

SCULPTURE REVIEW

A Publication of the NATIONAL SCULPTURE SOCIETY www.sculpturereview.com

*MOTION IN
SCULPTURE*



WINTER 11 Vol. LX No. 4



US \$6.95/Canada \$8.95/Euro 8.00

MOVEMENT IS THE VIBRATION BETWEEN THE FIGURE AND THE CONTEXT

BARBARA LEKBERG

From an interview with Patricia Delahanty

Inspiration for Barbara Lekberg's sculpture comes from a variety of sources: music, dance, news photography, literature, and science have all been important in the development of her work. Such influences are easily recognizable in her vibrant sculptures of dancers and her figures drawn from mythology, the Bible, and theater. The artist absorbs a multitude of impressions, from the most fleeting of thoughts to the impact of life events. Lekberg feels the creative process involves both conscious and unconscious work in organizing experience: "Something may affect you and months and even years can pass before it surfaces as an idea for sculpture. It may seem like a jolt of sudden inspiration, but a lot of work has already been done unconsciously. I think daydreaming, where the mind is relaxed and open and ideas float freely, can be an aid in accessing such ideas."

Her sculptures exist in a realm that crosses the conscious and the unconscious. "When I began, I felt close to German Expressionism and my work was strongly gestural, with emotionally impelled movement. Now I feel a kinship with the Surrealists—Duchamp, Max Ernst, de Chirico, Giacometti. Movement now is more internal; more about states of mind and being as figures relate to each other and the environment that surrounds them."





After receiving her M.A. from the University of Iowa in 1947, Lekberg moved to New York City. The late 1940s and early 1950s were a heady time for artists in the city, and Lekberg embraced that energy. She continued her studies at the Clay Club, which in 1950 changed its name to The Sculpture Center, and later to SculptureCenter, and was exhilarated by the artistic environment she found there. "It was a young sculptor's paradise where students and established artists worked side by side. It is sad that such a facility no longer exists. It is difficult for a young sculptor to afford the machinery, materials, and space necessary for making sculpture, particularly in New York. Also, after years of comradeship in school, it is hard to be suddenly on your own. The Sculpture Center provided a supportive environment where we were free to explore our ideas. When I arrived there, a new technique was coming into use: oxyacetylene welding. Sahl Swarz, who worked at the Sculpture Center with director Dorothy Denslow, taught us all to weld. For me it was if the heavens opened. The old struggle with plaster and coat hangers ended when I began to weld steel. Steel held its own when projected into space and seemed to do everything I needed. This is a primal joy in sculpture: that a mineral from the earth can be a vehicle for expressing one's innermost thoughts. Exhibitions of welded sculpture in the SculptureCenter gallery included artists like David Smith and the rest of us as we grew. Articles and reviews from the time were enthusiastic about the new technique and some found it particularly surprising that women could weld. The general roster of the gallery read like a 'Who's Who of American Sculpture' from Baizerman to Zorach."

(Continued on page 35)

Opposite page: Barbara Lekberg (1950s), welded work-in-progress. On this page, left: Woman in Purdah, bronze, 8 inches high; on this page, right: Orpheus, bronze (1984), 10 feet high.





On this page, clockwise from top left: Barbara Lekberg (1950s), welded work-in-progress; Reflection, bronze, 6-1/2 feet high; The Wheel (1968), welded steel; Causerie (1957), welded bronze.



Opposite page, from top to bottom: Pushing the Limits (1972), hammered and welded bronze, 52 inches diameter; Illumination, bronze, 23 inches high; The Wave, bronze, 18 inches high.

A RICH PERSONAL JOURNEY

by Gordon J. Alt

Barbara Lekberg's body of work displays an extensive tapestry of images extrapolated from a lifetime pursuit of the spiritual and the mythological. And, by exploring a variety of media throughout her career, she has used this intuition and skill to develop her unique subjects and themes.

In the late 1990s, when we interviewed her for *In Search of Motion: John Cavanaugh / Sculptor (1921–1985): Biography and Catalogue Raisonné*, she talked about the amazing hammered lead workshop conducted by Cavanaugh—"ten years after she had given up on trying to work in lead." She and Cavanaugh were both at the SculptureCenter during the "heady days" of the 1960s and 1970s, when preeminent sculptors, beginners, and students all worked side by side in this unique resource in Manhattan. It was here that she learned to weld, and this allowed her to develop an extensive lifetime of welded brass and bronze work, which became the important center of her oeuvre.

Much of her sculpture seems influenced by a surrealistic vision, as in the dreamlike ribbon in space below the figure in *Reflection*. Movement is often an element in her sculpture, particularly in her dancers, but also in her classic sculpture, such as in the windswept *Sea Wind III*.^{*} There are also times when a darker, brooding mood pervades her work, such as in *Caryatid*, whose central figure seems entombed in a shadowy crypt. Each of her sculptures is totally unique and gives us clues to her many interests and ideas.

Hers is a rich personal journey. And because she works and develops her ideas and images over a long gestation period, as though drawn from a process akin to free association, her sculpture offers us a preconscious as well as a poetic impact of her thoughts, unlike some figurative work, which almost becomes static and impoverished in comparison. Lekberg does not reduce the actual world around us as in a dream, but rather through an inward experience like centering, she encloses us in a powerful existential force that allows us access to this journey.

Gordon J. Alt is executive director of the John Cavanaugh Foundation.

NOTE: ^{*}See *Sculpture Review* (vol. 39, no. 2, 1990), p. 7.







MOVEMENT AS EMOTION

by Jonathan P. Harding

There is a sense of movement in many of Barbara Lekberg's works, but it is a sense of movement that often challenges traditional understandings of the idea. In her sculpture *Loïe Fuller: Vortex 3* we are offered an image of the pioneer of modern dance twirling in her silk costume in the *Danse Serpentine*. The sense of physical movement is integral to the figure but also suggests the psychological relationship between the dancer and the dance. Barbara would develop this relationship in later works, realizing that "movement is not so much gestural, but emotional." In *Daydreamer* she uses the same swirling form found in *Loïe Fuller: Vortex 3*, but uses it to express the motion of thought and memory.

It is this sense of motion—of flow—that has come to pervade Barbara's work and is fully expressed in such works as *Dreaming the Future*. Here we have what at first appears as a timeless, static, sculpture, and yet the motion of the bronze stream that links dreamer to dream is integral to the meaning. Increasingly, Barbara has found that "movement is the vibration between the figure and the context" and has expanded our ideas of motion to include time, reflection, and memory.

Jonathan P. Harding is the curator at The Century Association in New York City.


NOTE: Quotes are from Barbara Lekberg's remarks presented at The Century Association in New York City on October 2, 2001.



Top: *Loïe Fuller: Vortex 3* (1977), hammered and welded bronze, 21 inches high. Opposite page, bottom: *Lament* (1980), terra-cotta study. On this page, bottom: *Daydreamer*, bronze, 14 inches high.



Lekberg's work can be found in many private and public collections across the United States, including The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Mount Holyoke College, Massachusetts; and the National Academy of Design, New York (now the National Academy Museum). Lekberg is the recipient of two Guggenheim Fellowships; a grant from the National Institute of Arts and Letters, which is now the American Academy of Arts and Letters in New York City; and another grant from the Richard Florsheim Art Fund. She won the Saltus Gold Medal from the National Academy of Design in 1990, and the Gold Medal from the National Sculpture Society in 1991.

Although Lekberg has exhibited extensively, one of the most memorable exhibitions in which she had ever been involved occurred during the worst time in New York City history, the week of September 11, 2001, at a prestigious private arts association in the city. "Along with everyone else, I was stunned, and wondered what possible relevance an art exhibition could have at that time. However, people seemed moved by my subject matter and often commented on its almost eerie resonance with the disaster. Several of these sculptures were of ruins. All were intensely personal, dealing in one way or another with catastrophe and renewal. The work appeared to give comfort to total strangers and some, writing in the visitor's book, actually thanked me. And this is perhaps the most profound joy of sculpture, to have another person say, in effect 'I know what you're saying. I get it. I understand'." 

Patricia Delahanty is the editor of the *National Sculpture Society News Bulletin*.

Opposite page, clockwise from top left: The Measure, welded bronze; Graham Dancer, bronze, 35 inches high; Changing Wind (1974), welded bronze, 28 inches high; Equilibrium, bronze, 38 inches high; Summer Afternoon (1986), bronze, 8 inches high; Sea Wind III, bronze, life-size.

On this page, top: Untitled (1951), welded steel; *on this page, bottom:* Discovery (1957), welded bronze.

