Robert Stanley

# SCULPTURE

## Foreword and Acknowledgments

The Bayly Art Museum of the University of Virginia is delighted to present Robert Strini's new work in conjunction with the University's recent Nobel Peace Laureates Conference. At the time the Museum was considering its contribution to the conference, I was visiting the studios of area artists. My visit to Robert's studio was indeed well-timed. I was emotionally and intellectually moved by Robert's work and his ability to combine social content with aesthetic fluency. I also realized that through his sculpture, he confronts the same issues faced by the Nobel laureates: human survival, cruelty, and redemption. The paradoxical nature of his work—such subjects as genocide and military power are rendered in works of exquisite craftsmanship and beauty—effectively enhances their impact. We are appalled by man's inhumanity to man and as deeply touched by the fragility and potential of human life.

This exhibition has been made possible in part by a grant from the Virginia Commission for the Arts. We are grateful to the state arts agency for giving us this opportunity to support and present the work of Virginia artists.

Jill Hartz, Director
Bayly Art Museum

## Robert Strini

As the millennium comes to a close, the harsh realization that humankind has not risen from its state of "fallen grace" is evidenced every day in newspaper stories and television reports. As individuals we feel powerless. We look within ourselves for answers and find clues in the searches of others. Robert Strini's powerful visual statements reach deeply into the artist's passion and engage us with insights, often clothed in enigma. They expand our own quest.

Robert Strini's sculpture is indeed an exposition of his self-inquiry. For nearly two decades his masterful craftsmanship has explicated issues that confront the ethical and moral dilemmas of our time. Strini sets forth his narrative with a sculptor's vocabulary. His love of materials makes referential associations: shells are the skeletons of humanity; lead is coldness, both physical and emotional; a light bulb is a life sign. Individual pieces speak to specific issues. An imposing wall relief from 1986, *Joy Stick,* layers symbols of power. At the apex of a lead-faced pyramid a carefully carved F-14 fighter plane of dark African wood is mounted on large bleached wood bones in front of a gold plated cross. Aesthetically the piece is seductive. The pedantic description of the plane's capabilities stencilled on the lead counts the paces to death and salvation.

More recently Strini's work has explored his own emotional and physical awareness. In an eloquently simple wall piece nineteen ochre-colored rocks are placed on a black gesso ground; the title is *Tears*. Strini calls them Apache tears—frozen emotion. Confronting his physical health and a diagnosed heart condition, he has focused on the form of the heart as a formal element and as a symbol of the source of life. A major piece, *In Touch with Your Heart,* has occupied him for many months as it builds symbolically the components of a total person and by extension a total society: the heart, which is the core—the humanity—is surmounted by a saddle—the will—and as Strini states, "if we can ride our heart and become one with its feelings, we can open up the coldness within." The obstacles to this wholeness are evident in opposing forces represented by rope-covered orbs ameliorated by a hemispherical nurturing form. The energy conveyed by the active, intertwined organic forms in their colorful, textured surfaces is of a perpetual quest.

The room-size installation piece, *The Sight and Sound of Death: Genocide,* has given Strini an opportunity to return to specific social commentary. The insanity of brother killing brother, the arbitrariness of these acts, and their devastating effects on individuals, families, and community are conveyed through imposing sculptural forms, light, and sound. On a field of red cloth totemic tripods, taller than a man, each suspend a large-scale human heart form. Lead-covered, cold, and unfeeling, it is lit by a single bulb, the only vital sign. A rock suspended below rises about a foot, then, it falls to the ground with a thud—another body falling, the sound of death. One never knows which rock will fall next or when. Overhead, the voices of men, women, and children, taken from newscasts around the world, describe the horrors of their experiences. In between reports music removes one from this confrontation. This village of tripod sculptures stands sentinel over its destiny.

Strini's visual statements have a timeless quality and, through his master craftsmanship and aesthetic sensibility, they create a powerful presence. Strini knows of man's vulnerability and insecurities, but in his work a sense of energy and perseverance of spirit provides reassurance and hope.

Suzanne Foley, Curator
Bayly Art Museum