

# ART LETTER

## THE MONOLITHS HAVE LANDED

**N**ineteen concrete monoliths—each weighing between four and eight thousand pounds—finally have found a home near the west entrance to Ayres Hall after three other locations fell through. Distinguished Visiting Professor Deborah Masters conceived of the project as a way of teaching Graduate Sculpture Students “all that I know about making public sculpture in one semester.” Below, Masters and four participating students discuss the project with Dolores Mitchell.

**Mitchell:** Deborah, what did you hope your students would learn by means of the monolith project?

**Masters:** Within the first week, I realized few of the students knew each other, and they came from so many backgrounds—architecture, construction, painting. I wanted a project that could pull the class together and came up with the monolith idea. I decided that if students learned how to make steel armatures with clay bodies and plaster molds that they would cast into concrete, plus acquired some political and organizational skills of the sort I’d had to develop in New York while doing public commissions, in one semester they’d have all I could teach them.

always pushing students one step beyond their expectations.

**Mitchell:** What sort of support did you get from other people in the University?

**Masters:** The Plant Operations people were really wonderful in helping us with all the permits we needed. Brooks Thoraksson always came to our aid, and Dean Heintz’s belief in the project really helped us.

**Roberts:** Robin Wilson was out there watching us often, and giving moral support.

**Mitchell:** Susan, your piece is figurative, while the other monoliths are quite abstract. Why?

**Bardine:** Mine is a cenotaph, showing a woman giving a little boy up to the heavens. It’s a memorial for a cousin of mine who drove to Florida in his van and was never seen again. Inside the monolith are some of my cousin’s clothes, a dirty shirt and bandana, an old love letter from his wife. My sculpture will help him to live in the hearts of his family, even if his body is never found.

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concrete, plus acquired some political and organizational skills of the sort I'd had to develop in New York while doing public commissions. In one semester they'd have all I could teach them.

**Mitchell:** Over the months, your site changed several times. How did you and the students deal with that?

**Masters:** We'd all have to get together, build a new model overnight and become committed to the new idea, after having said: "Oh, we can't possibly do it again."

**John Hubenthal:** Then, no sooner did we have the site squared away on campus by the creek, when mysterious anonymous petitions appeared that were against erecting the pieces. We set up information tables and tried to build support for the sculptures.

**Masters:** I'm glad it happened. The result was very educational, the kinds of things sculptors always encounter in the real world.

**Ross Roberts:** I agree. The unity of the group was enriched through overcoming so many obstacles.

**Jeff Ferrando:** We had to learn to deal with other opinions. While I was at our information table, I spoke a long time to one lady before I realized that when she thought of "concrete" she saw vertical sidewalks in her mind.

**Hubenthal:** The whole process was great. We learned to depend on each other, working twelve hour days, all semester, laughing, plastering, molding.

**Ross Roberts:** We worked miracles. We removed a 48 foot by 45 foot solid concrete slab that was 8 inches deep. The loading of the concrete into a dump truck was a gigantic job, but when one person gave up, another took the lead.

**Susan Bardine:** It was hectic, lots of hard physical work that was tough on my body. My father was a house builder. I'd watched him a lot and had always wanted to participate in something similar. I liked the entire process of working in concrete from welding rebar to covering the armature with styrofoam, to molding the plaster. We had to get used to being filthy... had to build up our physical strength.

**Masters:** If you want something badly enough, there are no limits to what you can do.

**Roberts:** Deborah was like a psychotic Mother Teresa, fronting with her own money when funding was delayed.

**Masters:** Students put themselves on the line too, and made things happen. Jeff was like a den father,

grass will be planted around the clustered monoliths, thus actually increasing the amount of campus green space in an area once covered by concrete. Already, students are using monoliths as backrests, as they take breaks from making their own art in adjacent studios. The nineteen monoliths are by: Deborah Masters, Michael Bishop, John Hubenthal, Ross Roberts, Jeffrey Ferrando, Susan Bardine, Geoff Wilcox, Michael Dittmer, James Nelson, Kim Couchot, James Moody, Clay Canaday, Ingrid Larson, Kathy Lazzareschi, Robert Colon, Chris Beaumont, Peter Bradon, Blake Rosstler, and Remye White.



Monoliths being slid.

## THREE SISTERS AND A ROSE GARDEN

**L**arger-than-life female figures by Deborah Masters (*Visiting Professor of Sculpture, Spring and Fall 1990*), have been shown at the Whitney Museum, New York. Masters' travels in Mexico, Greece, and Italy brought her in contact with monumental sculptures that served as inspirations for her art. Below, Masters discusses a figural group she is creating for our campus.

Before I leave Chico in December of 1990, I will complete work on three monumental female figures for the triangular lawn between Trinity Hall and the Rose Garden. Originally, this was to be a piece about isolation from the larger world—three strong-backed women huddled together with their backs to viewers. The women with massive backs in Giotto's *Lamentation* had always reminded me of the strength people get from each other in times of need—although such bonding sometimes seems alien to our society. Perhaps I also had in mind the plight of older artists, past forty and still struggling, without money or security, and how when artists can bond together they may find the strength to go on.

My ideas for this piece have evolved in response to the open quality of the Chico environment. Now, I will have the women face the rose garden—I've always loved roses. Although still introspective, these are women who can also look out on the world, and each conveys a sense of being happy within herself.

**KIM COUCHOT**, an advanced sculpture student and my assistant for this piece, has been a great help. She's done the molds herself, and has been much more patient with the time-consuming process than I usually am.

I love the site, with the weathered brick of Trinity Hall as a backdrop, a wonderful plum tree, and the nearby rose garden. Sometimes I set up a piece of heavily-textured wood on the site, sit on the grass, and watch the effect of the changing light. When I develop the pieces indoors, using a stable light source, I have to remind myself how much the sculptures will change throughout the day when sited outdoors, and how different they will look by summer and by winter angles of the sun.

I hope people who pass by will stop and "lose" themselves a while in my piece. The large scale of the women and their long robes make them appear to be coming from past ages. I also hope people will notice the roses more because the women will be gazing at the garden.

Deborah Masters, one of *The Three Sisters*