Where does art come from? The artist’s hands make the art, but what directs the hands to act? And after hearing the artist say how a particular piece came to be, what weight do we give the words when we look at the work? Do we differentiate “the dancer from the dance,” in Yeats’s phrase?

The figurative ceramic sculpture of Daisy Youngblood has intrigued viewers since it was first shown publicly, in New York, in 1979. Youngblood’s sentient creatures, at once human and animal, trigger potent responses and inspire inquiries about human nature and our inner lives. Audiences often feel as if her salient images address them directly. In the artist’s statement, published for the first time in this catalog accompanying her retrospective at Beaver College, she describes the various emotional and conceptual processes behind the creation of her work: “Exposing myself is what I do in my sculptures. I try to get beyond personality; in doing so, I am never embarrassed by them.”

Some of Youngblood’s images have their origin in body movements. In describing a slight shift in her working process from 1988 to 1990, the artist has noted “I [now] experienced the gesture of the image within myself as much as in seeing it.” This embodiment of motion is an abiding strength and characteristic of her work, as is her skill in explicating the human condition. The great founder of modern dance, Isadora Duncan, once said, “It is here [placing her hand on her breast] that the center of inspiration lies, and [placing her hand on her brow] it is here . . . . [My work] has its virtue in certain soul-states which are, in a sense, incommunicable.”

In titling my essay “Soul-states,” I wish to acknowledge both Youngblood’s articulation of her spiritual intentions as well as the diverse connections that I perceive between her work and the realm of dance.

In 1935, the pioneer American dancer Martha Graham experimented with a stretch body-sack costume for her dance Lamentation. In Barbara Morgan’s photography of Graham’s performance, we deduce the presence of the choreographer’s limbs—summarized knees, shoulders and elbows jutting out under the taut fabric that shields her figure. In preventing us from observing the body’s familiar articulation, this surrogate skin generalizes movement and enhances emotional communication. Forms are distorted, content is compounded.

Daisy Youngblood is a sculptor who has no interest in articulating entire figures. She may dispense with a body appendage only to substitute an analogous form—for example, a branch for an arm. Sometimes the absence of limbs is a presence, as when she emphasizes the body as vessel by creating openings where arms or legs may be. Or she may merely intone the nascent form of a limb that pokes up from beneath a sheath of clay/skin. As viewers, we intuit the location of body parts and accept deformation on the artist’s own sculptural terms.

Whether animal, human, or a seamless blend of the two, the figurative images of Daisy Youngblood communicate an emphatic emotional intensity that is unmatched by any of her contemporaries who work with the figure. Her art bears affinities to other cultures, other eras. In an early draft of her catalogue statement, the artist expressed “a strong feeling of connectedness to the world of ancient art. Very moved by certain pieces in museums, I would hear myself say, ‘Oh, I remember doing that.’”

As a sculptor, Youngblood is particularly sensitive to the role of the wall as an active support. In Torso Triptych (Elbow) and Torso Triptych (Still), the figures, delineated from midthigh upward, seem embedded in the vertical plane: (Elbow) spirals outward in a contrapposto so coiled it appears ready to spring back and strike
the plane it’s mired in; (Still)’s head is half-buried in the wall. Shy Horse burrows her snout against the vertical, and Running Man seems to pivot toward us for a moment before resuming his apparent path through the wall.

There are modern choreographers, Senta Driver is one, who have a special consciousness of the floor. They address it, not just with the soles of their feet but their entire bodies. Like the mythical giant Antaeus, who renewed his strength each time he came in contact with the Earth, his mother, Driver’s dancers never forget that the ground is a power source, that gravity is an ally. Youngblood’s sculpture in the round is rooted to the pedestal or floor; others seem to have been born underground. The visible segments of the figures Madame Dupuy and Romana end just below the level of the pubis, sliced by the horizontal plane. We can only guess at the invisible continuation below grade.

Clay is, after all, the most humble and grounded of art materials. Gretchen Adkins has noted that the artist began making objects at a time of great financial hardship in her life: “Youngblood looked for the cheapest available materials. The things of the earth that were free—clay and sticks—were the answer.” Traditionally, clay has been associated with the female. Soft and malleable, it is used for such domestic purposes as shelter and containers. In Western culture, objects of clay are relegated to the decorative arts, downscaled in importance in comparison to paint and canvas, or bronze.

Twenty years ago, few sculptors worked in clay. It is telling that a woman—Mary Frank—is credited with establishing clay as a significant sculptural material in the postwar New York art world. Frank was an artist who was undeterred by clay’s anti-heroic and low-art reputation. By using it as her favored material for figurative sculpture, Frank succeeded in raising its stature beyond the unnaturally low ceilings of regard imposed upon the craft world.

Art critic Janet Koplos has recently discussed Frank’s sculpture in relation to the work of Youngblood, citing the two artists’ divergent form and content. One factor that allies them, though, is their ability to create primordial clay figures that radiate an emotional life. The artists’ generative powers bring a magical breath to the clay, not unlike the way the otherworldly golem is created in Jewish folklore. In Puttermesser, Cynthia Ozick’s novella about a golem, the heroine first fashions a woman out of raw earth, and then animates the creature by blowing gently into her nostril. Youngblood’s figures often have the body’s apertures of eyes, mouths, and even nipples left open, as if to permit a supernatural energy to flow in and out.

The artist uses both the slab and pinchpot methods to construct her figures. She may work on pieces for an extended period, repeatedly tearing them apart and starting over. Unfired clay, if kept moist, retains a near-magical capacity to be renewed and reconfigured. When Youngblood first started working with clay, she simply built a fire outdoors and finished her pieces by burying them in the blaze. Her early works, fabricated from clay she herself had dug out of the ground, were full of splits and fissures, resulting from the unpredictable clay body and the unregulated firing. She enjoyed the crudeness and mystery of the process in which the end product could never be predicted.

In recent years, Youngblood has been using a wood-fired or electric kiln for bisque firing. She still creates the final patination of most of her pieces by immersing them in a smoking pile of sawdust or leaves. She favors low-fire clay because it is so porous and absorbent. The surfaces of the artist’s finished pieces retain her touch, revealing the process of their creation. In
Madame Dupuy, for example, the seams of the coil construction are apparent, as if she grew in a vertical version of annual rings. Banded, she seems bandaged.

This current retrospective permits us to consider a decade's span of Daisy Youngblood’s sculpture. One of her great strengths as an artist has been her ability to delineate both the power and vulnerability of her figures. *Running Man*, for example, a gender-reversed Lot’s wife, derived from a news photo of a man who turned to look back as he fled from an exploding building. In her catalog statement, the artist has described working on the piece for over a year, during which time the man became someone “running in the jungle, vulnerable, yet strengthened by the acceptance of that vulnerability.” In an early draft of her statement, she noted: “I think he has to do with the turn the ego must make when it reaches maturity—the acquisition and release of personal power.” As much at the onset of her public exhibitions as now at midcareer, Youngblood evidences herself as an artist fueled by well-springs of personal power who is undaunted by her own vulnerability.

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**NOTES**
1. Unless otherwise noted, all Youngblood quotations in the text are from the artist’s statement regarding her work published elsewhere in this catalogue.