

The Evolving Sculpture of Blake Ward

written by Ariane Goodwin

In the beginning

Yellowknife is a city built on the Canadian Shield, sculpted from rock worn smooth during the last ice age. It is also where Blake Ward was born in 1956.

Here, a brief twilight serves as a winter's day that punctuates the long nights when the Aurora Borealis astounds with its 'dancing lights'. Here was born Blake's earliest inspiration for the sculptures to come – pristine ice and snow;

ancient stone; crispness; clarity and form.

That inspiration would evolve into artistic sensibilities that have evolved over the past 30 years, shifting from a purely aesthetic and technical approach to figurative sculpture, to one where stories are told in marble and bronze. The nature of his work is reminiscent of the Aurora Borealis as content suffuses the form.

His journey as an artist has taken him many places. His family moved to Edmonton, Alberta where he was raised and eventually graduated from the University of Alberta in 1979 with a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in sculpture.

But the affinity for sculpture was planted by a friend's mother. "In junior high school my friend's mother, a potter, had a ceramic studio in the basement where she let us muck about," Blake says. "This was my first introduction to the joys of clay. We may have been nerdy, but we had a blast making all sorts of teenage boy things. Interestingly, both my friend and I became sculptors."

Blake credits his mother, Marjorie, with nurturing his sculpture interest, while his father,





Max, instilled in him a strong work ethic. "She is an art and history lover who took every opportunity to expose me to museums in Europe and North America. She had a huge influence on my career choices and her encouragement has been unwavering since the beginning," he says. "My father built an international airline from a bush pilot business and at 92 still creates master carpentry pieces in his workshop in Edmonton."

Blake's journey took him to Toronto where he worked in the family business, but he also wanted to further his technical education of figurative sculpture. In 1985, Blake moved to Paris to work full time for the airline and to study under Cyril Heck, from whom he learned traditional techniques of figurative sculpture.

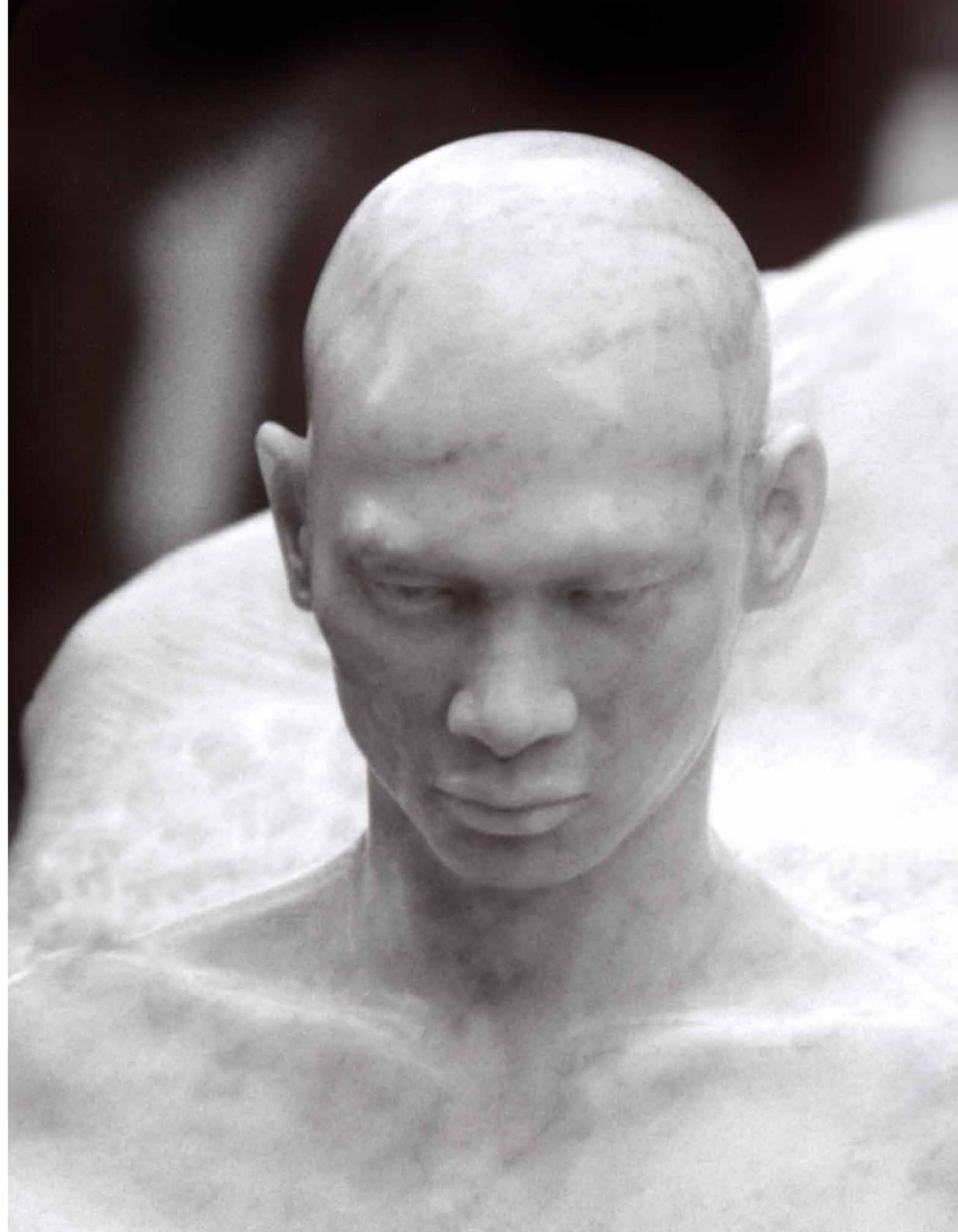
Those early works represent anatomically correct details in clay sculptures of live models – the first production where the final rendition is either cast in bronze, or sculpted in marble. When the opportunity arose for Blake to move closer to both his foundry and marble quarry, he opened his current studio in Monte Carlo in 1991.

Beauty

Blake's early work concentrated on the beauty of the human form. He was drawn to the arch of a perfect curve, by exact proportions, by physical perfection.

"In the beginning, my sole objective was to make beautiful art. As a young man, I was drawn to the art and cultures of Europe including the aesthetics of the old world and eventually had the good fortune to land in Paris where I basked in the beauty of figurative sculpture," Blake says. "It was everywhere, on the buildings and in the parks."

Studying under Heck, an American sculptor, he learned a traditional method of "classical figurative" sculpture that was said to have been developed by the ancient Greeks. Heck believed and lamented that these ancient methods of sculpting were being lost and emphasized the practice of maintaining precise proportions through the measurements of the skeletal structure of the individual model being used as reference. "Take your measurements!" he would insist. "Stay true to nature and sculpt only and





exactly what you see. Nature is more beautiful than your imagination will ever be!"

Before Blake left his tutelage, Heck made him promise that he would pass on this method, which Blake describes as wonderfully exact but excessively time consuming. "I guess that it helps to be somewhat obsessive and, luckily, my father fostered that in me."

Sculpture & the human condition

Blake's journey continued and he retains his academic foundations with its vital aesthetic principles, he has further progressed to imbue each sculpture with his deepest thoughts. "I believe the purpose of beauty in art is to draw us into deeper realms that challenge us to evolve," he explains. "Much in the same way that we are committed to further developing the disciplines of science and psychology, art is a catalyst in today's world, epitomized by the ever-increasing interest in metaphysics and the spiritual realm."

Blake's work with the figure led him to explore other aspects of what he refers to as the "human condition", which includes a view of humanity from a political and moral perspective.

This transition began when Blake was invited to teach at the University of Hanoi in 2003. He immediately noticed large numbers of people, both young and old, who were missing limbs. They were the victims of landmines and inspired him to consider the destructive nature of society and how it changes our notions of beauty.

From these thoughts and ruminations, The Fragments series was born. "Little did I know how affected I would be over what I encountered in both Vietnam and Cambodia," he recalls. "The ongoing effects of landmines still lay waiting, recognizing no cease-fire order, nor able to discriminate between the step of a child, or a soldier in the 1960s, landmines still claim many victims each month." His response to the situation was a series of nineteen one-quarter life-size bronze sculptures which he deliberately deconstructed and removed limbs and pieces, turning them into "fragments".

"The Fragments collection is an extraordinary expression of tragedy and hope, war and artistic expression, and the desire to make a difference," he says. "I hope to subvert traditions of figurative sculpture by creating a haunting visual paradox that embodies both beauty and destruction."



Each of the sculptures is named after a landmine and the group has raised over a quarter of a million dollars donated to promote landmine awareness and fund their removal.

The Spirits

While the foundation of all of Blake's work continues to be humanity, and the aesthetics of beauty, his most recent work, The Spirits, also addresses that which lies within us.

Blake applies a concept toward the more intangible nature of human beings. "If I was to base a work of art on an idea, then I wanted to include some mystical concepts, leaning towards all the complexity that comes with them," he says.

Part of the origin is daily meditation that he has practised for 15 years and has led him to delve more deeply into his spiritual beliefs – with the result that he explores them in his art.





The first in the series is an innovative interpretation of the human figure – a contemporary ‘partial figure’ that invites us to become aware of the mysteries that lie within.

He attributes the technique he used with The Fragments series, but one where it incorporates the ‘spirit’ of the figure. To this end, Blake worked toward creating partial figures that still read as a whole – creating an ‘abstraction’ by retaining only a fragment of the figure.

"I liked the idea of using a partial figure with an exposed interior to encourage the viewer's imagination to fill in the rest of the form. As with the earlier series, Fragments, the parts missing are in many ways more important than as those present," Blake says.

The abstraction is accomplished by painstakingly removing parts of the surface of the sculpture, thus revealing the inside, while taking great care to not distort the realistic proportions found in classical figurative work.

"I began exposing interior features within a sculpture while considering the idea of ‘spirit’, character, will, and morality as one of the most vital parts of our existence," he says. "As individuals, we are continuously developing levels of complexity that shape the essence of who we are deep inside.

"As The Spirits developed, I began to recognize a difference between the outer and inner spaces as the physical versus the abstract."

To date, The Spirits series includes Angels, Phantoms and Ushabtis, influenced by Egyptian mythology. All are one quarter life-size figures that go well beyond the classical realm. Some of the figures have moveable parts, while some are gilded with 24kt gold leaf to draw attention to our interior.

The interior of a figure is the internal realm and includes that over which we have authority within ourselves. The central framework suggests an imaginary structure capable of holding the weight of the cerebral and spiritual ideas that comprise us as individuals.

Thus, he maintains the figure as a vessel to hold the inner core of ‘self’ in all its complexity and manifestations, presenting a view of the whole through the accumulation of parts present, as well as, presumed.

On a larger scale, he addresses not only spiritual, but social elements. "The Spirits collection represents the materialization of our knowledge and our growing level of consciousness, of our understanding and the role an individual plays within the whole," he says.

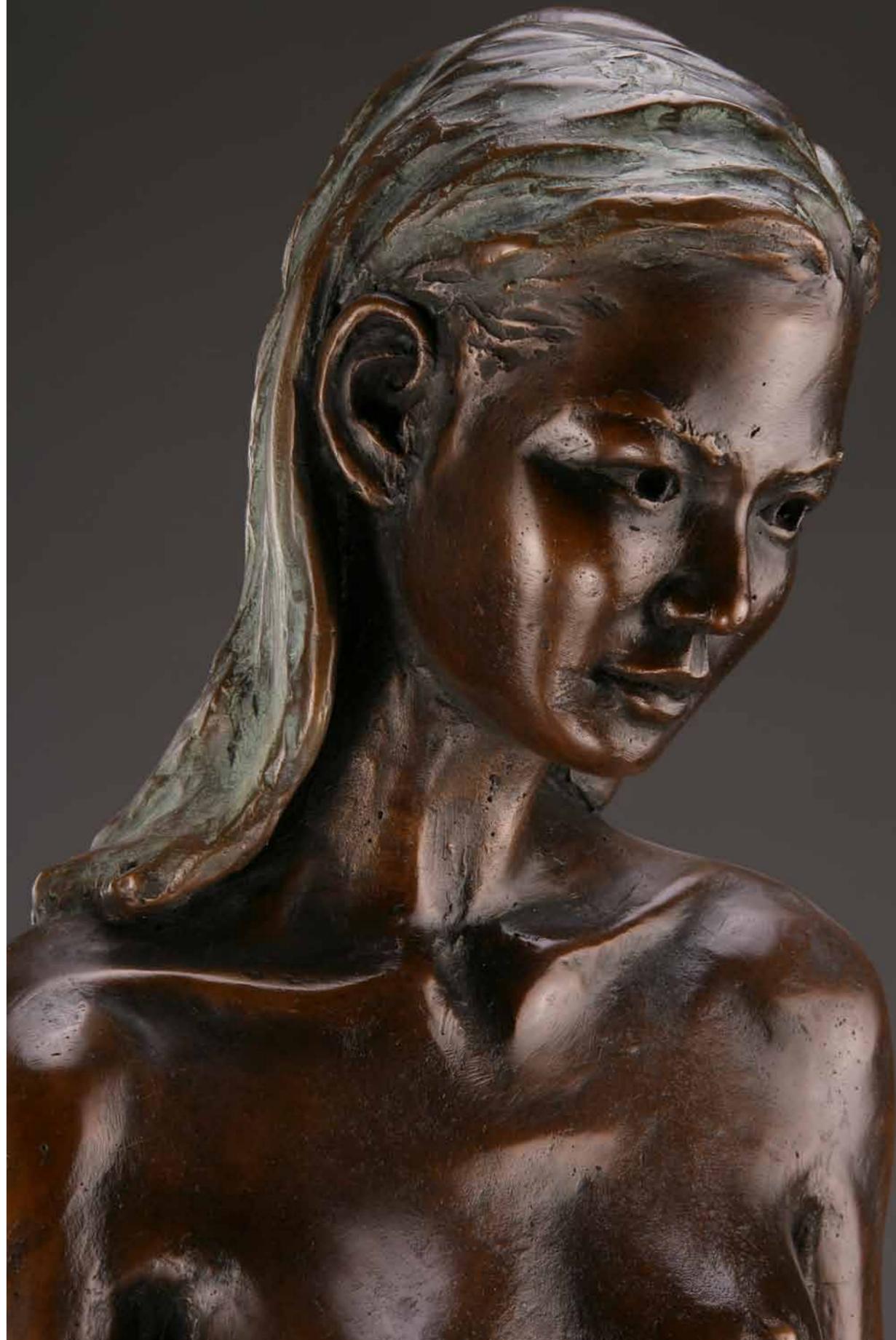
In the studio with Blake

"Living in a country that is just over a square mile in size, I am lucky to have found a studio at all. It is my laboratory, my workshop and certainly my haven. It was once the horse stables on ground level, underneath the main house. It has high ceilings, a solid floor and a great sense of history."

Blake often works with the door open onto the street and welcomes visitors, but tries not to stop working other than to greet them.







"The atmosphere in the studio is very special, there is a cool vibe that attracts people; small children and dogs will enter without hesitation! It definitely says something about the space; that it is safe and comfortable. I work at my studio every day and it's probably where I am the happiest with myself."

In the constructing of *The Spirits*, Blake switched from his original medium of choice, clay, to a new material: wax. The characteristics of wax are essential to Blake's interpretation of the figure, and to how a different process would alter each of these semi-abstracted figures in unique ways.

"This aspect intrigued me," Blake explains. "It was as if I was reinventing my work. Instead of the painstaking attention to detail I had practised for so long, *The Spirits* gave me a new freedom with technique and ideas I hadn't known before. I am having a lot of fun."

Much of his process has moved beyond the way traditional figurative sculpture is created. A key difference being that he continues to remove parts of the sculpture once it's cast in bronze, further changing the work – something that is almost never done in figurative bronze work.

Other developments manifest themselves as he pushes the material beyond its limits – the wax will sometimes break into pieces. "The accidents have become part of the process and I like how this keeps changing the work," he says. "The wax is brittle and the sculpture sheds, with pieces breaking and dropping off as the piece comes into being."

He also embraces risk, and accidents become part of how he explores and conveys new meanings and messages. "It's like two steps forward and one step back," he explains. "The wax originals will shed parts all the way to the foundry – it is fun, although it can be a disaster as well and I have completely lost a couple of them so far."

While he ultimately remains true to the tenets of classical sculpture, the figure is the expressive 'subject' that he uses to address humanity and the human condition. "Ultimately, I'm drawn to people," he says, "and want my work to be about them."

Blake Ward's sculpture may be found in the following Canadian galleries:



Ian Tan Gallery

Vancouver, British Columbia
604.738.1077
www.iantangallery.com

The Front Gallery

Edmonton, Alberta
780.488.2952
www.thefrontgallery.com

Rouge Gallery

Saskatoon, Saskatchewan
306.955.8882
www.rougegalleries.ca

Articsók Gallery

Toronto, Ontario
416.651.5020
www.articsokgallery.com