

Symbolism and Form

New exhibition traces the life and work of Hannah Holliday Stewart, a heralded but enigmatic artist

July 4-18

Matthews Gallery

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A *tropos Key* (1972), a 10-foot bronze sculpture by Hannah Holliday Stewart (1924-2010) sits on a hill in Houston's Hermann Park where it catches the wind and the attention of performance goers at the Miller Outdoor Theatre. Created in 1972, it was installed in the park in 1979.

Stewart studied at Cranbrook Academy of Art and taught at the University of St. Thomas in Houston. Her work was exhibited widely and in such prestigious museums as the Smithsonian Institution, the San Francisco Museum of Art, the High Museum of Art, and the Dallas Museum of Fine Arts. Nevertheless, she retired to a studio in Albuquerque, New Mexico, where she worked in seclusion for the last 20 years of her life.

In a note found among her personal papers, Stewart wrote: "When I was eight years old, I asked my mother what the wind really looked like. I remember spending hours...days...sitting with my hands open wide or running with my lightning-bug jar, hoping to catch the wind. I wanted to SEE the wind, that magical force that could bend the huge oak tree in a summer storm, gently caress me on a hot summer day or sing to me as it played through a tree or around the house."

She continued, "This early interest



Hannah Holliday Stewart (1924-2010), *Atropos Key* (maquette for public sculpture, Houston, Texas). Bronze, gold patina, 24½ x 15 x 3 in.



Hannah Holliday Stewart in her studio circa 1980s, photographer unknown.



Hannah Holliday Stewart (1924–2010), *Untitled*. Bronze, dark patina, 35 x 25 x 4 in.



Hannah Holliday Stewart (1924–2010), *Untitled*. Bronze, dark patina, 7½ x 6 x 2 in.

Hannah Holliday Stewart (1924–2010), *Stranger*. Bronze, dark patina, 113 x 20 x 20 in. Images courtesy Matthews Gallery.



in natural forces has sustained me throughout my life as a sculptor. My goal is to render visible the hidden realities of pent-up contained energy. The direct fields of reference are Sacred Geometry, Astronomy, Myth & Physics...Each Sculpture is an energy form, the movement arrested in space, a form sustaining an energy. My work is a response to these patterns and delineations and communicates with viewers through the universality of symbolism and form.”

A maquette for *Atropos Key* is included in the exhibition *Hannah Holliday Stewart: An Artistic Legacy Rediscovered* at the Matthews Gallery in Santa Fe July 4 through 18.

At a time when women artists were marginalized in the art world, *International Sculpture Magazine* noted she “forged the way for serious women sculptors. Uniting Greek mythology and contemporary energy concepts...[her] work fuses both primitive and futuristic sensibilities.”

Stewart was brought up in Birmingham, Alabama, in a socially prominent family. Christopher Clements, who knew Stewart at the University of St. Thomas, commented at the time of her death, “Once she was out of the nest, the pearls and gloves went away, and she became an

artist. She was a Southern belle tomboy.”

As did other women artists of her generation, Stewart embodied aspects of the “sacred feminine” in her work. The concept derives from Shakti, the divine force in Hinduism, the mother goddess.

In *Atropos Key*, she refers to one of the three Greek fates who were responsible for human destiny. Clotho spun the thread that is a person’s life, Lachesis measured out the length of the thread, and Atropos cut the thread and ended life. A sculpture of *Lachesis* was among the works in the studio at the time of her death.

In his essay for the catalog of her work, Lawrence Matthews, owner of Matthews Gallery, writes, “Stewart’s artistic affirmation of the feminine spirit paralleled social changes which were creating new more powerful self images for women in conjunction with their ascendant collective power in society. Her work then contains the elements that are found in serious artistic efforts—a personal vision of the world combined with a sense of the society and the unique period in which she lived.” ■