



A Feeling of Lightness

NAOMI PRESS

Retrospective



The artist with *Emma*
Stainless steel, Height: 61 cm. (24 in.)

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Retrospective

Curated by Edward Lucie Smith
Co-curated by Mick Bateman

7th - 30th October 2011

The Bermondsey Project Space
46 Willow Walk, London, SE1 5SF
020 7426 3882



The artist with Clement Greenberg,
Malleable Metals, Bethany, Connecticut, 1984

FOREWORD

by Karen Wilkin
New York, August 2011

Asked for advice to young artists, in the eager question and answer sessions that followed his lectures, the celebrated critic Clement Greenberg often said "Live a long time!" He frequently added, "If van Gogh hadn't shot himself at thirty seven, he would have died a rich man," which always got a laugh. But Greenberg was also serious. He was advocating persistence and effort, over time. His aesthetic was formed in an era, when, in contrast to today's enthusiastic embrace of unformed talent plucked straight from art schools, artists were expected to spend decades maturing both the form and content of their efforts before they felt themselves worthy of attention. Greenberg believed - as many artists, curators, and critics still do - that only with the luxury of time, could painters and sculptors fully explore the many possibilities presented by their materials, develop the implications of discoveries made in the course of working, and, perhaps, most important, find their own voices.

Greenberg became an admirer of Naomi Press's work fairly early on in her evolution as a sculptor. Over the years that he followed her development, he continued to admire her and I suspect that had Greenberg himself lived longer, he would have continued to follow

Press's work with interest, as her individual voice grew even clearer; from her improvisations on the elegant color and suave surface of stainless steel to her recent responses to the character of 19th century builder's brick.

Each of Press's series is distinct and expressive of the particularities of her materials, but there are also recognizable constants - the artist's own sculptural "handwriting." No matter what material she works in, whether she is making intimate pedestal based works or large constructions that occupy our own space, Press's sculptures are characterized by a clear relationship of part to part, by firmly articulated profiles, and by sensitive adjustment to the needs of scale. While her language is a language of abstraction, her shapes and forms are never arbitrary, but always resonate with the fact that they are triggered by lived experience. The selection of Press's work in this exhibition is at once tightly focused enough and comprehensive enough to present an accurate portrait of the artist's recent concerns and some of their origins, over her long career. Her friend Greenberg would be pleased that she followed his advice.



The artist with Clement Greenberg,
Malleable Metals, Bethany, Connecticut, 1984

TAKING BACK THE TERRITORY

by Edward Lucie-Smith

It may seem odd to compare Naomi Press, who is neither Portuguese nor a poet, to one of the most distinguished poets that Portugal has produced. Fernando Pessoa (1888-1935) is one of the best known of all Portuguese Modernist writers. His fame is founded, not only on the quality of his poetry, but upon the fact that his poems were the product of three entirely different literary personalities, to each of which he assigned a different name. Anyone who looks through this catalogue will understand the justice of the comparison. Naomi Press is three sculptors in one, and each of these sculptors is a fully independent creative being.

One may add, as a footnote to this, the fact that Press has spent much of her long creative life in South Africa. Pessoa, as it happens, spent a large part of his childhood and adolescence there, living first in Durban, then studying at the University of Cape Town.

Like Pessoa, Press was not African born. She was born in Iwje (or Ivje) a town near Vilnius. Like Vilnius itself,

Iwje was then Polish, but belonged historically to the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, and is now once again Lithuanian. A large part of its population perished in the Holocaust. Press and her family escaped before the Holocaust began, emigrating to Bulawayo, in what is now Zimbabwe. She remembers that her first love in the arts was neither painting nor sculpture, but ballet. However, she also remembers winning a prize, when she was twelve years old, for a painting of three dancing figures. "This was a surprise," she says, "because I didn't enjoy painting on an easel. I kept wanting to do the back of the figures."

Later, married for a second time after a brief first marriage, Press moved to South Africa, where she began to make sculpture in earnest, at first pieces in polished bronze that echoed the dance movements and gestures she had learned as a girl. A crucial encounter was one with the American critic Clement Greenberg, who came to South Africa to lecture. Greenberg and his daughter became close family friends.

By this time Press and her husband also had a second home in the United States, fifty miles outside of New York. When they visited America, their friendship with Greenberg continued and deepened. Greenberg introduced them to the circle of distinguished artists who surrounded him, among them Helen Frankenthaler and Kenneth Noland. She got to know the revolutionary work of David Smith and Antony Caro. Greenberg encouraged her to make a change of course, from work cast in bronze to abstract steel sculptures made on a large scale, which originated in smaller scale paper models. "The move away from the anthropomorphic excited me," she says. "Turning away from the pedestal or mantelpiece and placing a sculpture directly on the ground - horizontal, oblique, in the round - was a new experience: what freedom!"

These steel sculptures, which she continues to make, often on a very large scale, now represent one of her three major sculptural personalities. Essentially they identify her with a crucial phase in the development of Late Modernist sculpture, the moment when monumental sculptures climbed down off their bases, and confronted their potential audience without being



physically separated from it. It is interesting to compare what she did with this concept with the work of Smith and Caro. Essentially her work tends to be more sinuous, with twisting, ribbon-like forms that seem to relate to her youthful passion for dance. She talks of her wish "to bring an element of surprise, variety, humour and a feeling of lightness" to these often monumental pieces. The choice of words seems less strange when one confronts the sculptures themselves - they offer a series of evolving points of view, but what one sees, as one moves from one viewpoint to another, is never quite what one anticipates. Press says they now tend to surprise even her, when she returns to her home in America after a nine-month absence.

Like David Smith, Press sometimes makes use of found forms - discarded industrial detritus. She describes how, in South Africa, she used to work in factories than specialized in making large industrial objects out of steel. Discarded templates used for boatbuilding and for forming parts of machines became a source of inspiration and were incorporated into the work. This tendency to re-cycle found objects is of course typical of the way in which Modernist sculpture developed. One finds many examples of it in the sculptural work of Picasso. Often the shock of surprise comes from recognizing a particular component's original purpose.

Press's second sculptural personality also makes use of recycling, but both the basic material and the results are even more unexpected than the forms found in the sculptures made of steel. She explains that when she and her husband decided to leave Johannesburg and spend more time in London, she found herself unexpectedly inspired by the red brick buildings she found in certain parts of the city - buildings from the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th, in a style that is sometimes described as 'Pont Street Dutch'. "I fell in love with these magnificent red brick buildings," she says, "with their elaborate gables and cornices, and often with inlaid cameo busts of the original owners." After a search, she found the original source of this material in the brick fields of West Sussex. The owner of the brick works she visited was delighted by her enthusiasm, and allowed her to carry off as much material as she wanted. "I gathered

The artist, c. 1974

as many bricks as my car could carry, finding the most unusual shapes, broken shapes, bits of cornices, things long ago cast off - even new bricks sometimes, lying around in the mud." For a long time, however, she wondered exactly what to do with them.

What catapulted her into a new creative phase was, first, the threat of losing the storage space where she kept the materials she had rescued, and, secondly, a chance encounter with one of Richard Long's stone circles. What she made, however, was something fundamentally different from Long's work - a series of miniature buildings, which could be brought together to form an imaginary citadel. Another source of inspiration for this concept was the series of landscapes that Picasso painted at Horta de Ebro in 1909 - the beginning of Cubism.

Sculpture representing architecture is, for obvious reasons, a great rarity, so much so that it is hard to think of any other convincing examples. We are more accustomed to seeing sculpture placed in relation to architecture, or acting as part of an architectural ensemble, such as, for instance, the marble reliefs and

figures that once adorned the Parthenon. Perhaps the nearest contemporary parallels to Press' work, oddly enough, are the terrifying miniature worlds created by Jake and Dinos Chapman.

Her brick sculptures are very different from her work in steel because, rather than exploring form, they aim to tease the imagination. What beings, for instance, can have inhabited these little buildings, which we see through the wrong end of a telescope? The brick sculptures, when brought together, invite the spectator to invent a narrative.

Press' third personality is as different from the other two as they are from each other. Reverting to the modeling techniques she used at the beginning of her career, she has been making a series of sculptures in bronze, but the bronze has now been given a highly reflective, mirror-like surface that, as Press remarks, almost has the liquid quality of a pool of mercury. These works are often commentaries on the great Modernist sculptors of the past - there are tributes to Brancusi (new versions of Brancusi's The Kiss) and allusions to Archipenko and perhaps also to Zadkine. In them she casts a slightly satirical, but at the same time appreciative eye, on our contemporary world of beauty and fashion, "the obsession with glamour, with shoes, with fashion shows." She is fascinated not only by our obsession with youth, but by the exaggerated poses adopted by young and would-be fashionable women - "busts thrust forward in skin tight sheaths." These 'liquid silver' sculptures are the products of someone who has always moved in the great world, but who has preserved sufficient distance from it to be able to turn its follies into art.

Her three creative enterprises are not sequential. In the latter part of Press's career, they overlap. What they all have in common in their concern with form, and with how form is experienced in relation to the surrounding space. In an age when "anything can be sculpture" - a collage made from newspaper, two performers singing as they stand on a table - she offers a salutary reminder of why sculpture offers unique kinetic and empathetic experiences that can be duplicated by no other form of artistic expression. In this sense, she is classic, in addition to being modern.



Clement Greenberg,
Kenneth Noland and the artist

The artist with Solo I,
1989, Anglo-American
Corporation, Finance
House, Johannesburg



STAINLESS STEEL

Naomi Press' work in steel, inspired in part by her friendship with the influential American critic Clement Greenberg, and by contact with other practitioners of the same style, such as David Smith and Antony Caro, places her firmly in the late phase of High Modernist sculpture, and, to be more precise, in that part of it that descends from Cubism. It is often distinguished by her employment of more sinuous forms than those of her male colleagues. It is tempting, knowing her early background in ballet, to see a number of these sculptures, not as being in any way abstracted representations of dance, but as metaphors for dance.

Greenberg's insistence that sculpture must desert the customary pedestal, and engage directly with the viewer has been enormously influential, and Press was one of the pioneering sculptors who pushed this idea to its limit. The fact that her role in this significant sculptural movement has been ignored is largely due to her long residence in South Africa, though she has major sculptures visible not only in that country but also in the United States. It is an interesting fact that these sculptures begin with maquettes made of ephemeral materials - paper and cardboard.



Improvisation, 1988
Initialed NP, stainless steel, 269 x 125 x 117 cm. (106 x 49 x 46 in.)



"The leap of imaginative accord cannot be taught."

Lyndall Gordon

Rondo, 1984

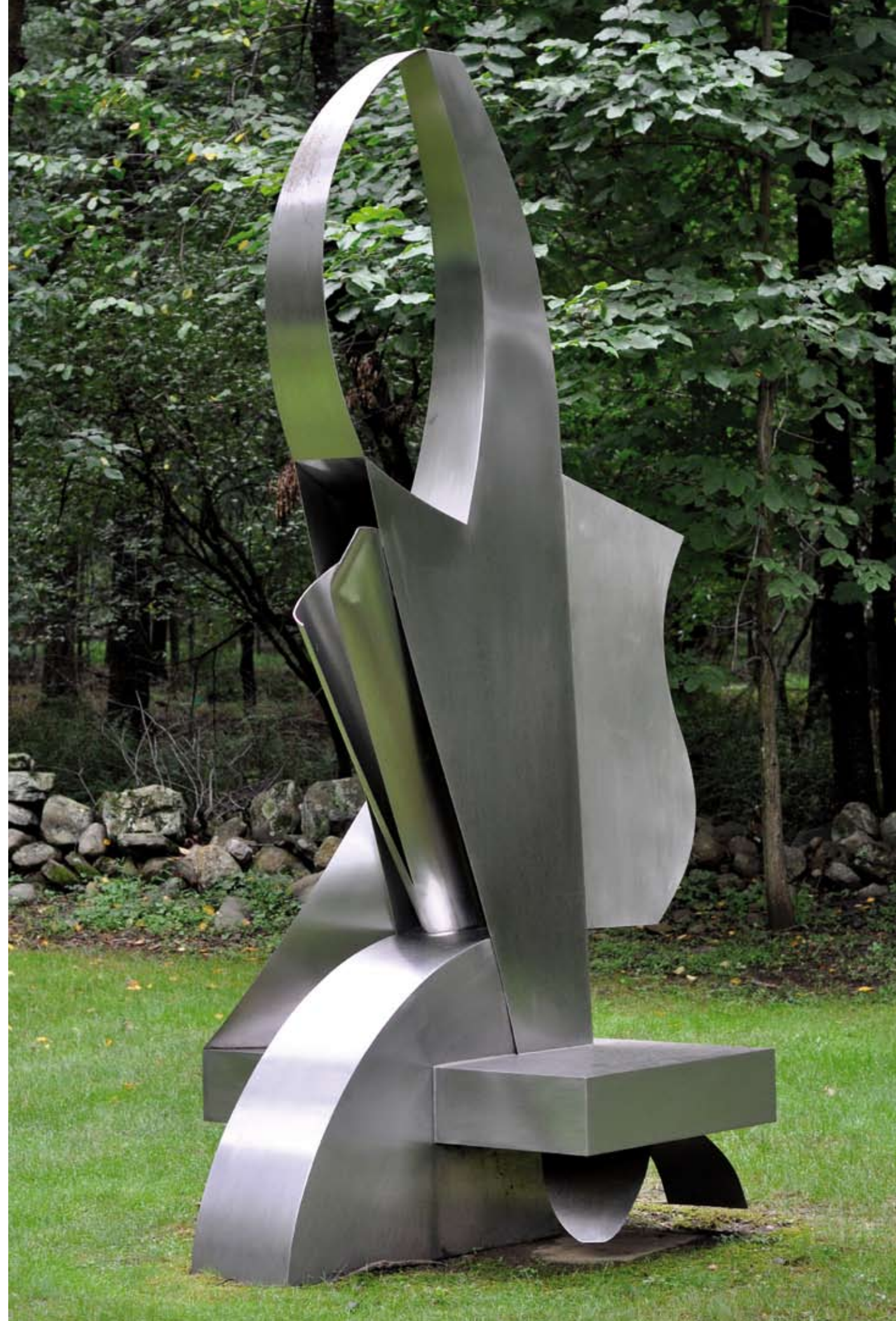
Initialed NP, stainless steel, 140 x 127 x 51 cm. (55 x 50 x 20 in.)



"Her highly personalized approach to the metal - contemplative, intuitive, passionate, direct, and concise - has revealed undreamed of possibilities for stainless steel abstract forms in space....Press's deft manipulation of sweeping planes and volumes, although tightly controlled, project the viewer into a timeless world where form and feeling have been integrated. This is a world which values the profound life-affirming experience of her sculpture - a deeply felt, graceful encounter."

Robert Metzger

Sylvan, 1986
Initialed NP, stainless steel, 239 x 117 x 101.5 cm. (94 x 46 x 40 in.)
New York Private Collector



"Gleaming stainless steel becomes, in her hands,
an extraordinarily refined metal..."

Karen Wilkin

Fouette, 1984
Initialed NP, stainless steel, Height: 152.5 cm. (60 in.)
London Private Collector



"I try to bring elements together with space and form,
adding excitement, daring, expressiveness, humour,
the look of the unexpected and a feeling of lightness."

Naomi Press

Head, 1985

Initialed NP, stainless steel, 155 x 75 x 33 cm. (61 x 29 ½ x 13 in.



"I think the freedom of gesture and the courage to act
are more important than trying to make a design."

David Smith

Glissard, 1985
Initialed NP, stainless steel, Length: 127 cm. (50 in.)





“...the touch of a butterfly’s wing...on a framework of steel”

Naomi Press, inspired by Virginia Woolf

Rond de Jambe, 1984
Stainless steel, 56 x 73.3 x 20.3 cm. (22 x 29 x 8 in.)



“It was to be a thing you could ruffle with your breath;
and a thing you could not dislodge with a team of horses”

Virginia Woolf

Equus, 1984
Stainless steel, 66 x 63.5 x 33 cm. (26 x 25 x 13 in.)

"Steel is the hardest and most durable
material - the cleanest and most reflective."

Naomi Press

Vertex, 1984
Initialed NP, stainless steel, 167.5 x 61 x 50.8 cm. (66 ½ x 24 x 20 in.)





Artist's design for brick installation
at Bermondsey Art Project, 2011

TERRACOTTA

The sculptures made from bricks are perhaps Naomi Press's most unexpected works. People have always felt a fascination with things that portray the world in miniature, but efforts of this kind are seldom or never presented as art. One thinks of the table-top battlefield panoramas still sometimes to be found in old-fashioned military museums - an obvious source of inspiration for the Chapman brothers - and also of the surroundings for their trains devised by model railway enthusiasts. Press' brick sculptures do not have this insistent exactitude, they are paraphrases of architecture, not just a literal minded reduction in scale

of the real thing. Perhaps what they most readily remind me of are the ruins of ancient pueblos to be found in certain parts of New Mexico. The fact that the brick sculptures incorporate fragments of full-scale buildings means that they offer a kind of double vision. The fragmented parts make us speculate about their original purpose. Because the bricks themselves are fragile, the completed sculptures are usually cast in resin, textured and coloured so that they exactly resemble the original. Press has also, on occasion made scaled up versions in resin, in which the forms derived from the bricks take on a more independently abstract quality.

"The view from my window of the red brick buildings with their gables, cornices and pediments inspired me and I went in search of the place these bricks were made."

Naomi Press

Citadel I, 2004

Cast terracotta, edition of 3 and one AP, Height: 81.5 cm. (32 in.)





Citadel III, 2009
Terracotta resin, Edition of 7, Height: 43.2 cm. (17 in.)



Citadel IV, 2009
Terracotta resin, Edition of 7, Height: 46 cm. (18 in.)



Citadel VII, 2009
Terracotta resin, Edition of 7, Height: 44 cm. (17 ¼ in.)



Citadel VI, 2009
Terracotta resin, Edition of 7, Height: 44.5 cm. (17 ½ in.)



Citadel VII, 2009
Terracotta resin, Edition of 7, Length 41.3 cm. (16 ¼ in.)



Citadel V, 2009
Terracotta resin, Edition of 7, Length: 44.5 cm (17 ½ in.)



Citadel IX, 2009
Terracotta resin, Edition of 7, Length: 37.5 cm (14 ¾ in.)



Citadel X, 2009
Terracotta resin, Edition of 7, Height: 37 cm. (14 ½ in.)



LIQUID SILVER

The 'liquid silver' pieces by Naomi Press that form the third section of this exhibition are full of surprises. At a time when most sculptors seem to find it difficult to make convincing work on a relatively small scale, these are series of sophisticated variants on the human figure, just sufficiently abstracted and simplified to surprise the eye of the spectator. Many are obviously inspired by Press's knowledge of and passion for dance. Others are witty commentaries on the follies of the world of fashion. There is a wide range of cultural reference. Some pieces refer to Brancusi's *The Kiss*. Others seem to allude to certain Hellenistic Greek sculptures, which

make virtuoso use of finely pleated drapery. What animates all these sculptures is the constant play of light on their highly reflective surfaces. Every shift in the spectator's position modifies the forms. In this sense, many of them seem to be actually animated - the dancers move and sway to unheard music. Humour is not usually a quality we associate with sculpture, but these pieces are often witty. In some cases, it's not far off the mark to call them actually mischievous. These are the products of an artist who can actually have fun with her work.

Arabesque, 2011
Initialed NP and numbered 1/7, silvered bronze edition, Height: 27.3 cm. (10 ³/₄ in.)





Form in Movement, 2011
Initialed NP and numbered 1/7, silvered bronze edition, Length: 45 cm. (17 ¾ in.)

Arch with raised Knee, 2011

Initialed NP and numbered 1/7, silvered bronze edition, Height: 27.3 cm. (10 ½ in.)



Seated Form, 2011
Initialed NP and numbered 1/7,
silvered bronze edition, Height: 34.3 cm. (13 ½ in.)



Form in Movement, Head Back, 2011
Initialed NP and numbered 1/7, silvered bronze edition, Length: 46 cm. (18 1/8 in.)

Seated form with Raised Knee, 2011
Initialed NP and numbered 1/7, silvered bronze edition, Height 30.5 cm. (12 in.)



Lunge, 2011
Initialed NP and numbered 1/7, silvered bronze edition, Height 30.5 cm. (12 in.)



Lift, 2009

Initialed NP and numbered 1/7, silvered bronze edition, Height: 32.5 cm. (12 ¾ in.)



Catwalk, 2009

Initialed NP and numbered 1/7, silvered bronze, Height: 24.8 cm. (9 ¾ in.)



Model with shoe, 2009
initialed NP and numbered 1/7,
silvered bronze,
Height: 47.6 cm. (18 ¾ in.)



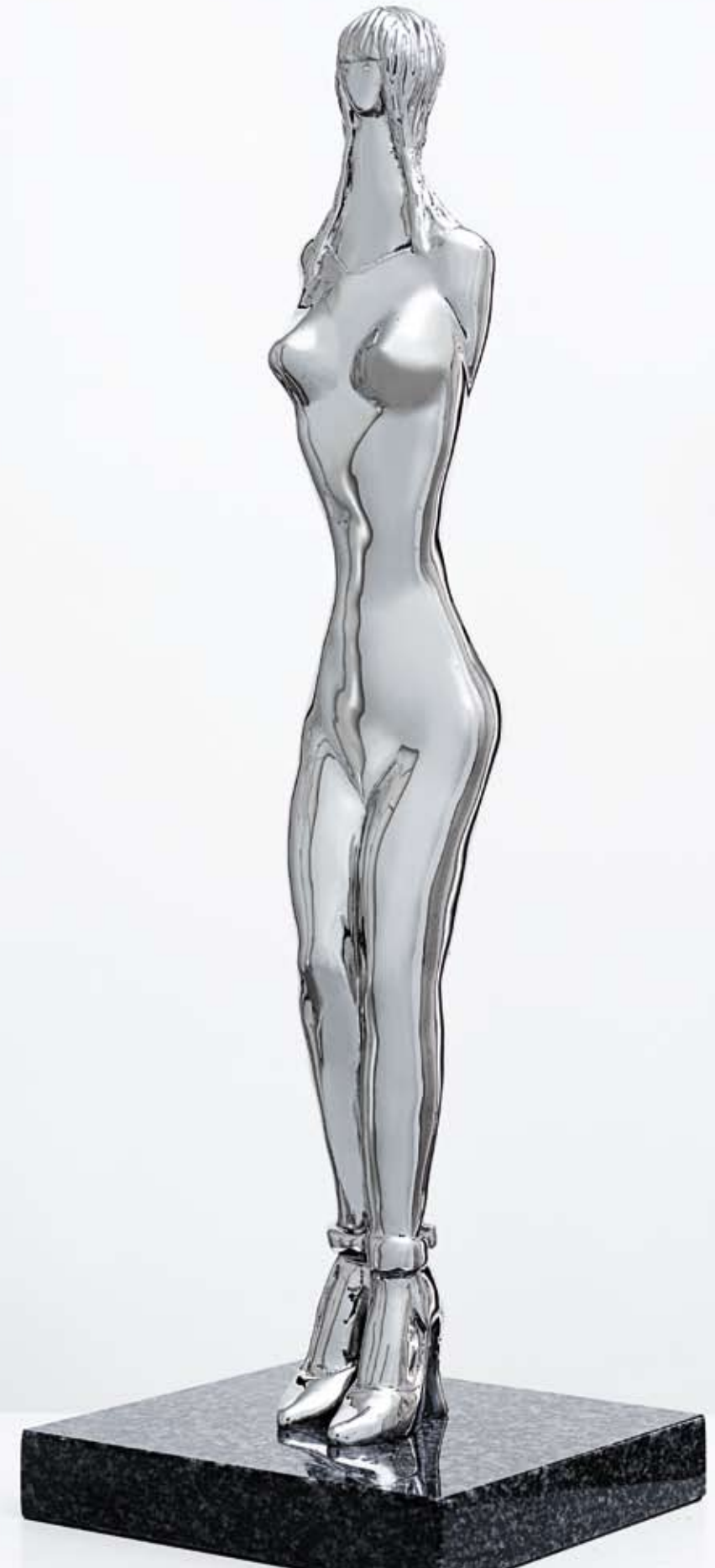
Palace dreams, 2010

Initialed NP and numbered 1/7, silvered bronze, Height: 33 cm. (13 in.)



All I want is My New Shoes, 2010

Initialed NP and numbered 1/7, silvered bronze, Height: 33 cm. (13 in.)





Pure Love, 2009
Initialed NP and numbered 1/7, silvered bronze, Height: 20.3 cm. (8 in.)



When Two becomes One, 2009
Initialed NP and numbered 1/7, silvered bronze, Height: 25 cm. (9 ¾ in.)

Inclined Head, 2009

Initialed NP and numbered 1/7, silvered bronze, Height: 33 cm. (13 in.)



Passion, 2009

Initialed NP and numbered 1/7, silvered bronze, Height: 24.8 cm. 9 ¾ in.



NAOMI PRESS

Born in Poland

Immigrated to Zimbabwe as a young child

Married and raised a family in Johannesburg, South Africa

Studied sculpture with Peter Hayden from 1968-1970 at the Craighall Academy, Johannesburg

and later with George Boys

Moved to London in 2001

1979 - 1980	Worked in bronze and marble in Pietrasanta, Italy	1991	Received commission for two stainless steel floating trophies for Faculty of Engineering, University of Johannesburg
1981	First exhibition at Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg, showing polished bronzes	1992	12 ft stainless steel sculpture acquired by ISOA Gallery Collection (Phyllis and Samuel Schreiber), Greenwich, CT
1982	Bronze “Mother and Child” chosen by Johnson and Johnson as floating trophy for baby-of-the-year award	1992	Stainless steel sculptures exhibited in Group Exhibition, Waterside Studios, Stamford, Connecticut
1982	Bronze “Dancer” chosen by Arabesque magazine as floating trophy for excellence award in the field of dance	1995	10 ft. stainless steel sculpture chosen for “The Park for the Two” in Jaffa, Israel
1982	One person exhibition at Gallery International, Cape Town, showing polished bronzes	1996	Phyllis Weil & Co. toured with sculptures in U.S.A. including Delaware Art Museum
1983	Began working in stainless steel at Malleable Metals foundry in Bethany, Connecticut	1998	10ft stainless steel sculpture chosen for André Emmerich’s Top Gallant Farm, Pauling, New York
1983 - 1985	Group shows at Everard Reed Gallery, Johannesburg and Cape Town	1998 - present	Rose Korber Art Salon, Cape Town, selected works exhibited
1985	One Person Exhibition at Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg, showing stainless steel	2000	Worked on series of brick figures and heads in Cape Town
1985 - 1986	Sculptures placed in private and public collections in the U.S., Canada, Great Britain and South Africa	2001	Moved to London.
1989	One-person exhibition with Phyllis Weil & Co at Art 54, New York City	2002 - 2005	Citadel Series in terracotta brick and resin
1989	Two-person exhibition at Dome Gallery, New York City	2003 - present	Everard Read Gallery, Cape Town, selected works exhibited
1990	Two stainless steel works acquired by William’s Island, Florida USA	2006	8 ft English Limestone Citadel Series sculpture placed in private collection, London
1990	One person exhibition at University of Johannesburg, opened by visiting art historian and curator, Dr. Robert Metzger, Bucknell University, Pennsylvania	2009 - present	New series in highly polished silvered bronze
1991	12 ft. stainless steel sculpture acquired for entrance of Anglo-American Finance House, Bruma Lake, Johannesburg		
1991	12 ft. stainless steel sculpture acquired by Anglo-American Properties, Kyalami Park, Johannesburg		

Enquiries:
info@naomipress.com

Works not illustrated in the catalogue:

Reclining Nude with Arched Back, 2011
Initialed NP and numbered 1/7, silvered
bronze edition
Length: 31 cm. (12 ¼ in).

Spanish Dancer, 2011
Initialed NP and numbered 1/7, silvered
bronze edition
Height: 38 cm. (15 in).

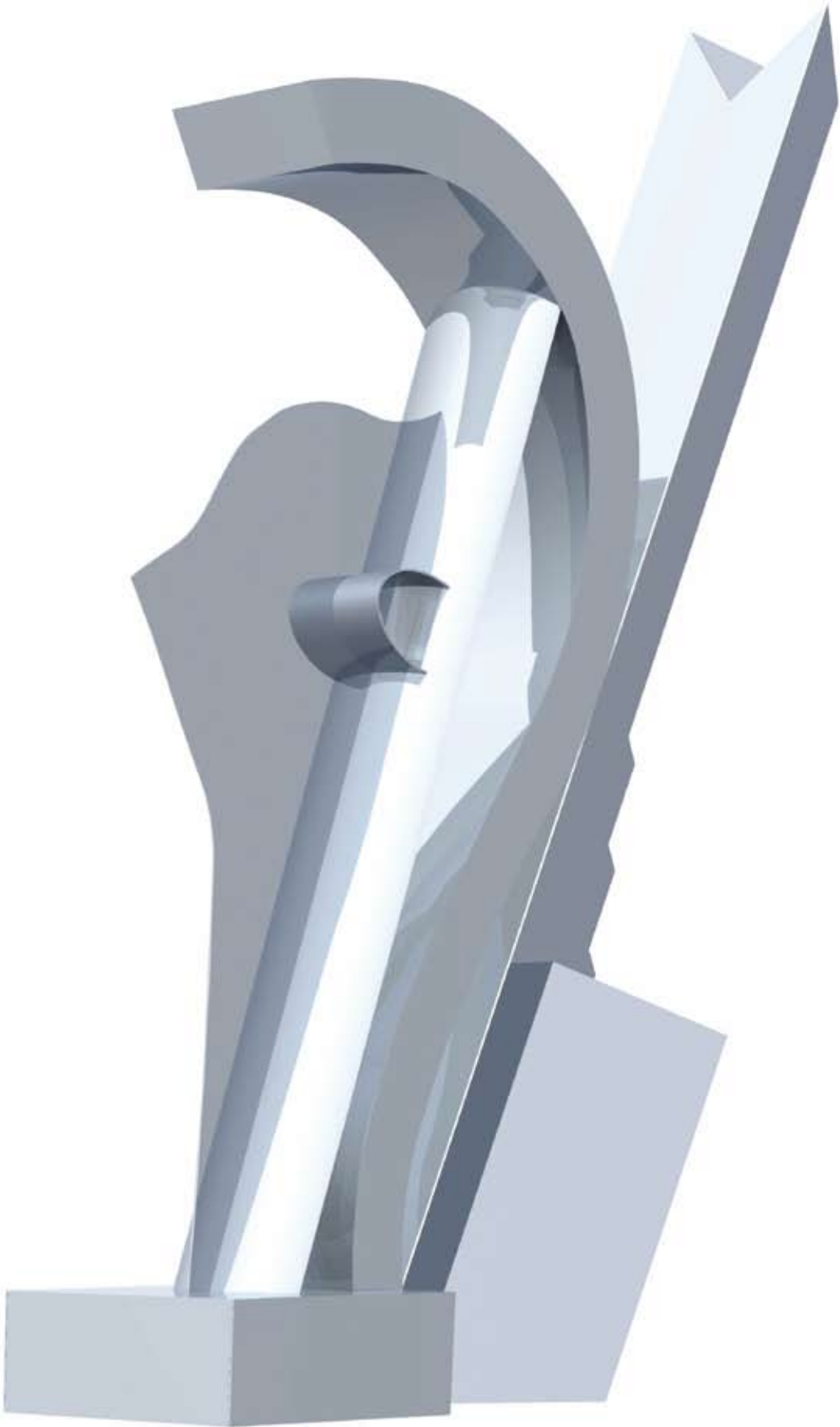
K and W on a Bed of Roses, 2011
Initialed NP and numbered 1/7, silvered
bronze
Height: 26 cm. (10 ¼ in).

Lovers, 2011
Initialed NP and numbered 1/7, silvered
bronze
Height: 45 cm. (17 ¾ in).

Citadel XI, XII, XIII, XIV, 2004
Terracotta resin, sizes vary
Edition of 7

Photography:
Keith Davey at Prudence Cuming (Terracotta & Liquid Silver)
Richard Valencia (p.33)
James Robinson (inside cover)
All other photos courtesy of the artist

Design:
James Robinson at jalloro
jalloro.com | +44 (0) 20 70362780



Artist's impression of Solo II, 2011,
Stainless steel, mirror finish, Height: 305 cm (120 in.)

