

# ANCIENT STORIES IMAGINED ANEW

Liz Wolf's sculpture captures the human experience in elegantly haunting forms.

BY GUSSIE FAUNTLEROY



PHOTO BY JOHN GUERNSEY

*"Drifting," mixed media, 42" × 17" × 6"*

What sparks artistic inspiration? Sometimes it's the simple confluence of seemingly unrelated events: Sculptor Liz Wolf walks the short distance across her yard from her house to her studio. A flock of birds flies over. She looks up, and the word migration flashes through her mind. She thinks of major life changes and imagines one's heart and inner world taking flight, migrating on to new places, new experiences. Once in her studio, she is drawn to a tall, gently curving piece of driftwood. She starts shaping it....

"Migration" is a driftwood wall sculpture in the form of a figure that appears to be softly swaying as if she would float away. Inset into the figure's chest is a pair of small tin doors. They can be opened to reveal a

tiny triptych painting of a landscape with a flock of birds overhead. "I tried to have her look like she's leaving with the birds," Wolf remarks, sitting in her brick-floored studio just north of Santa Fe.

Around her in the neatly organized space are a couple of aging, mismatched wooden chairs, a work table, small electric kiln, and a rack of tools for working with all kinds of materials, from metal to wood. The adjoining room is her ceramics studio. Shelves of plastic storage boxes contain collections of objects she loves, which often become part of her art. There's hide from deer, elk, and moose. There are feathers, fur ("Looks like I'm a witch," she jokes, reading the labels), beads, rusty metal, shells, and thorns—the last item used

as hummingbird beaks.

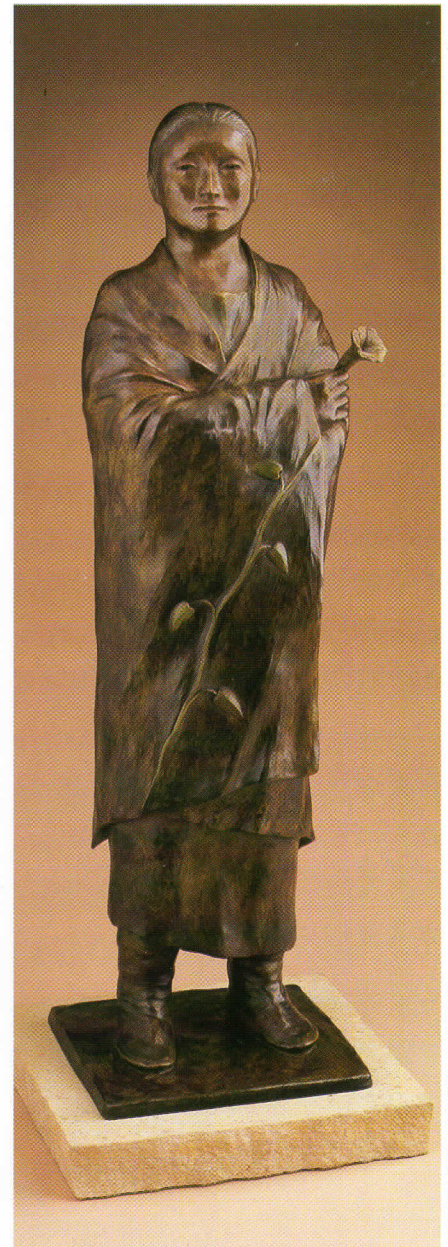
The realms of human experience and animal spirit are intimately fused in Wolf's creations. Delicately featured, elegantly haunting figures—in raku-fired clay, driftwood, or bronze—often combine the human form with the head of a raven, deer, horse, or other creature. Like the sacred soul journey of the shaman, these works evoke a sense of boundaries erased: between past and present, human and animal, waking consciousness and altered states.

"When I was a child sleeping at night, the more dolls I had around me the safer I felt. I've always felt that inanimate objects had souls and spirits. From childhood, that's always how it's been," the artist reflects.

More comfortable creating than speak-



Left to right: "Gathering Shells" and "Crow Mother," bronzes, 22¼" × 10" × 8" each



"Summer," bronze, 33" × 8" × 6"

PHOTOS BY WENDY MCEATHERN

ing of her art, Wolf, much like her creations themselves, reveals a blend of childlike openness and intuitive depth. Her own childhood, in fact, seemed ideal for enhancing her imaginative traits.

The daughter of a hotel manager, she grew up in grand old hotels in St. Paul, Minnesota, the family's residence a penthouse suite and the entire hotel her playground. With two brothers but few other children around, she roller skated in the hotel basement and ate pie stolen from the pantry, hiding under the ballroom bandstand and watching dances through the stage's latticework. Whenever she and her brothers played make-believe involving an animal, she was the animal. Her mother's own strong creative streak expressed itself

in an improbable but successful garden on the hotel rooftop, complete with pine trees, flowers, and a small winding stream stocked with trout.

Wolf studied three-dimensional art in all types of materials, though not ceramics, at Northern Illinois University and the Art Institute of Chicago, earning a BFA and MFA in sculpture. Later she agreed to open a gallery in Chicago with a friend who was a ceramic artist. Experimenting with her friend's materials, she taught herself to sculpt in clay. The two artists did pit firing together.

Today Wolf fires her hollow-bodied figures first in the kiln, and then transfers them to a steel drum that sits on its side on legs in her yard, and which she fills with dry

pine needles. Covering the sculptures with more needles and blessing it with sage, she starts a fire in the barrel. She closes the opening and lets it burn out and smolder for several hours. When she opens it ("It's just like Christmas!") the fired figures are darkened with a uneven smokey patina that gives them an ancient, mysterious feel.

While there are suggestions of American Indian mythology in her art, Wolf sees her inspiration as originating from an even deeper and broader source that includes indigenous cultures around the world. "Everything that awakens something inside me seems to have a really primitive quality, and that ties in with nature," she explains. "I never search out or read about these kinds of mysticism—I just feel it. I always



PHOTO BY JOHN GUERNSEY

"One Trick Stick," mixed media, 31" x 20" x 11"



PHOTO BY MARISA WOLF

have my own stories with the pieces. I don't want to pull from other cultures. I make up my own worlds that they live in.

"Where does that internal resonance with certain things come from? That's the magic of life. To me it's all magical, all mystery. If I could live two or three lifetimes I might get done what I have in my heart and spirit to do!"

*Liz Wolf is represented by Manitou Galleries, 123 West Palace Avenue, where a show of her sculpture, along with paintings by Roseta Santiago, opens September 17 with a reception from 5 to 8 p.m. Hours: Monday-Saturday 9:30-5:30 and Sunday 11:00-5:00. (505) 986-0440, 1-800-283-0440, [www.ManitouGalleries.com](http://www.ManitouGalleries.com).*



*"Cries for Rain," bronze, 10½" × 6" × 7½"*



PHOTOS BY WENDY McEAHERN

*"Rain Catcher," bronze, 24½" × 43" × 20"*