

## Rhythm and Metaphor: Tova Beck-Friedman

by Margaret Sheffield



Above: *Triple Stelae*, 1997. Adobe, cement, and crushed roof tiles, 90 in. high. Above, right: *Excerpts of a Lost Forest: Homage to Ashera*, 1992. Vinyl concrete, ferro-cement, and black pigment, each element up to 96 in. high.

Tova Beck-Friedman's sculptures embody Isamu Noguchi's ideal of sculpting space itself; her works are dynamic interactions between viewer, sculpture, architecture, and nature. Beck-Friedman's subject is the monumental feminine, dramatized as archetypes based on ancient and modern myth. These semi-abstract figures, whether of adobe, clay, ferro-concrete, or stone, do not narrate a particular story, but are rich metaphors inspired by the ancient world and by the artist's search for her own ancestors in a patriarchal society.

Every sculptor could be said to ask the question: how can a work of art, which is permanent, express the ever-changing impermanent nature of reality? Beck-Friedman has found that it is possible to capture lifelike change and movement through the works' expressive edges—actual edge, volume, and silhouette—as it interacts with surrounding space. Originally from Israel, Beck-Friedman beautifully exploits the multiple meanings of the Hebrew word for edge, *sapha*, which means both “lip” and “language.” She has said that the “primal power of the edge creates a dialogue between the object and the viewer.” Having lived in Japan, where, in fact, the artist

changed from painting to sculpture, her intuition of edge and plane, like that of the ancient Raku masters, is fundamental to her art's expressive power. Her semi-abstract figures are primal, non-geometrical forms, their asymmetrical edges relating to an indeterminate spatial reality.

In her work of the past five years, the artist has gradually placed a more conscious and intense emphasis on her placement of figures in rhythmic groups, usually in landscape settings. This rhythmic grouping is strongly choreographic, and like Noguchi's garden sculptures or their prototypes in Kyoto temple gardens, the arrangement radically affects the viewer, who must become a dramatic protagonist in a transformational space.

Beck-Friedman's figural groups show her increasing ability to site pieces and also to invent ways to make her figures express a kinetic vitality. The subtle mixture of figural and abstract is an important part of Beck-Friedman's signature style. From a distance, the five figural units of *Excerpts of a Lost Forest: Homage to Ashera* (1992) or *Primordial Quintet* (1991) seem abstract, like black formal accents or cuneiform writing that orchestrates a vast musical space. The rhythm of the



Above: *Primordial Quintet*, 1991. Ferro-cement, each element 73 to 87 in. high.  
Left: *Stelae* (detail of installation), 1995–96. Clay, each element up to 21 in. high.

whole unites with the rhythms of the individual pieces, as in a dance or procession. Close-up, however, one is aware of how subtly the artist has suggested the female and the human without breaking away from abstraction. Movement results from the artist's tapering the lower part of the figures and weighing down one side more than another. This creates an articulation of the torso, and results in that sense of implied energy and movement that Kenneth Clark in his book, *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form* (1956), calls "the heroic diagonal." Beck-Friedman invents a kind of body language, tilting the torsos of single figures so as to relate them to one another, and also to form a unity, in radical contrast to the groups of Giacometti or Abakanowicz, where the group only intensifies an existential isolation.

*Excerpts of a Lost Forest: Homage to Ashera* (1992), at Grounds for Sculpture was critical in determining the direction of Beck-Friedman's increasingly kinetic work. This austere, majestic group of five monoliths, each eight feet tall, shows the artist's gift of making sculpture equally figural and organic. She metaphorically fuses the tall, vertical images with trees, earth, rocks, and the eternal feminine in

myth. The inspiration for the work was the wooded site's atmosphere and the symbolic meaning of the ancient Hebrew goddess, Ashera, who was revered in groves.

In her work *Triple Stelae* (1997), at a sculpture park in Be'er Sheva', Israel, she again metaphorically fuses the imagery of three tall figural presences with both tree and female, creating sinuous concavities and convexities that resemble the undulating wave-like growths on ancient tree trunks, as well as suggesting womblike contours.

Beck-Friedman is inventive in her use of materials, whether clay, ferro-concrete, or, as in Be'er Sheva', a mixture of crushed red roof tiles, adobe, cement, and pigment. Rather than the austere and imperious mood of *Excerpts of a Lost Forest: Homage to Ashera*, here the artist's manipulation of contour and surface creates a buoyant, sensuously textured feeling, with the surface markings and colors echoing the terra-cotta earth and surrounding architecture.

*Primordial Quintet* (1991), of ferro-concrete, at the Newark Museum sculpture garden, also has immense resonance and interactive power on the site, and shows the artist using edges to make the figures into forms that are mobile and kinetic. *Memory*

*Imprint* (1997), of cement, paper pulp, mica, and black pigment, but has the weight and appearance of granite.

Beck-Friedman's work communicates a strong sense of human values and has an intellectual and emotional universality. Her moral and cultural vision stubbornly insists on seeing the present through the lens of the past and carries echoes of prehistoric female fertility goddesses, ancient stelae, and Cycladic art. Most important, while her work is not figurative, she has the magical ability to infuse her forms with a vast range of ideas and emotions: pathos, energy, determination, courage, and power. At the same time, her work is modern, in its materials, gallant vision, poetry, and rhythmic organization.

Beck-Friedman reminds us of art's highest function: to sustain. These works are positive images of power; they are a link to Caryatids and the Greek chorus, to the monoliths of Stonehenge, and to the family groups of Henry Moore. They insist on a wholeness of consciousness and create a power of distilled thought and emotion that is unforgettable.

*Margaret Sheffield is a critic and art historian living in New York.*