

# Language of the Body

By Edward Rubin

In this age of showy spectacle and eye-popping commercial entertainments, where sculptures of the human form are easily digested and just as easily dismissed as having little to do with what it means to be a living in this day and age, the story-telling bronze figures of Austrian artist Anna Skrabal, fraught with sociological, psychological, and philosophical underpinnings, are a godsend. Not since Balzac's immediately recognizable and fully breathing characters in *La Comédie Humaine* – which included more than 2000 literary creations, all of which he kept in his mind for future use – or for that matter Rodin, who celebrated individual character and physical stances in an never ending panoply of iconic poses, has a contemporary artist taken on the challenge of rendering the human figure in all its living colors. That Skrabal succeeds at all, and so well at that, is a testament, not only to her powers of observation but the strength of her will to go on. Climbing a mountain is not easy. Forging your very own path is even harder.

Skrabal's sensitivity to the human form and its physical behavior, so highly evident in her work, if not attributed to her being born an artist, most certainly began at birth. Being born into an artistic household – her mother Marga Sacher-Santana is a successful painter – Skrabal quickly digested what it means to be a working artist. And she took to it like a duck to water. Over the years, as she watched her mother paint, the artist developed an acute knowledge of aesthetics. She also memorized the workings of the human body in action. Eager to establish her independence, above and beyond her artistry, Skrabal turned to the study of medicine, as well as art, at the University of Vienna. Shortly thereafter she began studying with the noted Austrian sculptor Paul Muehlbauer. Working at a hospital at the time afforded her endless opportunities to further study the behavior of individuals as well as groups. Her ultimate goal, recently achieved, was to establish a private practice as a child and adolescent psychiatrist and psychotherapist, and continue her artistic career. Much to her benefit, each of her occupations, as this exhibition so pointedly demonstrates, give strength to the other.

Like Dr. Anton Chevkov, whose doctoring experiences can be found in his short stories and plays, the subjects of Skrabal's narrative sculptures – victimization, eating disorders, nail biting, depression, the power and striving of the individual, the act of loving and man's inhumanity to man, can be read as a study of human behavior, a compendium in bronze. Interestingly enough, while Skrabal's people are our contemporaries, if not us, not surprisingly their situations are as old as history itself. In *Victim/Committer* (2009), the committer (aggressor), puffed up with confidence, is seen standing threateningly over his cowering victim, a subservient posture that arguably attracts the very aggression the victim wants to avoid. In *Pompeii* (2009), a work that invites us to contemplate our own possible actions, the artist uses the eruption of Vesuvius as a symbol for problems that suddenly appear. Sprawled across the floor, various figures are seen facing the unexpected, each in their own way. Some are so astonished that they are rendered immobile. Others are seen sleeping, some are running away, others pray, while still others hold on to each other for dear life. Here, as in her other works, Skrabal's and her cast of characters, like the title of Gauguin famous painting, appear to be asking *Where Do We Come From, What Are We and Where Are We Going*. Though answers are less than scare, examples are a plenty, and questions abound.