science, which has so convincingly proven its capabilities, is unable to provide all the answers. The behaviors of sub-atomic particles are ruled by chaos. As the son of a scientist and member of a technological society, I used to be confounded by the uncertainty of basic physical phenomena. The more I tried to fathom the questions of existence, the more my cultural expectations are at odds with my perceptions. Through sculpting I have learned to be more accepting of uncertainty, and even to welcome its surprises.

Spiritual wisdom is revealed to individuals only in extraordinary circumstances. Super-consciousness can sometimes be glimpsed in a state of delirium caused by extreme illness, pain, or exhaustion. At a few extraordinary times in my life, glimpses of the world beyond normal cognition have been present in me. Each time a clear choice presented itself to me. Either I could deny the validity of those experiences and embrace the delusions that perpetuate the status quo, or I could make my life a patient, unrelenting pursuit of elusive spiritual knowledge. The latter carries with it the risk of alienation, persecution, and insanity. Many have looked the hard truth in the eye and become angry
discontents, suicidal alcoholics, and junkies. Yoga and carving are more suitable, less destructive vehicles that have allowed me to remain true to my heart’s desire: to plumb spiritual depths and to share my understanding with others.

Sculpting as Shamanism

I respect my studio as a sacred space. A subtle shift occurs when I enter the studio to carve. While I am working I become more focused and observe a different code of conduct. No formal training informs my attitude. It is a mindful combination of yogic posture, breathing, and a spirit that accepts mistakes and accidents. Because I am not merely performing a set of tasks towards a known goal, I must be flexible and open to uncertainty.

A good work session begins in a quiet, solitary setting, late in the day. To achieving a state of spontaneity in a repetitive process such as carving I must throw myself into the act with all of my enthusiasm. In order to complete an inspired carving, the state of openness and inspiration, once attained, must be sustained for a long duration. Distractions and worries break my concentration and frustrate my creativity. At other times, my carving is completely overrun by emotional tides and the labor becomes a dance.
As I work to become more aware of my body and its relationship with the divine, my carvings serve to mark my progress. The largest, most involved sculpture I have made to date, *Perceiving Truth*, depicts a specific moment of passage, from youth and innocence to the awakening of an unsettling reality. The carving *Embodying Wisdom* portrays one who has come to terms with this transformation and is more fully herself. The pair of figures, *Manifesting Power: Hal & Martha*, represents the fulfillment of lives well lived. The old couple can see, through their children and grandchildren, their actions and choices stretching well beyond the span of their lives. In this way they have achieved immortality, while they are still alive. They are *kami*.

Many obstacles prevent individuals from attaining this state. As a society we distrust our bodies. They betray us by being too weak, too fat, too ugly, or too unreliable. Fear of mortality produces a general state of denial. As I followed the course of society at large, I became more unbalanced, dependent on consumer goods, and dissatisfied. Eventually I began to realize that collective healing is not to be found in religion, science, or medicine. Through my art I seek a more balanced course and a more holistic view that combines the best aspects of religion, technology, and healing. My sculptures are the affirmation of the principles I have come to hold as sacred. They portray personal truth, wisdom, and power that transcend a specific cultural framework.
V. Conclusion

The opening reception of my thesis exhibition was an exhilarating culmination of my graduate studies. Outside of the gallery I hung paper ornaments, similar to those used in Shinto rituals and celebrations, from the branches of two large trees. I also tied pine and spruce branches, decorated with more paper ornaments, to the three columns inside the gallery. By emulating Shinto customs I hoped to entreat kami, which usually congregate at the tops of mountains, to descend through the trees and the supports of the building (Mitsukuni, p.17). Eventually the kami might choose to reside in the carvings to receive the appreciation of the living. Although the ritual function of this arrangement was not articulated to visitors, the ornaments helped to consecrate the setting.

Except for the raking spotlights that accentuated the tooled surfaces of the woodcarvings, the gallery was dark. When visitors entered, many were visibly moved. The mood was reverent and auspicious. At last my works were being shown in their proper light to people from all walks of life. Several of those gathered for the opening expressed to me the power of their emotional response to the exhibition. Because the notion of the Unseen is inherently difficult to express, I had worried that it would not be understood. Visitors’ comments and appreciation for the sculptures, however, assured me that the implied reference to the Unseen was well received.

On the last Sunday of the exhibition my faith community, the Quaker Missoula Friend’s Meeting, will meet in the gallery for worship. This was first suggested at the opening and received enthusiastic support when it was proposed to the congregation at the weekly meeting.
I cannot express clearly how far the response to my exhibition has surpassed my hopes and expectations. The exhibition transcends my personal aims. Fully immersing myself in a purely personal, solitary pursuit, and allowing an inner voice to guide me has accomplished something greater than I had envisioned. The gathering of my woodcarvings in a conducive setting has achieved a whole greater than the sum of its parts. The exhibition fulfills a function in the larger community. I cannot imagine an outcome that could more conclusively affirm the hidden spirit that has guided my efforts.
Select Bibliography


