

## Nadine Rennert interviewed by Rory MacLean, 2009

Where does an idea come from and how does an artist transform it into – say – Moby Dick or the Venus di Milo? The poet and critic Craig Raine once said, “The task of the artist at any time is uncompromisingly simple – to discover what has not yet been done, and to do it.” Ezra Pound was even more concise. “MAKE IT NEW,” he wrote in *The Cantos*.

Creation is no easy business. Alongside passion, honesty, daring and skill, all the artists I’ve met share a steely tenacity. Rent overdue? Critics slammed the latest exhibition? Partner wants to get married and have a dozen children? So what? The true artist must shut the studio door in their face and get on with work, even at the expense of failing as a caring human being. Which makes sculptor Nadine Rennert’s achievement even more exceptional. Not only has she created a body of stunningly original work but she has managed to remain an incredibly nice person in the process.

“My ideas come both from things I’ve seen, and from somewhere deep inside me,” she told me as we walked around her show at Berlin’s Georg Kolbe Museum. “A feeling or image comes into my mind, maybe at that time between sleeping and waking. I pull it back inside myself, as if to meditate on it, and try to observe what it does with me. If it moves me enough, if it is true, I start to draw it.”

The drawing is then given physical form, realised in silk or lace, polyester wool or even electric lights. It’s a process of change and discovery, reflective and demanding, her sculptures taking as long as three months to create.

Rennert paused in front of a dynamic construction of three linked naked bodies which echoes a traditional subject in Christian art. Each generation sits on its elder’s lap. Saint Anne’s hands reach deep into her daughter the Virgin Mary’s back, as Mary’s thrust far into Jesus.

“The starting point for my *Selbdritt* was Leonardo’s *Anna Selbdritt*,” Rennert told me. “I loved how he stapled together the three generations, bonding them in a single movement. I wanted to transform this idea into sculpture, to explore the influence of the past, showing how older generations continue to influence us. I also wanted to examine the mystical side of family relationships.”

On the gallery wall hung another version of her *Selbdritt*, intimately illustrating Rennert’s working method. In a photograph she – herself naked – sits in Mary’s place, Saint Anne’s hands plunging into her back as hers reach into the polyester wool figure of the Christ-child.

On the gallery wall hung another version of her *Selbdritt*, intimately illustrating Rennert’s working method. In a photograph she – herself naked – sits in Mary’s place, Saint Anne’s hands plunging into her back as hers reach into the polyester

wool figure of the Christ-child.

“I often use myself as a model,” she explained. “It’s easy. I’m available. But above all it’s important for me to go into the sculpture. I need to feel what’s happening from the inside. Only then can I stand back and work on the whole.”

“Figurative sculpture is in a dilemma today,” she went on. “New works often concentrate on the physical – muscles, bones, tendons – at the expense of inner, psychic aspects. My earlier work was abstract and it taught me the importance of the spirit of a work. So I learnt not to place stress on the anatomy alone. I explore the possibilities of bodies. I always start with the spirit of my subject.”

The photograph reminded me of Gérôme’s *Pygmalion and Galatea*, in which the artist depicted himself as a sculptor who carved and brought to life an idealised female statue. I told Rennert and she laughed, pointing out a small, referential postcard of the exact painting within the photograph.

“In their work male sculptors often aspire to create the perfect woman. It’s different for a woman artist. I see it more as a process, being regenerative rather than creating something perfect.”

We walked between a fallen skydiver shrouded in a parachute, a blind child mannequin imagining the future and a face caught in a fowler’s net. Rennert’s work seems to blur the inner and outer worlds, mixing the sinister with fairy tales and archetypal dream images. We stopped at *Escape on the Spot*, a powerful but cowering seven-legged female, covered by lace yet naked, invulnerable yet exposed.

“I reveal so much of myself in my work that sometimes I myself feel naked.” She gestured towards the agonised runner, damned and unable to flee. “This is a sculpture. Visitors walk around it, stare deep inside it, and I feel they are looking inside me.” Her determination to reveal herself has heightened her interest in identity and security. “In my work I’m interested in how we try to protect ourselves by constructing safe situations. But when we examine them, they’re often illusory. Our illusions collapse and we are naked again.”

Finally we reached *Inward Waiting*, a pair of ominous, black-cloaked beings, lying prone on the floor, miniature lights glowing at the tips of their gloved fingers. I imagined them to be beheaded monks, surrendered to devotion, touched by divine light. “I try to be open in my work, to encourage the viewer to bring his or her own story to the work, to activate it,” said Rennert. “For me these two are individuals, maybe human, maybe animal, as dark and mysterious as each other, reaching out with their fingertips – the most sensitive part of their bodies – to illuminate and show interest in the other.”

Schinkel wrote, “Kunst ist überhaupt nichts wenn sie nicht neu ist“ (‘Art is above all nothing unless it’s new’). *Inward Waiting* is haunting and – as are so many of her creations – unlike anything I have seen before, the juxtaposition of the submissive and the surreal creating a disturbing dynamism. I asked Rennert to explain the purpose of her work. “I like to discover things that until now have never existed,” she tells me, echoing the view of Craig Raine. “It’s fun but you have to trust yourself and that’s not easy. But I also see myself in the tradition of art. I like to place myself in a process. In showing my work, I am part of the process. I see it as a gift, a gift given to us all.”

*Rory MacLean February 2009*