

RUTH ROSNER

CREATING WITH A STRONG YET SUBTLE VOICE

Influence, like conjuring, is hard to measure, but we try, since art history without connections would present a falsely static picture of a lone figure pocketed in his or her own vacuum.

So, I find myself in sculptor Ruth Rosner's studio/apartment at treetop level over Brookline's bustling Beacon Street, wondering from where she received that first complex imperative to "Go figure!"

I'm feeling this imperative from the throats of multiple personae — women's voices that seem to speak from themselves to themselves, so multi-dimensional, so inflected with subtle motions are they from foot to crown, that I think they could be, perhaps, meditating like the Buddha who, it's said, discerning "whole worlds" contained within himself, withdrew under the Bo tree to sort things out.

But no, Rosner's personae are too restive to sit and sort; they have a torsion in their figures like an athlete about to hurl something not just away, but toward. And indeed, when grouped, they seem to respond to other voices in chorus, to other forms like modern dancers hewing to a group dynamic of which they're both founders and followers.

I saw this group/individual dynamic when I visited Roxbury Community College's Joan Resnikoff Gallery. A number of Rosner's figures were invited to join the excellent company that spilled right out the front door to occupy the adjoining plaza in the exhibit "What About War," on display through September 5 as part of an ongoing, citywide initiative of Violence Transformed. Rosner's creations were both inner- and outer-directed, as if their energies, both vocal and somatic, were just too explosive a counsel to keep.

Back in her studio, I'm handling and being handed cousins, aunts and daughters, perhaps, of those figures I simply observed with gallery-proper etiquette, just barely, back at the Resnikoff.

"She's an early one," said Rosner, with a maker's pride, as she hands a statuette, just a few feet tall, off to me. I take her gingerly, not just to avoid the extrusions and intrusions in a dermis both delicate and tough (more on this later), but also because I'm touch-certain that I'm handling a "her" and not just an "it."

"Am I getting too close to my subject?" I whisper to myself before I snap back to my art historian persona and, I'm afraid, practically grill Rosner on the provenance, the pedigree for goodness' sake, of this "she" I'm cradling in my arms.

With suspicious alacrity, smiling into my rudely pointing finger, she obliges. Turns out that she often hopped onto a bus in her native New Jersey to ride into that contagion of influence MOMA! Then again, she dreamily recalls the 1964/65 New York World's Fair that impressed her deeply with Michelangelo's "Pieta" and Olatunji's drumming.

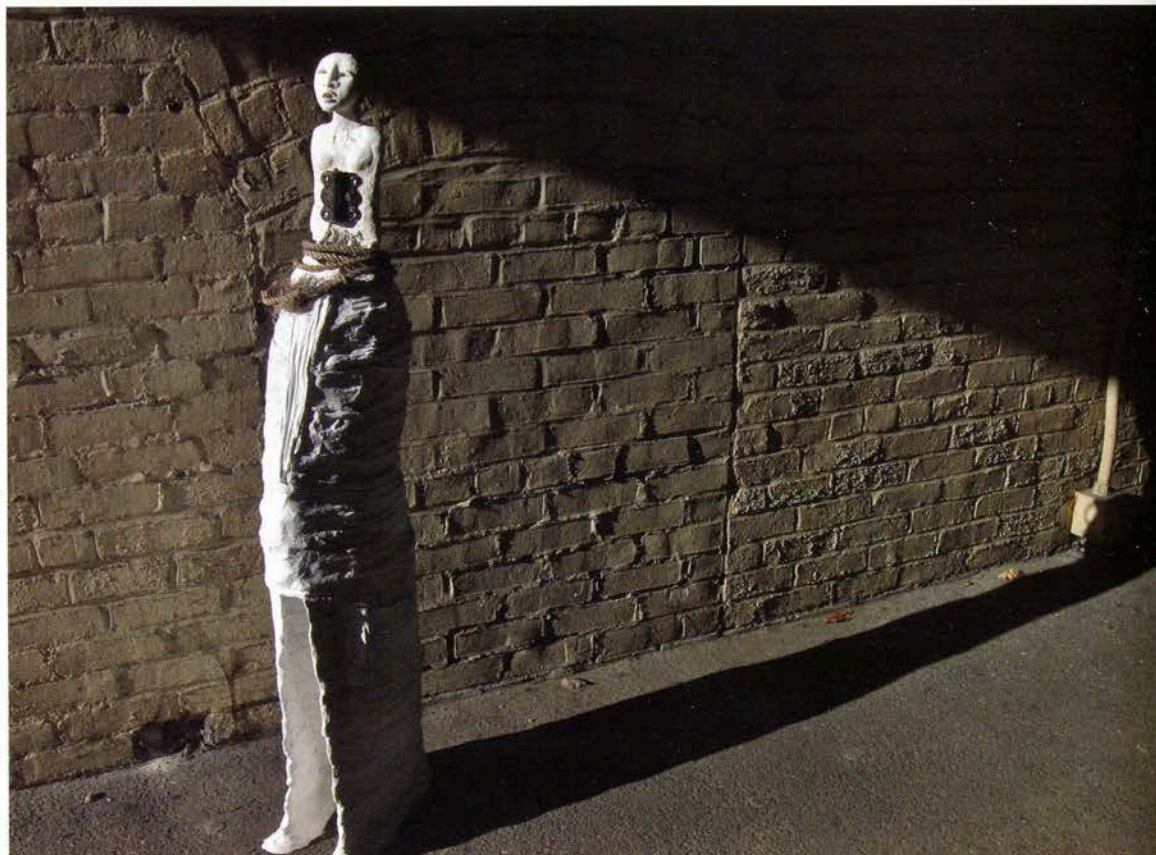
I squint, looking for malice, but seeing none ask Rosner about Picasso, that conduit and fount of modern influence.

"The Monkey!" she responds, beaming. I see two metal toy cars soldered together, bottom to bottom for the head, a jug-eared jar for the swelling torso and shoulders and, finally, a metal spring for the lively tail and backbone.

One step forward, two giant steps back. Despite their animation, their

(UN) COVERING VIOLENCE TRANSFORMED
COPLEY PLACE CENTER COURT
 100 HUNTINGTON AVE
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Woman Walking with Rope & Metal, from the "Off the Pedestal Series," 2013.



affinity for ready-to-wear industrial detritus, I just can't connect Rosner's dignified ladies with that grinning simian.

"Arte Povera?" I question. "Mario Merz!" she ripostes. Now we're getting warmer ... and colder. Wasn't he that Mediterranean obsessed with igloos?

"Max Ernst!" I say, since old Max could rosily personify a bathtub or a bird-headed interloper, and I find myself in Ruth Rosner's studio, exchanging confidences with a lady I'm sure I've met somewhere before, though she sports a rusted-out catalytic converter for a chest – and not unattractively.

Turns out we've both been mesmerized by Max Ernst's "Capricorn" at the National Gallery of Art. I'm charmed, intrigued and beaten – my inner "art historian" a splintered pack of hound dogs over-taxed with scent trails.

Gently, Rosner leads me to her storeroom, an inner sanctum where she seems to have picked up, sorted and shelved every last piece of iron and steel that, as spike or bolt or clasp, ever dropped off the trolleys banging down Beacon Street (plus a few errant car parts too weak to "tough out" Boston's famous potholes). At last, a straight line of inspiration!

"Violence Transformed," a once-annual exhibit that has gathered momentum, like trolley cars, autos and violence itself in occupying stages all over this city, will be celebrating the power of art at Copley Place Center Court through September 12.

This iteration, "(Un)Covering Violence Transformed," will include two of Rosner's latest full-length figures: "She Wore Her Metal Like A Garment" and "Walking Woman with Rust and Threads."

We've discussed the futility of seeking to sniff out the threads of influence in figures, probably imbibing new ones as they're now being installed, but then, strenuous play deserves serious attention. So, do as I did, please riddle away.

But please also step back to enjoy the striding stillness and voiceless lyricism of these stalwart figures so opposite to the shrill, abiding stereotype of the hapless female with "Nothing to wear!" Both as archetypal as Brecht's "Mother Courage," and as familiar as the latest current of refugees, they are handily fashioned, though one looks and looks for arms, to our deeply exigent times.

| James Foritano

