The Fantasy of Flight in the Sculpture of Patti Warashina

For many modern sculptors the idea of a heavy weighted sculpture that can magically lift into the air around it has been a dream and a challenge. How can such a thing be possible? What kind of flight are we talking about?

In Patti Warashina's long career as an artist and ceramic sculptor (she was born in 1940 in Spokane, Washington) she has covered a wide range of social and formal issues in her work especially in the figurative “heads” that look back to Greek and Roman portraits in stone and bronze. The idea of transformation - of being one thing and yearning to be another- and at times achieving that goal is what I see and feel in front of this 2008 work Bonded Flight by Warashina, a recent work cast in bronze. A woman's head with a bird perched on it amid wild wind blown spirals of hair piercing the air! And look at this arching neck coming at us from an upward twisting body. If this figure doesn’t achieve buoyancy it comes close to it!

Birds can fly - why can’t I? Well, you can fly in Patti Warashina’s world. She has used this same bird motif in many of her works over the years. Knowing a little of Warashina's family history I can see her affinity for birds and their actions and their symbolic power. She was born in 1940 from parents who came to Washington state from Japan. One year later Pearl Harbor was attacked by the Japanese military and it set off a series of events that ended in many Japanese Americans from mainly West Coast cities being sent off to internment camps in desert areas. Childhood memories stay with us all our lives when the “normal” is turned upside down. But birds - they can fly over walls!

When Warashina is often asked about these experiences and whether this figure is a self-portrait she will say “no” but we can entertain the thought anyway. If anything it is a marvelous fusion of her wide-ranging travel and art experiences but even more it has an immediate expression of a joyful state of being and a strong sense of optimistic humor. Photographs of Patti Warashina show the same thing.

Historically speaking there are precedents for the elements in this sculpture in other American and European artists’ work and I think of Paul Manship’s figures and their “art deco” look and Eli Nadelman's whimsical figures and I think Warashina would agree with me on that. Look up their work and see what you think of my comparisons here.

In the Tweed Tezla Library you can find an autographed copy of the book Wit and Wisdom: Patti Warashina from 2012 with an excellent essay by Martha Kingsbury that goes even further into Warashina’s life and work.