Five Sculptors

Peter Agostini Christopher Cairns Bruce Gagnier Jonathan Silver George Spaventa

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This show has been organized by Alexis, Christopher, and Nicholas Cairns with assistance by Vita Litvak and Rebecca Strattan.

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Five Sculptors: One Aesthetic

The five sculptors whose works are presented in this exhibition, Peter Agostini (1913-1993), George Spaventa (1918-1978), Jonathan Silver (1937-1992), Bruce Gagnier (b. 1941), and Christopher Cairns (b.1942) all lived and worked in New York City during a seminal period in each artist's development. Their intersecting circumstances and interconnected experiences created a culture of creative energy, collaboration, and competition. The five formed a guild of sorts, based on a shared aesthetic of working from the figure, informing and influencing one another's work while forging individual creative paths and lines of inquiry. They are not "figurative" artists in the current parlance, but artists whose subject is the figure. Their shared aesthetic is an extension of late 19th century and early modern European art as represented by Cezanne, Picasso, Braque, Giacometti, and deKooning.

The works in this show – whose influences range from dreams to Abstract Expressionism to the Medici Chapel, from African masks to Leonardo's horses – reveal the artists' dedication to their subject. It is inherent and paramount. While each mastered the centuries-old techniques of drawing, modeling and casting the human figure, technique and materials are at the service of the works' underlying meaning —a humanistic aesthetic that has been overshadowed by Post-Modernism's concern with process and materials. This exhibition will allow a reexamination of their aesthetic approach.

The pieces presented are of necessity smaller works. As a consequence, significant areas of the artists' larger worlds are not represented. Most notably absent are Agostini's large plaster constructions of the 60's, Silver's dramatic rooms of sculpture, Cairns' desiccated and disturbing multi-figure settings, and Gagnier's more recent larger works. The hope is that the kernel of the large sculpture is imbedded in the smaller works, thus serving as a sort of "DNA" sample of larger work that can be seen in other venues or in reproductions.

The five sculptors are from two generations. The older artists Agostini and Spaventa were life-long friends and colleagues, who as young men in New York attended the Leonardo da Vinci School, an art school for Italian-Americans sponsored by Mussolini. In the 50's, as active members of the 10th Street/Cedar Bar group of artists, and still later as fellow faculty members at the New York Studio School, they continued to share work and ideas. Silver, Gagnier and Cairns sought out and studied with Agostini at Columbia University between 1960 and 1966, and Cairns worked with Spaventa at the New York Studio School during this same period. Both Gagnier and Cairns were Agostini's studio assistants during the late sixties. Influenced strongly by the creative sources and artistic approach of Agostini and Spaventa, the younger generation developed from students to apprentices to peers, often collaborating and exhibiting as a group.

These five artists were colleagues in another aspect of their lives. Each, in response to the need to support his work, gravitated towards teaching as a path for survival. In so doing, the continuity of two generations of artists' mutual influence was extended to a third – their students. Often working side-by-side with students in the studio, these artists passed on, by example, a work ethic, aesthetic and a body of technical knowledge.

All of these sculptors have long and deep ties to the artistic culture of Haverford College. Cairns was a faculty member for thirty-five years. Gagnier taught periodically at Haverford, and Silver, who taught Art History at Montclair State College, was a frequent visiting critic and lecturer. Spaventa and Agostini were Distinguished Visitors. Most importantly for Haverford, these artists had a profound impact on the students – artists and non-artists – who studied sculpture and painting at Haverford from 1970 to 2005. Among these are Sivert Hagen, Deborah Masters, Cathy Koshland, Walter Hall, Mark Chehi, Steve Larson, Ingrid Muan, Wayne Marge, Bruce Colburn, Alexis Cairns, Richard Bechtel, Vince Desiderio, Eric Karpeles, Hilarie Johnston, Scott Sherk, Tina Potter, Jesse Amar, Michael O'Keefe, Nicholas Cairns and many others.



Peter Agostini, Marina Head, 1945, 15"h, bronze

Peter Agostini

That is the prime thing—to generate "up"—leverage, elevation. The balloons rising, clothes on a line being picked up by the wind. The same with my horses. Whatever use they are, my horses are about flight, bursting out.

-Peter Agostini

Peter Agostini exploded on the New York art scene in 1959 with his first one-man show at the Stephen Radich Gallery. He was 45 years old. The next year he was featured in Time Magazine as the "plaster master".

Prior to his debut, Agostini worked as a mold and mannequin maker, skills he learned during the Depression as part of the WPA. He made sculpture in his kitchen, which doubled as a studio. In this tiny space he made horses, burlesque queens and heads in clay and wax. Several pieces in this current show were made in that kitchen, including the Head of Marina and the 1952 Horse. The influence of Leonardo and Marino Marini on these works is immediately apparent.

Peter Agostini was born in Hell's Kitchen, a then-tough neighborhood on New York's Westside, in 1913. His mother died when he was three and he spent some time at a school for orphans before his early education in Catholic school, which ceased after the eighth grade. Agostini was a self-taught artist whose only art training was one year at the Leonardo Da Vinci School in midtown, a school run by the sculptor Onario Rutuola and sponsored by Benito Mussolini. Ambitious from the start, he made a 40" plaster figure, The Swimmer, while in attendance. At Leonardo Da Vinci Agostini formed two lifelong friendships with artists George Spaventa and Nicholas Carone.

In the late 1950's Agostini moved into his first studio on 10th Street. His work of the 50's, was impulsive and to accommodate its spontaneity, he began fashioning sculpture out of dripping plaster. In the 60's, his plaster work was distinctive for its extreme immediacy. Anticipating Pop Art imagery, he cast and assembled with incredible assuredness newspapers, balloons, egg cartons, clotheslines, pillows, corrugated cardboard, truck inner tubes, bottles – all sorts of disparate objects—"frozen from life." He made "instant sculpture" whose characteristics were speed, luminosity, and explosiveness that ran the gamut from figurative to abstract. He had a great gift for enlivening inert matter, and a fluid control of the unyielding materials he used.

In 1960, Agostini was hired by Andre Racz at Columbia to teach sculpture and drawing. He had had no previous teaching experience and had to invent his own way. His approach was to direct the student's observation through demonstration, without giving any verbal instruction. This hands-off teaching style appealed to many young students, including Cairns, Gagnier and Silver. As a teacher Agostini combined an intense charismatic charm with a certain detachment, always putting emphasis on personal expression. His approach had no artifice and his presence was electric, and therefore he had many devoted students. Women loved him, and so did men. In 1969 he joined Spaventa on the faculty of the New York Studio School where he often worked from the model alongside his students. Agostini also taught for many years at the University of North Carolina, Greensboro, and was a Distinguished Visitor at Haverford College.

In the 1970's and 80's, Agostini returned to figuration, producing a series of old men, female heads and large horses. For Agostini, there was no difference between representation and abstraction. In their commitment to mass and form and in the masterful modeling technique employed, these works were as related to his "swells" and "squeezes" of the 1960's, as they were influenced by Michelangelo and Leonardo. Grounded in his lifelong habit of drawing from the figure, and reflecting his personal experience of aging, these works demonstrate consummate observation and distillation of form, and marriage of subject to that form.

Agostini had annual shows at the Radich Gallery until 1968. He subsequently showed at the Zabriskie and Bernice Steinbaum Galleries in New York.



Peter Agostini, *Squeeze* #1, 1964, 13x8x7", bronze



Peter Agostini, Figure, 1956, 20"h, bronze



Christopher Cairns, Deadly Nightshade, 1975, 23"h, bronze

Christopher Cairns

What is so extraordinary about Cairns' sculpture is the miracle by which he invests inert material with what one could only call a psyche. That is why he is a figurative artist, because the mind, and the psyche, need a body for what Shakespeare calls a local home and a habitation.

-Edward F. Fry, art historian, 1988

Christopher Cairns' sculpture combines themes that have challenged and inspired Western art for centuries with a deeply felt empathy for the human condition and an overarching reverence for the figure. Profoundly influenced by, and vitally connected to music, literature, and the art that preceded it, his work grapples with the foundations of human experience and the underpinnings of culture and uses these sources to forge an unflinchingly powerful body of work.

Cairns was born in Wilmington DE in 1942, the son of a research chemist who helped to develop the Minuteman missile. He received a bachelor's degree from Oberlin College, and an MFA from Tulane University. Noting his interest in sculpture in the early 60's, a hip friend, Henry Moss, suggested he look up Peter Agostini at Columbia. Cairns joined Agostini's class, where he met Jonathan Silver and Bruce Gagnier. He simultaneously studied sculpture with George Spaventa at the New York Studio School. Cairns worked with Agostini as his studio assistant, and credits him with "giving me my education."

Beginning with the catalyst of an Earl Kerkam cubist head, shown to Silver by Cairns in the early 70's, the two collaborated for a decade and a half, following parallel lines of inquiry and notably exploring the concept of sculptural frontality. They collaborated on an unusual method of casting in plaster, and then reversing and recombining sections of one piece in another. Informed by psychoanalysis, direct observation, and analytic cubism, they developed a common language of carefully modulated form, revealed through light and shadow. Cairns and Silver, along with Bruce Gagnier, showed at Haverford College in 1976. They also showed together in NY at the 4x10 Gallery in 1976, the Weatherspoon Gallery in Greensboro, NC in 1978, and at the Studio School in 1979.

During the 80's Cairns began making large bronze female figures based on mythological, literary and biblical archetypes. Ensembles of figures followed – some exploring similar themes, and others presenting Cairns' sculptural thoughts on the human condition: death, love, suffering – cast in plaster, and occasionally in bronze. Many of these figure groupings contain theatrical elements that create worlds and context for the figures that inhabit them. The plasters' temporality and fragility contrast sharply with their transcendence as images, a contrast that Cairns extends to his bronzes, which, through their handling and patinas, maintain this sense of fragility and defy the solidity of the material itself.

In 1980 Cairns built the Esmeralda Chamber, a room filled with sculpture, on the Haverford College campus (later destroyed by the college in 1988). This was a prototype for other chambers, and laid the foundations for a current work in progress, the Rochbergtorium. This "room," modeled on the tradition of the ancient Roman lararium, is Cairns' paean to his friend, the American composer George Rochberg (1919-2005).

Cairns taught drawing and sculpture at Haverford College from 1970-2005, where he is now Professor Emeritus, was on the sculpture faculty at the New York Studio School from 1976-79, and a visiting faculty member there until 1998. About his teaching, sculptor Walter Hall said, "For me he was a teacher in no conventional sense, but in a deep sense he was that to the core—a mentor—intent on sharing his passions and perceptions, and importantly, his artistic lineage. I saw him (and still do) as an indefatigable, relentless spirit, unwavering in its conviction, driven to ends not defined by trends or fame or the marketplace, principled and uncompromising in the extreme."

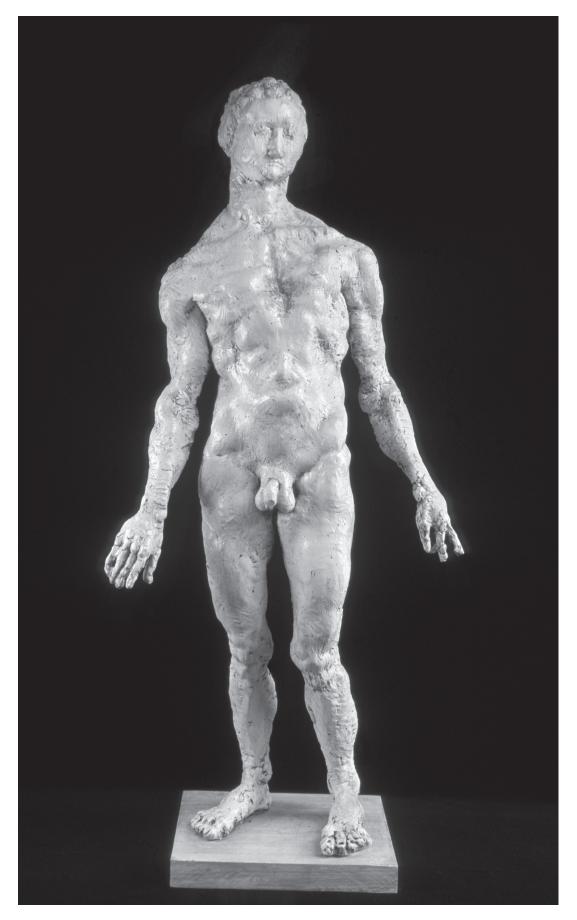
Cairns continues to work in his former firehouse studio in Havertown PA. He makes weekly trips to NYC, a habit begun in 1970, where he goes to museums, and attends films, music and theater events.



Christopher Cairns, Blanche, 2002, 24"h, bronze



Christopher Cairns, Deposition, 1987, 36"h, bronze



Bruce Gagnier, OTOM IV, 2002, 42"h, plaster

Bruce Gagnier

Gagnier's sculptures droop with the psychological weight of some of Rodin's more oppressed figures, as if they were at odds with themselves. Their roughened surfaces, fingered and punctuated, look battle scarred, yet they convey a youthful awkwardness, as if they were uncomfortably coming into being. -Lance Esplund, Art in America, July, 2001

Bruce Gagnier was born in Williamstown, MA in 1941. His father, a butcher and a painter, took him as a boy to the local museums, an experience that began a life-long love of painting and museums. He graduated from Williams College, where he studied biology and was on the ski team. Like many young artists, he gravitated towards New York, where he enrolled at Columbia University, worked with Jack Heliker and Peter Agostini, and earned his MFA. It was there that Gagnier met fellow students Jonathan Silver and Christopher Cairns in Agostini's drawing class. He worked as Agostini's studio assistant in the early 60's, during a very productive time in Agostini's artistic development.

After Columbia, Gagnier maintained his connections with Cairns and Silver, participating in an ongoing exchange of ideas that sparked lively discussion, dissent, mutual support and occasional rivalry – all of which aided each artist's individual development. Gagnier taught at Haverford College in 1974-76, and the three showed together at Haverford in 1976.

Gagnier is both a painter and a sculptor. While sometimes concentrating for years on one medium, he more often works back and forth, concurrently painting and making sculpture. He is an inveterate draughtsman. Gagnier's influences are eclectic, encompassing Cubism, the works of Giacometti and de Kooning and African Ife heads.

The themes of Gagnier's paintings have ranged from heads, to fantasy seascapes and imagined landscapes, to groupings of figures, single figure paintings and what he calls "portraits." The latter works draw from art history rather than from particular individuals. His approach brings to mind the working methods of Earl Kerkam: Gagnier may begin with a model but then proceeds, as he says, to "torture the thing," transforming the piece through working and reworking it until any direct resemblance to the model is removed.

Central to Gagnier's sculpture are the human figure and head, which he elongates and distorts, scraping and pulling the material and manipulating the surface to create internal torsion and a sense that these objects are shaping themselves of their own accord. He has often worked directly in clay, modeling, then firing the pieces and either glazing or painting them. More recently he has worked in plastiline, later casting these works in bronze. Gagnier's sculpture reflects his deep interest in so-called primitive art, especially West African and Mayan sculpture, as well as his commitment to the figure as subject. His work is vitally connected to history and is based on a profound knowledge of the art of the world. The ceramic sculptures reflect various modern influences from Nadelman to Arturo Martini to Turku Trajan. Of his more recent sculpture, critic David Cohen states, "the real fusion here is of the late Roman bronzes with Giacometti".

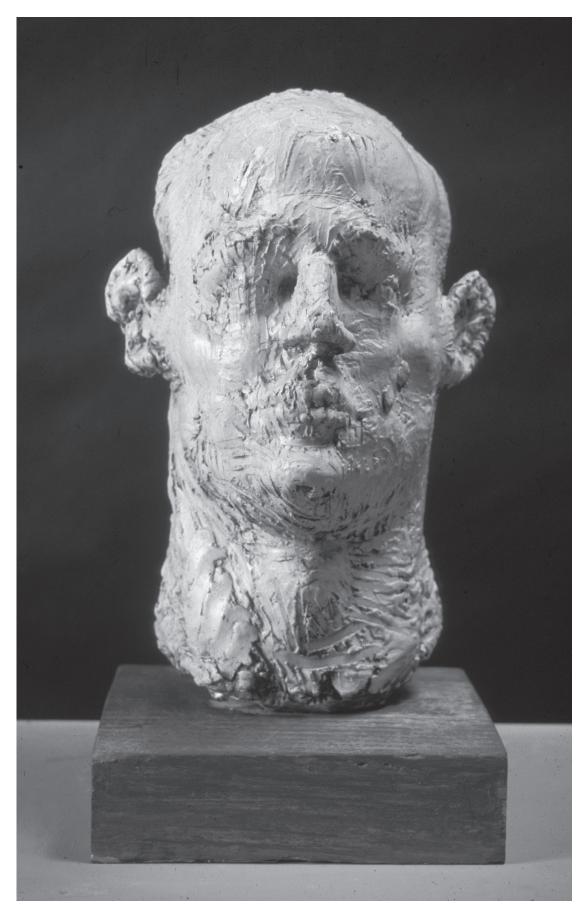
About the connections between experience and art, Gagnier says, "More and more I live in the past. I don't qualify my experience as to whether something is living or dead, whether it occurs in the contemporary world, in the here and now, or in a museum. A sculpture from the sixth century is more real to me than seeing a man vomiting on 8th Street at 3 a.m."

Noted for his knowledge of art and art history, his passion for creating and the independence of his aesthetic convictions, Gagnier has had a substantial influence over a generation of younger artists through his teaching. He has taught sculpture and lectured on art at the New York Studio School since the early 80's and served as the school's Dean for seven years.

Gagnier has had numerous one-person and group shows in New York and regionally. He is currently represented by the Lori Bookstein Gallery, New York.



Bruce Gagnier, Figure, 1983, 28"h, ceramic



Bruce Gagnier, Chuck, 2001, 15"h, plaster



Jonathan Silver, Head, 1976, 21"h, plaster

Jonathan Silver

Silver's sculpture is steeped in classical and religious myth. It is assembled, however, with a keen sense of modernist history, in particular, of the formal and psychological implications of Cubism and Surrealism. In Silver's work, myth is not quiet and controllable, but something that grows and evolves on its own and obliges mere mortals to flail away in its wake.

-Michael Brenson, 1984, The New York Times

Jonathan Silver was born in New York City in 1937. He decided not to go to high school, preferring to be educated by tutors at home. He received a B.S. degree in general studies from Columbia University and later enrolled in the Art History Ph.D. program under the famed historian, Meyer Schapiro. Schapiro was impressed by Silver's intellectual prowess and supported his dissertation on Giacometti. Silver, however, started making sculpture seriously in the late 1960's, and never completed his doctorate. As a Columbia student, he drew in Peter Agostini's class between 1960 and 1966, where he met future colleagues Christopher Cairns and Bruce Gagnier in 1965.

During the 1970's Silver worked alongside Cairns, collaborating on ideas for heads and figures. The two approached their work with the ambition and stamina of scientists tackling big questions, in it for the long haul; it was clear they neither expected, nor were interested in, quick or dramatically "personalized" solutions. Cairns and Silver developed a common method of assembling and reassembling, or embedding fragments of one head or figure into another, thus creating new works. The sculpture produced during this period was shown by Silver and Cairns at the 4x10 Gallery in New York in 1976. With their fellow alumnus from Agostini's class, Bruce Gagnier, they showed at Haverford College's Comfort Gallery in 1976. Cairns and Silver also exhibited together at the Weatherspoon Gallery in Greensboro, NC in 1978, and at the New York Studio School in 1979.

Silver began working on larger figures in the early eighties. Abounding with classical, mythical and art historical references, these ambitious works further developed the method of combining and recombining elements from several different pieces. Elaborately constructed, they often included found objects or sections of the plaster molds themselves. *Wounded Amazon*, which is in the Walker Art Center Sculpture Garden, dates from this period. Silver liked to say his work "tended towards the Greco-Oriental."

A visit to the Medici Chapel while traveling in Italy with Cairns in 1982 was formative. Silver began experimenting with placing groups of figures together in a room, leading to his *Room Dedicated to Septimus Severus*, exhibited with other large pieces at the Gruenbaum Gallery in Soho in 1985. Shows at the Victoria Munroe Gallery followed in the early 1990's. There was a posthumous show of his heads at the Sculpture Center in 1996.

During the last seven years of his life, Silver worked on rooms of sculpture, including the *Lower Room* installed at the Sculpture Center in 1990. Consisting of a dramatic ensemble of figures evoking the disabling effects of memory and aging, the room was filled with figures seized by uncontrollable and incomprehensible forces. Silver's late works were often scenes of torment or rage, where the expressionistic surface treatment contributed to their high emotional pitch.

Silver spent his entire life drawing from the model. He would stand at an easel, drawing with a number 2 pencil, making small, exquisitely constructed figure drawings. He also drew incessantly while watching television.

To support himself, Silver taught Art History at Montclair State College in Montclair, NJ. He was a frequent lecturer and visiting critic at the New York Studio School and at Haverford College, where he had a profound influence on students for over twenty years, inspiring those who worked closely with him by his penetrating intelligence, erudition, and aesthetic probity, and his willingness to share his perceptions. Silver wrote and published extensively on art historical topics. His articles on Giacometti and David Smith were published by *ArtNews*.

Jonathan Silver died of lung cancer in New York in 1992 at the age of 54.



Jonathan Silver, Night, 1976, 21"h, bronze



Jonathan Silver, Small Venus, 1984, 66.5x8x6.5", bronze



George Spaventa, Torso, 1968, 21"h, bronze

George Spaventa

"George...was a man of eloquent silences. His work breathes with the eloquence of his muteness." -Elaine De Kooning, 1979

George Spaventa was a thoughtful, somewhat reclusive artist who claimed that the ideas for his sculpture came to him in dreams. He was born in New York City in 1918, where he studied as a teenager at the Leonardo Da Vinci Art School. After serving in the military during World War II, Spaventa studied art in Paris on the G.I. Bill. There, he worked with Ossip Zadkine, visited Brancusi in his studio, and had the good fortune of meeting Giacometti, one of his great influences.

Spaventa's work was small, intimate, molded by hand in clay or wax and later cast in bronze. Besides Giacometti, his influences included Medardo Rosso and David Smith. In a 1964 review of Spaventa's first and only New York solo show during his lifetime, his good friend, the writer Frank O'Hara, described his work:

In Spaventa, the emphasis is on the hand, and handling. With the single exception of Nakian, it is difficult to think of an American Sculptor who has insisted more upon the imprint of his finger, thumb, wrist and arm. Sensitivity to the material is there, but first and foremost, the material itself is required to be capable of sensitivity to Spaventa.

He was a methodical worker, not particularly prolific, and it wasn't until he was in his mid-forties that he had his first solo show, the first of just two. His work was exhibited in a number of group shows, however, in the 50s and 60s, including the Annual Exhibition 1962 at the Whitney Museum, and an exhibition entitled, "Four American Sculptors," which also included Peter Agostini.

Spaventa was especially well liked and admired by many sculptors and painters of his time. He was particularly associated with a group of artists who worked on 10th Street in New York City, and developed what came to be identified as the "10th Street Style." They included, among others, Milton Resnick, Earl Kerkham, Franz Kline, Peter Agostini, and Willem de Kooning, with whom Spaventa was sometimes compared, and who once said about him, "When I look at George's sculptures, I wish I had made them myself."

Spaventa was one of the founding faculty members of the New York Studio School, where he taught until he died. Students remember him perpetually encircled by a cloud of smoke, ashes dropping from the lit cigarette in his mouth onto the clay as he rearranged their pieces with crushing movements and inarticulate grunts.

Spaventa found verbal expression difficult and would demonstrate with his hands and whole body in making a point. During the late 70s he would often comment of the work of Matisse, Michelangelo, and Brancusi using the words "oneness... plasticity..." over and over. He spoke about visiting Brancusi on Sundays when all the artists opened their studios. He once asked Brancusi about The Endless Column. Brancusi answered only by breathing deeply. George interpreted this to suggest that the column was about breath. He would often refer to a picture in the Matisse Sculpture book of "Jaguar Devouring a Hare after Barye." He would demonstrate how Matisse simplified the thrust of the jaguar by drawing his finger (with dry clay on it) along the form on the page. I am sure that that streak of clay is still on the book in the Studio School Library.

-Scott Sherk, 2006

Despite the public nature of his teaching life, Spaventa spent much of his time alone, in a life dedicated to art. He died of a heart attack in his studio in 1978. His work has been shown just twice since his death.



George Spaventa, Head, 1955, 17"h, bronze



George Spaventa, Figure #1, 1963, 13"h, bronze

Exhibition List

Peter Agostini

Marina head, bronze, 1945, 15"h, private collection Horse, bronze, 1952, 13"h, private collection Figure, bronze, 1956, 20"h, private collection Squeeze #1, bronze, 1964, 13"x8"x7", private collection Saracen, bronze, 1959, 31"h, collection Anita Shapolsky Running horse, bronze, 1972, 14"h, private collection Old Man head, bronze, 1972, 10"h, collection Diane Agostini Rock head, bronze, 1970, 12"h, collection Diane Agostini Swell, bronze, 1968, 17"h, collection Diane Agostini Rock head, bronze, 1972, 7"h, collection Diane Agostini

Christopher Cairns

B-52, bronze, 1973, 17"h, collection of artist *Deadly Nightshade*, bronze, 1975, 23"h, collection of artist *Sherk head*, bronze, 1974, 22"h, collection of artist *St. Joan*, bronze, 1984, 41"h, collection of artist *Phaedra*, bronze, 1982, 42"h, collection Lindsey Lawrence *Deposition*, bronze, 1987, 36"h, collection of artist *Medea*, bronze, 1987, 27"h, collection of artist *Am Damme*, bronze, 1993, 63" long, collection of artist *Burrowman*, bronze, 2002, 39" long, collection of artist *Blanche*, bronze, 2002, 24"h, collection Mark and Johanna Chehi

Bruce Gagnier

Joseph, bronze, 2000, 28"h, private collection Otom IV, bronze, 2003, 42" h, collection Jock Ireland Malone, bronze, 1999, 30"h, collection Jock Ireland Untitled figure, bronze, 2003, 30"h, collection Jock Ireland Molloy, bronze, 1999, 27"h, courtesy Lori Bookstein Fine Art Ruderi #1, plaster, 1985, 28"h, courtesy Lori Bookstein Fine Art Chuck, plaster, 2001, 15"h, courtesy Lori Bookstein Fine Art Mask, ceramic, 1980, 10"h, courtesy Lori Bookstein Fine Art head, painted ceramic, 1983, 14"h, courtesy Lori Bookstein Fine Art figure, ceramic, 1983, 30"h, courtesy Lori Bookstein Fine Art

Jonathan Silver

Night, bronze, 1976, 21"h, private collection head, plaster, 1976, 20"h, private collection head, plaster, 1974, 21"h, collection Richard Bechtel head, plaster, 1975, 13"h, private collection figure, bronze, 1988, 34"h, collection, Alexis Cairns Small Venus, bronze, 1983, 66"h, collection Richard Bechtel Elijah, bronze, 1988, 34"h, The Jonathan and Barbara Silver Foundation, courtesy Lori Bookstein Fine Art Niobid, bronze, 1983, 30"h, The Jonathan and Barbara Silver Foundation, courtesy Lori Bookstein Fine Art Untitled, bronze, 1990, 36"h, The Jonathan and Barbara Silver Foundation, courtesy Lori Bookstein Fine Art head of Wounded Amazon, 1984, bronze, 11"h, private collection

George Spaventa

Torso, bronze, 1968, 12"h, collection Deborah Masters head, bronze, 1956, 17"h, collection Paul Resika Figure #1, 1962, 13"h, collection Paul Resika Pregnant figure, bronze, 1954, 9"h, collection Stanley Kunitz Eagle, bronze, 7"h, collection Paul Resika Walking Woman, bronze, 1956, 34"h, collection Elizabeth Harris gallery Crucifixion, bronze, 1963, 12" h, collection Harriet Vicente Figure, bronze, 12"h, collection Paul Resika Metaphysical Still Life, bronze, 1975,11"h, private collection study – 1958, bronze, 10"h, collection Harriet Vicente