



HELAINÉ BLUMENFELD

at Salisbury Cathedral

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THE RESTORATIVE POWER OF ART

Richard Cork

Visitors to Helaine Blumenfeld's ambitious exhibition at Salisbury Cathedral will soon become aware that her sculpture, although made of solid marble or bronze, leads us away from a tangible presence towards a spiritual alternative. This fundamental paradox, lodged at the centre of her work, has been explored with an ever-growing sense of intensity over the four decades of her career. Blumenfeld has always believed that she is struggling to give form to something outside the corporal world, and she is not afraid of describing it as 'the soul'. That is why the decision to give her an exhibition at Salisbury Cathedral seems so appropriate. For this sublime building, largely erected in a sustained burst of medieval energy during the thirteenth century, likewise aspires to achieve a state beyond material existence.

Blumenfeld would understand immediately why the makers of Salisbury Cathedral wanted its tower and spire to be the tallest in Britain. Surging towards the sky, this iconic structure escapes from earthly confines and reaches a separate state. So does Blumenfeld's sculpture, even though it cannot rise to such an overwhelming height. Hence her decision to ensure that the first work we encounter, after entering the Cathedral, is a bronze called Flight. She wants viewers to feel, while looking at this work, that corporeal restraints can indeed be cast aside. For a moment, at least, we find ourselves invited to move into another realm. And when music is being played inside the Cathedral, Blumenfeld's work will appear even more at home there. A dedicated pianist in her youth, she has always gained enormous stimulus from musical sources. They enhance the experience afforded by her sculpture, and its air of freedom is undoubtedly inspired by the music she appreciates.

The complexity of Blumenfeld's work likewise possesses musical parallels. All her pieces need to be circumambulated several times. The more we walk round them, gazing from every possible direction, the more they change in meaning. Our attempts at scrutiny are rewarded, and we realise that her sculpture is forever on the move. In Italy, where she spends much of her life working near the quarries above Pietrasanta, writers have often linked Blumenfeld's art with the perpetual energy of Futurism. But she does not share the Futurist obsession with aggressive machine power. Rather does she look towards nature, regarding her sculpture as plants or roots filled with the potential for growth and development. The upper portions of her work often suggest a link with mountain ranges, and Blumenfeld has never forgotten her delight when, as a child, she visited her Russian grandfather's estate in upstate New York and roamed freely through the orchards and arbours, even when they were illuminated solely by the moon.

Flight, bronze

Blumenfeld's sculpture resonates with her understanding of nature as a living, ever-shifting force. Her work will seem at home here because Salisbury Cathedral was itself profoundly influenced by the forms of the natural world. A real symbiosis is likely to occur, allowing the sculpture to enhance the building and vice versa. But there will be nothing complacent about this relationship between contemporary art and its ancient setting. On the contrary: Blumenfeld thrives on challenges, and it is significant that one of her exhibits at Salisbury is called *Taking Risks*. Walking round this carving, we become conscious above all of its complexity. The forms all appear restless, nearly fitting together and yet not quite removing themselves from vulnerable ambiguity. That sense of risk is accentuated by the transparency of these slender white forms. Blumenfeld wants the light to come through them, and this penetration reinforces their air of fragility. The edges become increasingly significant, especially when they appear broken. The dialogue between the smooth and the fractured is informed by the sculptor's own continual awareness of the mortality underlying everything.

Blumenfeld aims at peeling away the layered facade which humanity presents to the world, and she reveals the pulse of an often chaotic dynamism beneath. Although no recognisable contemporary people can be detected in her work, she is fascinated by mythological beings. Hence the inclusion of Cleopatra, one of the largest exhibits in the Salisbury Cathedral show. Blumenfeld deplores the fact that our ever-increasing involvement with a consumer society has led us to lose these myths, and thereby cut ourselves off from a key to the significance of the universe. She wants to regain the restorative power of art, and a sculpture called *Angel* brings us very close to the heart of her concerns.

This work is rich in associations and possibilities, touching us on a whole range of levels. During her childhood, Blumenfeld sometimes experienced daytime visions of angels. They made her feel nearer to some reality far beyond what was happening on a mundane, everyday basis. And now she strives to make art which invites its onlookers to search for alternative sources of meaning. The task could be daunting, especially when Salisbury Cathedral sets such a mighty standard for any sculptor invited to display work there. But Blumenfeld is exhilarated by the prospect, and fearlessly commits herself to meeting this awesome challenge with the maximum amount of imaginative verve.

Richard Cork's latest book, *The Healing Presence of Art*, is a major history of western art in hospitals, ranging from Piero della Francesca and El Greco to Barbara Hepworth and Naum Gabo. It was published by Yale in 2012.



Taking Risks, marble



MESSENGER OF THE SPIRIT

Nicola Upson

Fundamental to Helaine Blumenfeld's sculpture is a belief that art exists to give form to the soul, to unravel the mysteries of who we are as human beings - and in Salisbury Cathedral, one of the glories of medieval Christendom and an inspiration to artists for 750 years, she has found the setting that her work has been waiting for. There is a perfect synchronicity at work in *Messenger of the Spirit*: like the walls of the Cathedral, the marble forms exude the passion and intensity with which they were created, combining the weight of history in the material with a soaring lightness of spirit; elsewhere, polished bronzes illuminate the darkness, absorbing and reflecting their surroundings until each is transformed by the other. The Cathedral is a monument to aspiration, not in the material sense but in the search for greater understanding, and at the core of Blumenfeld's work - amid the energy and movement which she brings to every medium - there has always been an extraordinary stillness, a space for contemplation and reflection, for personal revelation. It is as though these sculptures have always been here, or - if that is an illusion - as though they were always meant to be here.

Blumenfeld's voice has come always from within, with no allegiance to any particular style or movement. Her originality stems not from innovation for innovation's sake, but from a deep respect for tradition, an embracing of the sculptural values reintroduced by Rodin after Michelangelo. When studying with the sculptor Ossip Zadkine in the 1960s, she learned the importance of perfecting technique and the value of focus and craftsmanship; rejecting sculpture based on design or construction, she belongs to a school of artists who have pushed the frontiers of their art forward to make it truly their own. Her work engages in an ever-shifting dialogue between iconic, simple forms that strive for the reductive directness of the Cycladic sculpture that first inspired her, and more complex layered pieces, enriched through detail and intricate surfaces. To call this show a retrospective is in a way misleading, because many pieces have been created specifically for Salisbury or realised on a larger scale with the Cathedral setting in mind - but *Messenger of the Spirit* comes at a significant point in Blumenfeld's career, and the inclusion of earlier work allows for an understanding of the way in which her art has developed - always moving forward, but with an integrity to what has gone before. In the new pieces, we see an artist who is not afraid to embrace her roots: *Cleopatra* has an instinctive understanding with *Psyche*; *Angels: Harmony* echoes the more architectural *Shadow Figures*; and the energy and ambiguity of *Mysteries* can be traced back to *Creation II*. That is not to say that one sculpture is a footnote to another, but that any artistic development is a continual process of growth and reinvention.

Looking at these sculptures, it is easy to believe that we come closer through art to a spiritual realm, defined not as one particular culture or belief, but as the possibility for change inherent in each of us. Blumenfeld's first conscious effort to transcend forms which are purely physical came in the 1980s with the series entitled Souls. Walking in an ancient olive grove near her studio in Pietrasanta, she was struck by the eroded lyricism of the trees; moulded by wind over time, they took on a mythological quality that seemed to be the embodiment of human souls that had migrated and settled in organic form. She returned to her studio and produced hundreds of terra cotta models, which came to represent both a new way of working and a more determined effort to recall the spiritual essence within our lives. The Souls displayed here is one of the earliest in the series - a fierce, windswept mystery. The bronze gives the piece an aura which is both noble and primitive, its green patina heightening the organic origins of the form. Without it, a sculpture like Esprit (2013) would never have been possible, but the years in between have

brought a new resonance to the theme. Here, the translucent stone gives the work an ethereal quality which perfectly captures Blumenfeld's idea that what lies at our core is fragile, lyrical and intangible; the delicate outer layers of marble lift and animate the form, allowing the light to pass through, and - where the four parts of Souls were earthbound, fitting intimately together but rooted in their own space - Esprit (2013) is a spirit in motion, moving forward with an exhilarating optimism to embrace renewal and change.



Souls, bronze

It is one thing to visualise the spirit as something beautiful and elusive, quite another to convey that through the very real materials of marble and bronze. Throughout her career, Blumenfeld has striven to gain an intimate understanding of volume and space, surface tension and the laws and nature of each different material, and her ability to think in three dimensions, to create forms which translate her ideas in aesthetically satisfying ways, is the result of continual experimentation. Since 1974, she has worked in Italy and kept strong roots in England, developing a way of life which allows her to spend concentrated periods at her studios, then to return wholeheartedly to the emotional ties which give her sculpture its substance. Pietrasanta, with its unique resources of materials and skilled craftsmen, is arguably the greatest single influence on her work: its ethos of passion and vitality, combined with a pride in creativity and a distinct artistic ruthlessness, informs her sculpture as tangibly as the marble from the quarries at Carrara.

Working at the inspirational Studio Sem, under the tough but generous encouragement of Sem Ghelardini, Blumenfeld learned both technique and discipline from the older artisans, keeping their hours and earning their respect by involving herself fully in every stage of the sculptural process. Ghelardini was so confident in her talent that he gave her a blank cheque to buy whatever she needed for her first exhibition. She still has it, having chosen instead to bank something far more valuable: the opportunity to find her own voice. Young, female and American, she had to struggle to define herself in a very different culture, one which was steeped in tradition and predominantly male; the experience gave her the strength and independence to produce work which, in turn, transcends its own cultural boundaries. Whatever its setting and regardless of its physical beauty, this sculpture moves us because of the integrity with which it is created.

Blumenfeld's working methods are intense and extreme, a testament to her conviction that life is a process of living on the edge, a state of consciousness in which you must be prepared to risk everything for an enlarged sense of self-realisation. Each sculpture begins its life in clay, a material which she loves for the freedom it gives her; she works quickly and instinctively, without an armature or any concept of planning, making decisions unconsciously and trusting her inner voice. The resulting clay model, she says, represents the soul of every piece she creates, and contains the energy, vision and emotional landscape that will set the parameters - if there is such a thing in Blumenfeld's work - of the finished sculpture. The model is then realised in marble or bronze, and the choice of material is significant: marble has a mysterious, magical quality which exudes fragility and spirituality; bronze allows for more texture and detail, and expresses the power, energy and turbulence of the original model. Several of the works here - Ascent, Taking Risks, The Space Within - have been realised in both materials, but they exist in their own right as very different sculptures.



Esprit 2013, marble

There is a new poetry to some of the most recent sculptures. *Mysteries* and *Esprit* (2013) are complex, demanding pieces, but they avoid the risk of convolution; instead, they are beautiful drawings in space - flowing, lyrical, and characterised by strong lines that run throughout, giving the whole a powerful sense of unity. Blumenfeld's technical vocabulary has advanced, but there is a conceptual change, too: themes which - ten years ago - might have been expressed in a series of different works are now brought together in a single piece, so that it is no longer possible to say that *Taking Risks* is about independence or creativity, dreams or the power of the spirit; it is a coming together of all of these ideas. The later sculptures resonate from one to another, each revealing echoes of the last and a hint of the next.

It seems strange that Blumenfeld should have waited until 2009 to call a sculpture *Taking Risks*, when it is the fundamental principle on which her life and art have been based. In both, her focus is on tearing down established frontiers and breaking patterns of security; by engaging with her sculpture, we are challenged to do the same. There is no escaping the pain and fear which change involves, but every single piece that Blumenfeld has ever created is, in some sense, an effort to transform torment into beauty and hope, to visualise Kierkegaard's premise that art - whilst it may begin with a scream - must transform that scream into music. Her language of beauty - urgent, intense and dangerous - is never an end in itself, but the offspring of a deeply felt emotion - sometimes love and happiness, often pain and loss. And if there are moments which confront the scream head-on, there are others which testify to the value of the struggle: *Flight*, *Esprit II* and *Il Vento* (*The Wind*) take the process of change beyond suffering to a moment of enlightenment; the conflict is over, and what has been intense, wrenching and difficult is now serene, effortless and complete. Blumenfeld's sculpture often deals with contradiction, but never more poignantly than in the interdependence of beauty and pain: the resilience and serenity, the triumph of the human spirit, are borne out of struggle; but without the redemptive quality of beauty, the honesty of her work would be too raw.



Mysteries, marble



Angels: Harmony, marble

In *Ascent* and *Angels: Harmony*, we see another paradox at work: only by balancing intimacy with independence, Blumenfeld suggests, can we create a unit of two people which has power as well as tenderness. *Ascent* is an exquisite union of two figures: seen from one side, the female soars but her flight would not be possible without the strength of the muscular figure that anchors her to the ground; viewed from another angle, there is parity between the forms, a visual rejection of dependency in favour of inspiration and encouragement. *Angels: Harmony* follows a similar idea: two angels, each with only one wing, are seemingly ripped apart, and to fly they must embrace one another. It is interesting, though, that Blumenfeld has been compelled to revisit the original model to this sculpture, enlarging the wing and altering the proportions to see if its inner power could sustain it alone. The result is *Angel I*, a single, beautiful form which draws its strength entirely from within, and that is true of many recent works - *Flight*, *Esprit* (2013) and particularly *Cleopatra*, a sculpture with extraordinary presence whose inner energy seems stronger than the marble itself. There is great courage and vitality in each of these solitary figures; they are the work of a woman who has learned to trust her own inner toughness, to celebrate the power of one.



Helaine Blumenfeld with Flight

Tempesta, Blumenfeld's four-metre marble sculpture overlooking Hyde Park, exemplifies her increased confidence with scale and a renewed sense of purpose in her commitment to public art, but that is evident here, too: Ascent, Angels: Harmony, Messenger of the Spirit, Flight - these are continuous gestures in marble and bronze, breathtaking in their command of light and space, and capable of an immediate impact on the eye and a lasting impact on the soul.

For an age obsessed with communication, we listen so rarely - but there is a dialogue going on in this exhibition, a precious bond between sculpture and setting which is finally made complete by the viewer. It is at its most innovative, perhaps, with the three-part bronze *The Space Within*: on its own, each form has a stark, minimalist quality; placed together - with the added richness of the space between the figures and the shifting variations of light and angle - the sculpture seems capable of expressing infinite forms of human interaction. Standing within those shaped walls is a deeply affecting experience - quiet, solitary and intimate. It is rare to experience a work from the inside out but, in *The Space Within*, Blumenfeld has created a sanctuary, a safe place to confront the emotional risks to which she has devoted her life. The sculpture offers the viewer an opportunity to grow and to experiment - not with marble or with bronze, but with the less tangible materials of fear and hope, imagination and belief.

Stories are important. They enrich our lives and connect us to a past we've never known. They are how we define ourselves in the world to which we're born, how we make sense of our place in society, and how we articulate our hopes for a future. Blumenfeld's sculptures tell many stories - different from piece to piece and from viewer to viewer. In this unique setting, they resonate with an intensity beyond the power of words, as inexplicably moving as the brush of light through a stained glass window. Those of us who lack a faith can find it - sometimes - in the creative hope of others, in a vision of the world not as it is but as it might be. That is what Blumenfeld's work has given us for nearly fifty years - that, and the promise of more revelations to come.

Nicola Upson is the author of *Mythologies: the Sculpture of Helaine Blumenfeld* (Overlook Press). Her latest novel, *Fear in the Sunlight*, is published by Faber and Faber.



FLIGHT (Monumental)

Bronze
Height: 320 cm



CLEOPATRA

Statuary marble
Height: 300 cm



CLEOPATRA

Statuary marble
Height: 300 cm



HELAINÉ BLUMENFELD



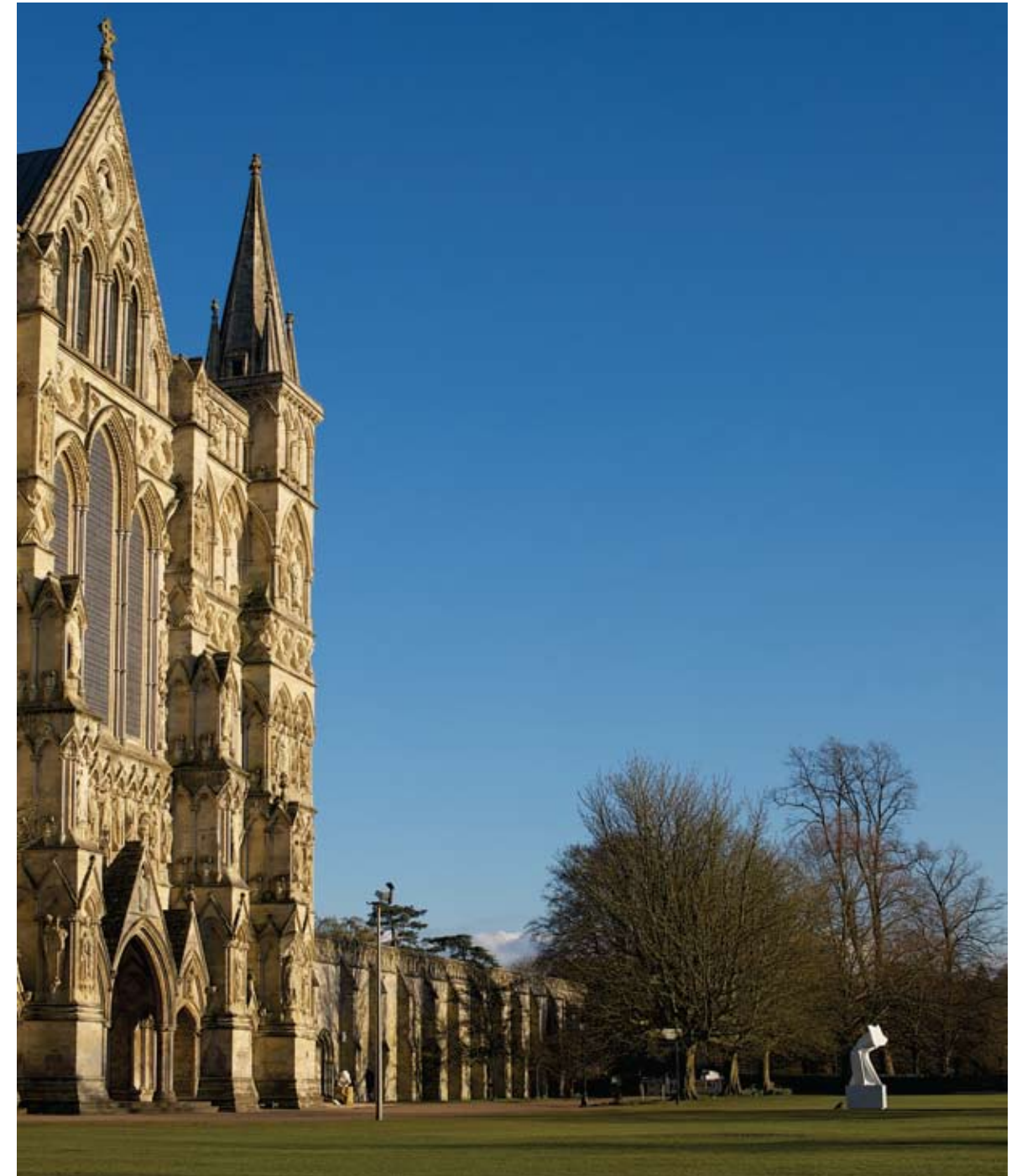
ANGELS: HARMONY

Statuary marble, in two parts
Height: 170 cm



ESPRIT 2013

Statuary marble
Height: 210 cm



ESPRIT 2013

Statuary marble
Height: 210 cm



TAKING RISKS

Statuary marble, in three parts
Height: 74 cm



HELAINÉ BLUMENFELD



TAKING RISKS

Statuary marble, in three parts
Height: 74 cm



MYSTERIES

Statuary marble
Height: 230 cm



HELAINÉ BLUMENFELD



MYSTERIES

Statuary marble
Height: 230 cm



ANGEL I

Statuary marble
Height: 110 cm



ANGEL I

Statuary marble
Height: 110 cm



IL VENTO

Statuary marble
Height: 72 cm





THE SPACE WITHIN

Bronze, in three parts
Height: 260 cm



THE SPACE WITHIN

Bronze, in three parts
Height: 260 cm



HELAIN BLUMENFELD



ASCENT

Bronze
Height: 335 cm



MESSENGER OF THE SPIRIT

Polished bronze
Height: 133 cm





‘For me sculpture is a journey to try and reach beyond the physical, emotional and cultural boundaries that limit our perception as well as our growth as spiritual beings.

I believe that art is an encounter with the unexpected that can extend our capacity for experiencing ourselves and the unknown.’

Helaine Blumenfeld

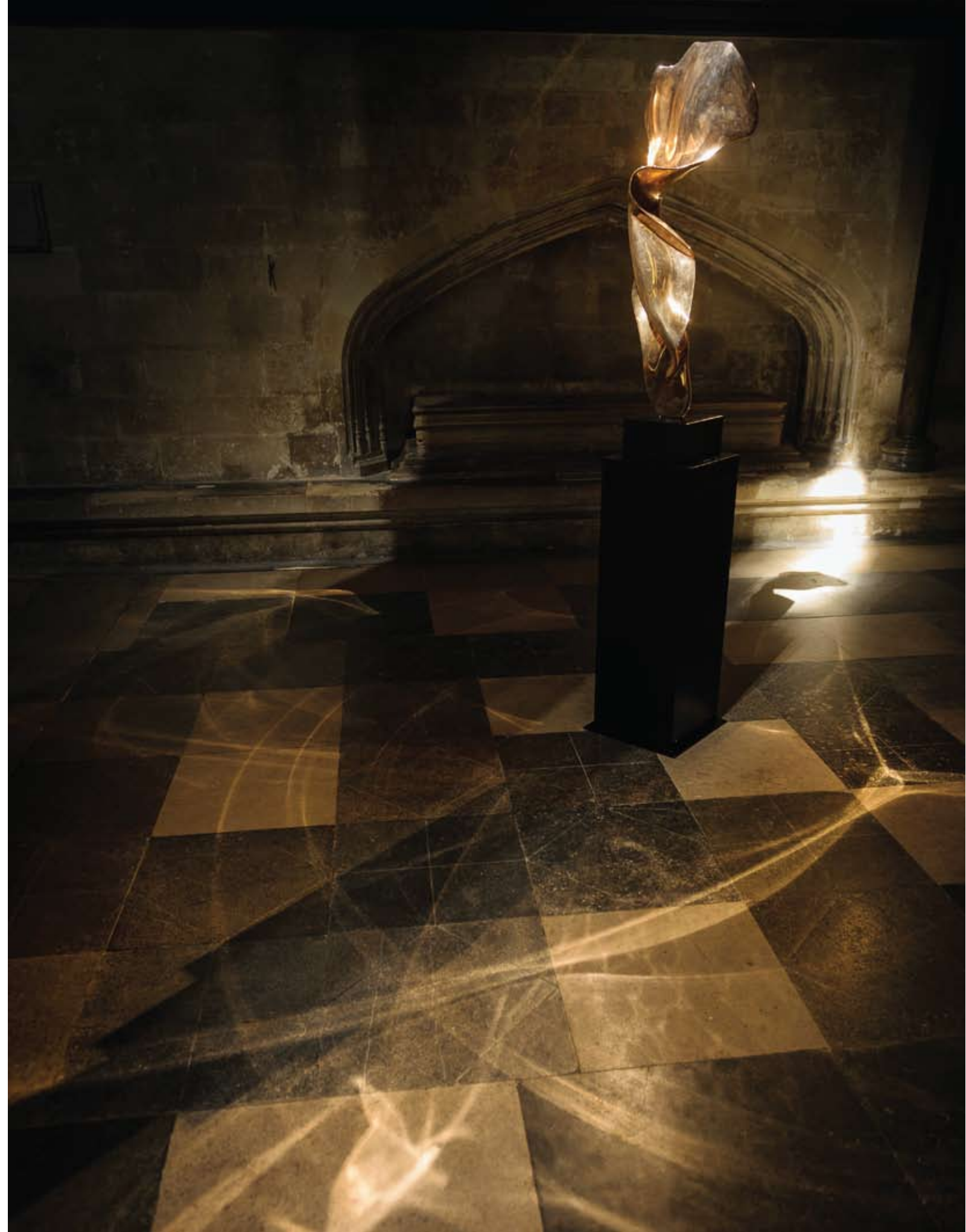
ESPRIT

Polished bronze
Height: 80 cm



FLIGHT

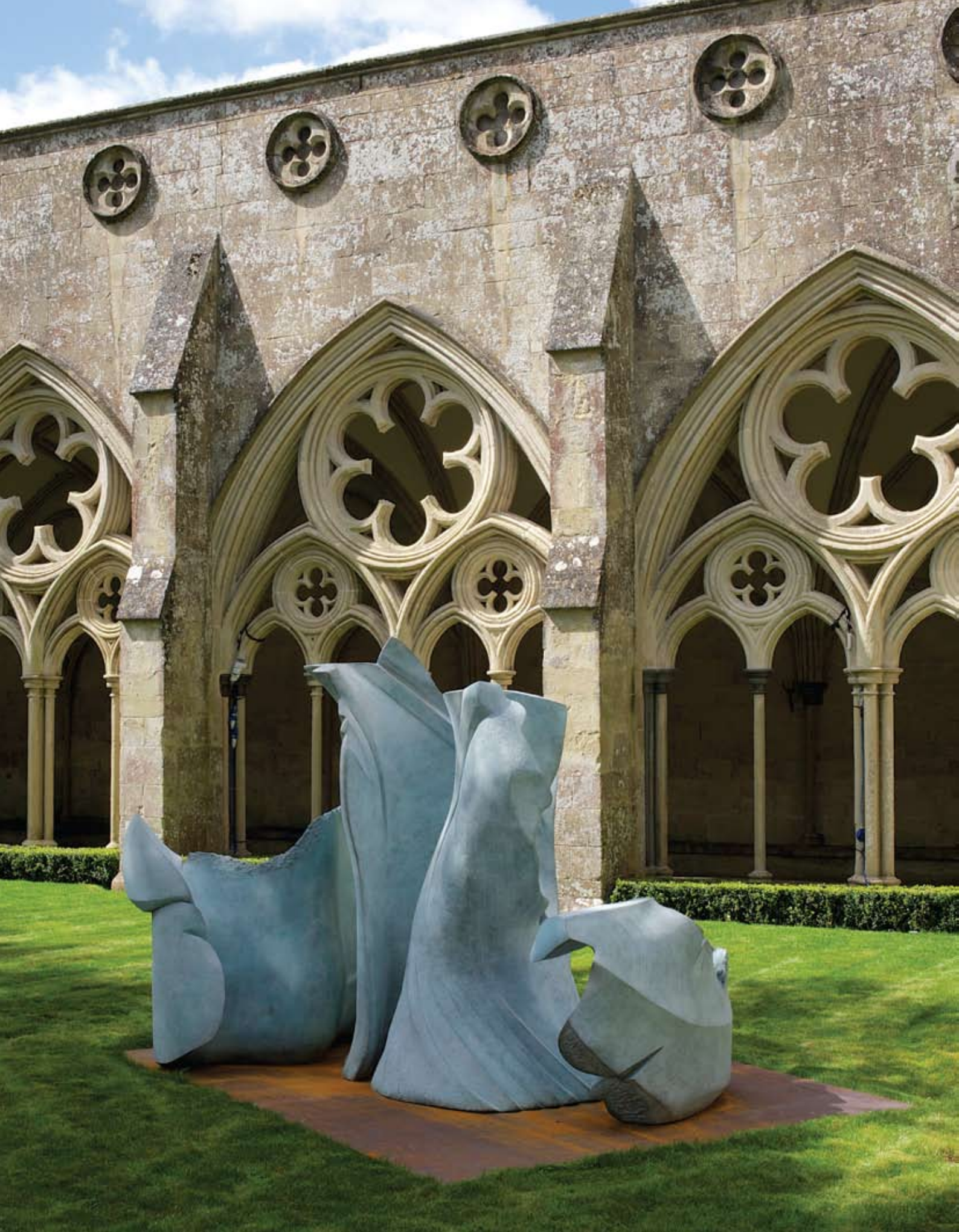
Polished bronze
Height: 103 cm





SOULS

Bronze, in four parts
Height: 200 cm



‘Through sculpture I have tried to create a language that does not depend on words but images for its impact.

The forms I have used have evolved, my vocabulary has increased, but the themes that have preoccupied me—man and woman and their relationship, the many aspects of the female psyche, the idea of creation, dreams and mythology—are constant.’

Helaine Blumenfeld

SOULS

Bronze, in four parts
Height: 200 cm



CREATION

Macedonian marble
Height: 70 cm



SHADOW FIGURES

Statuary marble
Height: 110 cm





PSYCHE

Bronze
Height: 105 cm



TOWER OF DREAMS

Bronze
Height: 72 cm



VOLARE

Bronze
Height: 66 cm

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