



"Sappho", personal residence
Commissioned by Abode, Inc., Austin, TX

ART FORM

ONE SCULPTOR'S CREATIVE JOURNEY

By Carol Denny

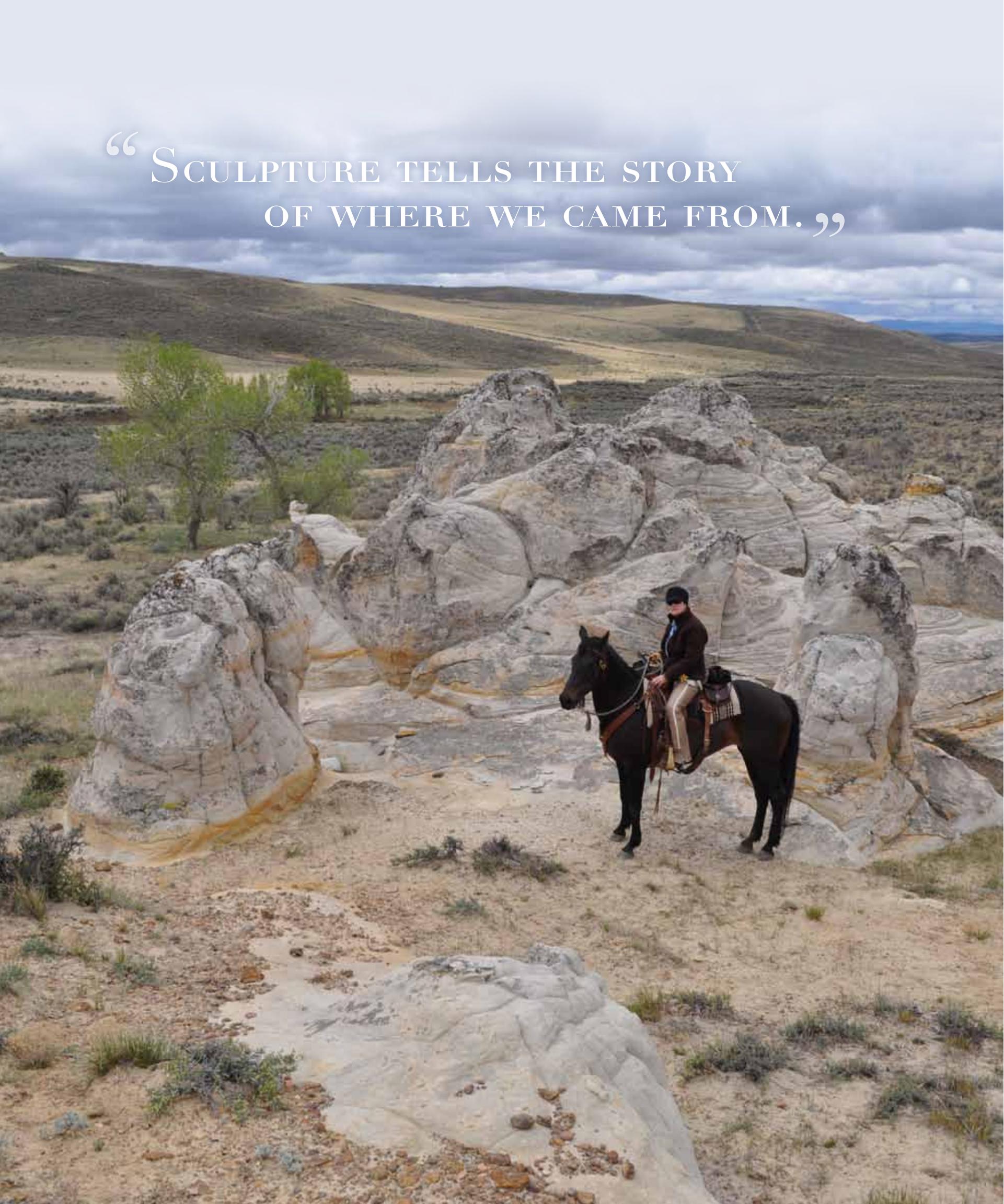
IN THEIR GRACE, STRENGTH AND SERENITY,

the sculptures of Claire McArdle evoke an aesthetic that's both ancient and timeless. Carved from marble, cast in bronze, or worked in terra cotta, her figures and torsos could be described as contemporary artifacts.

"Sculpture tells the story of where we came from," says the artist, whose show at Maryland Hall for the Creative Arts in Annapolis opens in April. "Thirty thousand years ago, there were statues with the human form that were exquisite. I feel personally connected to that, and I'm trying to share that connection at Maryland Hall."

McArdle's own journey as an artist has taken her from a childhood in Washington, D.C. (whose museums were an early inspiration) to the West Coast, where she first began to sculpt figures and animals. In the mid-'80s, she moved to Siena, Italy, where local artisans taught her the stone-working techniques that were to shape her career. She now returns to Italy regularly from her Colorado studio, located on the ranch where she and her husband reside.

“SCULPTURE TELLS THE STORY OF WHERE WE CAME FROM.”



The artist's Annapolis connection began in the '90s when her sister Margie, who lived locally, visited her in Italy and suggested she consider living and working in the capital. Claire found a studio in Eastport and a home in the city's thriving arts scene, eventually becoming an Artist in Residence at Maryland Hall in 2010.

Of her colleagues in Annapolis, it was a close friend, dancer Ingrid Zimmer, who shaped the direction of her art. Zimmer and another artist, Cynthia Word, were inspired by modern dance pioneer Isadora Duncan, whose choreography drew heavily on images of antiquity and classics. Those influences ignited a similar passion in McArdle, who channeled them to her figurative works. The women continue to collaborate in workshops and other educational efforts.

McArdle's sculptures vary remarkably in size—they range from three inches to 13 feet tall—but all exude a purity of form and a streamlined style. The female form is a favorite theme, but the Maryland Hall show, "Anima Mundi," includes other subjects, including recent equine figures carved in travertine.

The horses, with their archaeological aura, embody many of the influences in McArdle's life. "I feel that I'm putting it all together now," she explains. "My early inspiration as a 10-year-old were books on prehistoric art, African art, indigenous cultures. Today, living on the ranch, that's part of my life and belief system. Feeding the horses, riding them, working with them is a primal connection to the land that has really deepened my process."



"Torso"
Photo by Jafe Parsons



Photo by Jafe Parsons



Photo by Jafe Parsons

McArdle's creative process often begins with spontaneous renderings in clay, which she uses to create the first "sketches" of a new sculpture that, in final form, can weigh more than 1,000 pounds.

"Clay is the drawing medium, in a way," she explains. "I use very wet clay so I can manipulate it very quickly." Once she finds the essence of the piece, "I do a whole batch of that one kind. But what I do is subtractive—taking away, rather than building up, because that's how you work in stone. Of hundreds of torsos, I come up with the one maquette, or model, that I'll use."

Then, tools in hand, she begins to execute that shape in the perfect material. "Sometimes, I just see a block [of stone] that's beautiful," she says, as was the case with her 2012 "Venus." Years before starting the piece, she spotted a marble with "just the right veining" in an Italian quarry. "On a later trip, I put my name on it, and then, when I could finally afford it, I came back and bought it"—with three different pieces in mind.

"I know in my mind when I'm roughing it out how I want it to look when it's done," McArdle says. "I use diamond saws to cut away, hammers to break it, and chisels to shape it, knowing that once I've made the break, I can never get that break back."



"Venus"
Photo by Jafe Parsons



"Pronto"
Photo by Jafe Parsons

Planning for the show, including crating and shipping some of the larger works, has taken the better part of a year. "The moving and packing are things that go into sculpture that people don't really think of," she remarks. "I've learned a lot from an 87-year-old Italian crate maker. And my husband, who's a geologist, is a good rigger who knows strapping and safety. He's the only one I really trust."

McArdle is particularly gratified that Maryland Hall will dedicate both its large galleries to "Anima Mundi," giving her local patrons the chance to see some of her larger works for the first time. "In the lighter rooms, the sunlight on marble could make them almost translucent," she says.

Her figures, both large and small, will fill the space with a tranquility that belies the arduous process of their creation. "I see something in nature, sometimes connected to a feeling," she says simply. "It's almost like a meditation."

For more information, visit www.cmsculpture.com
 MARYLAND HALL FOR THE CREATIVE ARTS
 April 12 through June 9, 2013
 Annapolis, Maryland | www.mdhallarts.org
 "Anima Mundi"
 More than 30 works in clay, marble and bronze, and mixed media drawings by Claire McArdle