



# Intimate Castings of EXPERIENCE

## Linda Ridgway

BY TRACEE W. ROBERTSON

Linda Ridgway decided to work in bronze 20 years ago, adding her printmaker's point of view to an age-old medium. She has exhibited widely since 1974, with solo exhibitions at the Dallas Museum of Art, the Glassell School of Art at the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, the El Paso Museum of Art, Dunn and Brown Contemporary in Dallas, John Berggruen Gallery in San Francisco, Arthur Roger Gallery in New Orleans, and Charles Cowles Gallery in New York. The 1997 survey exhibition at the Glassell School of Art, which traveled to the Dallas Museum of Art, coincided with a turning point in Ridgway's career. Celebrating her 50th birthday, she embarked on her most thematically and technically daring decade. Now, as she approaches traditional retirement age, Ridgway is one of the most prolific and recognized artists working in Texas.

Ridgway's life quietly informs her work in language that alludes to a universal human journey, which began for her in Jeffersonville, Indiana, on a family farm run by her father, who planted and harvested corn. Leaving home in the early 1970s, Ridgway went first to

Opposite and above: *Knowing*, 2007.  
Bronze, 39 x 38 x 3.5 in.



Below and detail: *Winter Planting*, 2007.  
Bronze, 7 x 91 x 6 in.

from leaves. The even spacing of the forms belies their uniqueness, much like societal order or familial expectations, for example, sometimes fail to recognize individual human stories. Line implies efficiency and simplicity in farming and also serves as a metaphorical link to memory for the artist and the viewer: "I like line because it is the artery blood of the artist. It's how you start; it's how you think. It's an immediate expression of the soul of the artist." Line is both personal and universal. *Winter Planting* conveys determination and survival in both nature and man.

Nature provides many of Ridgway's source materials, including leaves, thorn branches, grapes, and bird nests. However, in the last five years, she has also found inspiration in objects offered by friends and strangers. She calls this the theater of her art—the phenomenon of many pe-



Anchorage, Kentucky, to the Louisville School of Art, where she earned a BFA, and then to New Orleans to complete her graduate work at Tulane University. Eventually she moved to Dallas pursuing work as a teacher. The story is remarkable and yet familiar: a farmer's daughter overcomes familial and social obstacles to become a professional artist.

Ridgway came of age at the height of Minimalism, one of the last male-dominated Modernist movements, in the midst of burgeoning feminist awareness and new experimentation with earthworks and conceptual art. She inherited a Minimalist aesthetic, which gives her forms a quiet subtlety, but she binds herself intimately to language in an entirely postmodern fashion, cleverly deconstructing everyday presumptions. The words and phrases in her titles or in the sculptures themselves ask questions, make statements, or sug-

gest meanings that provoke thought. Viewers may find themselves remembering a particular experience or reconsidering an ingrained belief. With themes and materials both deeply personal and universally understood, her work reaches out to us with pure ideas that often open doors to personal paths.

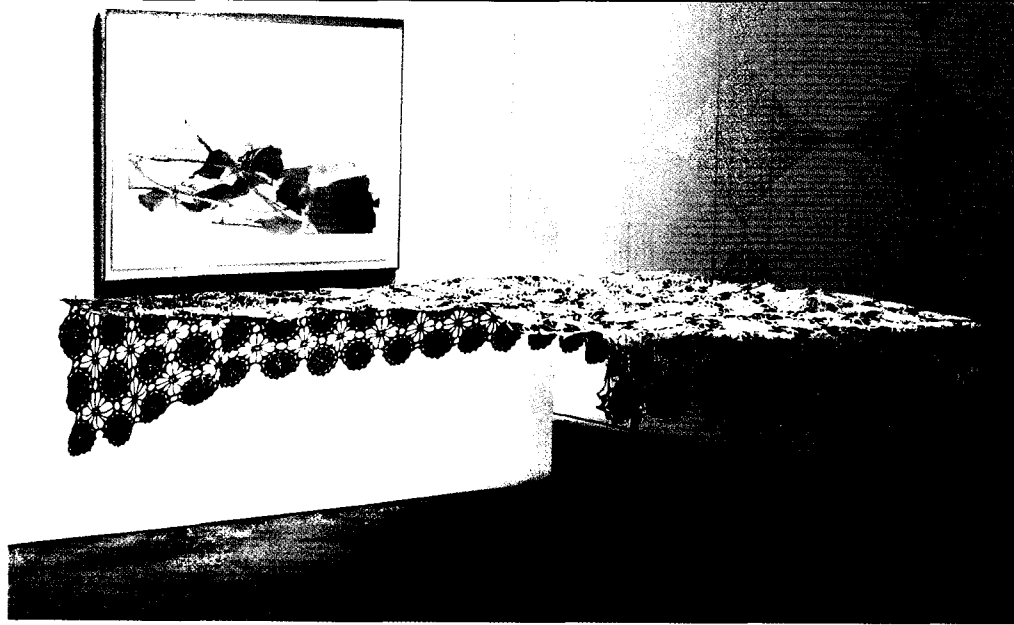
Ridgway's themes range from the formal mystique of line to a Dada-like interaction with chance. She uses line as the core element in her compositional approach. *Winter Planting* (2007) and *A Line Pulled Through* (2004) directly refer to her early experience sowing plants and watching them mature. One can easily imagine the connection. Driving on any state highway reveals fields planted in rows that recede into the horizon in mesmerizing lines that appear as ripples in the land. Similarly, in *Winter Planting*, cast seedlings hover in a row, and an implied line separates roots

ple being involved in creating the images and ideas that seep into her work: "Seven years ago someone gave me a crocheted piece of lace with the word 'bread' in its center, and I wanted to insert my cast words." *The Conversation* (2005), one of her first word sculptures, is made of cast lace rectangles that hang next to each other, featuring the phrases "Pink is Weak" and "Is Blue Strong." Ridgway employed someone to make the lace, which she sometimes unravels or cuts before casting. A friend provided the heirloom lace tablecloth that became the sculpture *Air Lace* (2003), about the evolution of family. Someone else gave the collar from her mother's religious habit, which led to a series of works using lace collars and slips in which ornament becomes a form of remembrance. Whatever Ridgway's material, she challenges its character and handling.

When one considers the technical demands of lost wax casting, Ridgway's materials seem unlikely candidates for the process. How do you cast a flower or a piece of lace in bronze? The answer for Ridgway is one piece at a time. Once individual items are cast, she painstakingly removes burrs, prepares surfaces, and welds each piece back together into a complete form—from petal, leaf, and stem to flower. She actively looks for ephemeral or delicate materials to cast and print. After finishing a sculpture, Ridgway often finds a similar object, such as the nest in *Knowing* (2007), to explore further in drawings. Running pine needles or lace through a press creates the first layer of her two-dimensional work. She then applies graphite to the indentations and lines left in the paper to rekindle the illusion of three-dimensionality. The forms evolve from the dimension of experience to the flat surface as sculptural or built drawings, allowing the artist to sustain her relationship with the source object and fully explore its meanings.

*Knowing* began as an abandoned bird nest, which was then dismantled, cast, and reconstructed in a loose spiral. The work appears to fly apart as if propelled by wind or to unravel as if pulled one strand at a time. This unfurling motion continues in our minds until the nest disappears altogether, representing both loss and gain. Nests are carefully created to harbor young birds while their parents feed and protect them. When the infants grow old enough to fulfill their own destinies, the nest is abandoned. The imagery in *Knowing* is simple, but it suggests the irony of life's journey: loss accompanied by growth and discovery. As we age, we lose our bodies, our loved ones, our minds, but at the same time, we come closest to knowing ourselves. In bronze and on paper, the filaments of the nest remain only loosely entangled, but their drift is as beautiful and complex as the original form.

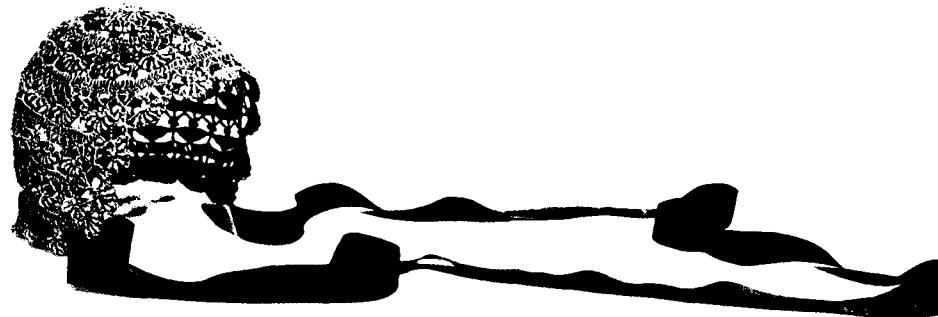
The understated shapes and fluid lines in Ridgway's sculptures are born of her attraction to literature, poetry, and work by artists such as Richard Tuttle. She seeks the same seeming ease, spontaneity, and absolute scantiness with which Tuttle

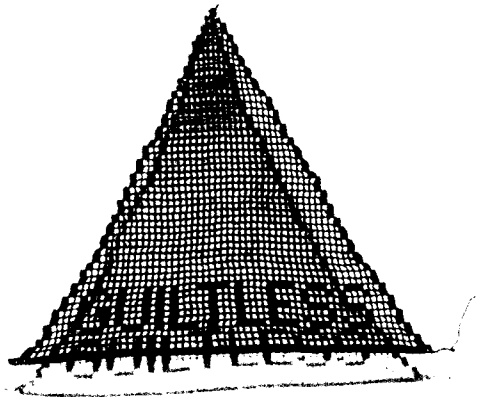
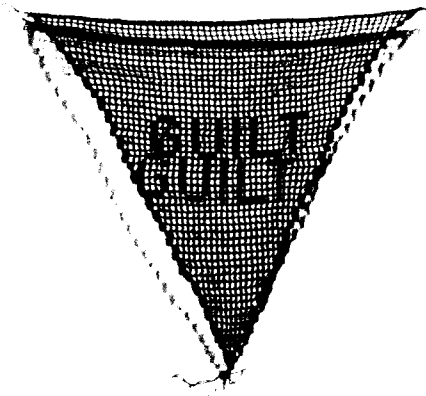


Above: *Air Loom*, 2003. Bronze, 49 x 72 x 20.5 in. Below: *Husband*, 2005. Bronze and silk, 16 x 38 x 20 in.



Below: *She, she, and she*, 2006. Bronze and satin ribbon, 6.5 x 25.5 x 6.5 in.





creates emotionally and conceptually significant objects. For example, *Husband* (2005) pairs a prickly, sturdy thistle, gathered from the thickets around Green Mountain Studio, where Ridgway works, with a square bronze pillow covered in a silk case. The branch simply lies across the pillow. Considering the title, the branch can read as an arm, a barrier, or an emblem.

The form makes no indentation in the seemingly soft surface, which imparts a lack of substance or permanence. One might also think of the traditional male roles in marriage: breadwinner and moral leader, as well as disciplinarian and realist. Rich, contrasting textures and an intimate scale attract the viewer to disparate forms that prompt much imagining.

The recent *Within a Cloud* (2007) relies on the hardy zinnia—planted, picked, and cast in bronze—for its conceptual punch. The bronze flowers are arranged on the wall in a large asymmetrical pattern that seems to ebb and flow as a unit, like a covey of birds in flight. It is uncontainable. The forms are painted white so that they fade into the wall, their shadows emerging as focal points. The work brings to mind the graceful movements of dance, the idleness of watching clouds, and the awe-inspiring sight of a flock of birds following a leader. These are poetic and whimsical notions, apparently unrelated to the zinnia, which survives the suffocating heat and cracked soil of the Texas summer, growing to waist height with thick stalks, ragged leaves, and a repellent odor. It adapts and thrives, as humans do. Yet, despite this ruggedness, there is almost nothing like the beauty of the zinnia's full, velvety flowers as they wave in the hot wind in dapples of vivid pink, orange, and purple, an image that reveals the whimsy we tend not to notice in the day-to-day work of living.

Above: *Choose Your Poison*, 2006. Bronze, 14 x 37 x 2.5 in. Left: *May 1st*, 1958, 2005. Bronze, 2 x 7 x 9.75 in.



In reality, and in the sculpture, delicate shapes give way to a sense of constancy and perseverance.

Other works progress from chance encounters with information. A 2003 series, "Diagrams of Beauty," deals with beauty—how it is constructed, disseminated, and perceived. The sculptures are based on a book of instruction in ikebana, the Japanese art of flower arrangement. Ideas from George Santayana's *The Sense of Beauty* have been dancing around in Ridgway's work for 30 years, so the notion of instructing beauty became a natural subject to pursue. The "Diagrams" feel contained, complete, and quietly dignified, yet they raise the question of whether beauty can be defined by a repetitious set of instructions. "The 'Diagrams' represent a false beauty. They are stilted, almost funerary—the end of beauty. I am exploring how we do our arrangements. This is a difficult process. I'm displacing myself because I'm following instructions." Indeed, the sculptures are black, solid, and still, but behind the scenes, in the shadows, things are a little less guided and suggest the changeability of the human element.

In the late 1990s, Ridgway's work became imbued with a decidedly feminine voice, culminating in two works that drew attention to a female presence. *Irish Rose* (2006) represents the history and fate of the female story, while *She, she, and she* (2006) alludes to the blossoming of a female journey. In the latter work, the repeated title on its natural satin texture reads not only as celebration and dedication, but also as anticipation, warning, and foretelling. The life-size dress in *Irish Rose* and the repetition of the word "she" in *She, she, and she* insist that we take note of gender.

Beginning in the early 1900s, artists as Georgia O'Keeffe fought against the interpretation of their work as "female" and infused with womanhood. Throughout the early 20th century, female artists were described as "women painters" as opposed to simply "painters." In a 1989 essay, an exhibition "Making Their Mark," Elizabeth S. Dowling pointed out that the Great Depression of the 1930s leveled the playing field between men and women. No one

ere status than any one else, and WPA  
of New Deal programs embraced women  
ists alongside their male counterparts,  
hout preference for either. These pro-  
ams employed artists who, like Louise  
velson, championed a feminine delicacy  
their work. Nevelson and others who  
gan their careers in the 1940s, such as  
Krasner, Alice Neel, and Louise Bour-  
ois, also embraced autobiography and  
sonal history as motivation for their  
rk. Landau suggests that women artists  
his generation searched for catharsis  
ough painting and sculpture, and it was  
them that Ridgway would have looked  
an art student in the early 1970s.<sup>2</sup>  
Similarly, Nancy Spero points out in a  
ent essay about Bourgeois's work that  
ng a woman and an artist were often  
ot always separated: "[I]n the 1960s  
d early 1970s there was a certain reti-  
ce among younger female artists to  
nowledge themselves as women. Louise  
mpletely ignored all that."<sup>3</sup> Ridgway was  
e of those young female artists looking  
established colleagues like Bourgeois  
o had found their voices. Moreover,  
Thomas McEvilley has argued, the late  
50s ushered in the Vietnam War, the  
il rights movement, student rebellions,  
d nuclear proliferation—all of which  
allenged Modernist notions of art. He  
plains that art referring to a hypothetical  
ther than everyday world began to be  
en as dangerous in a time when people  
d events felt out of control. Because  
of these social issues, feminist art in the  
1970s, he says, was about more than  
evening up the gender score," it was also  
about a critique of society that included  
acts of self-knowing—artists dealing with  
personal subjects rather than pure form.  
et being a woman and being an artist  
remained separated. McEvilley asks how a  
oman artist can pursue the self in a soci-  
ty in which a woman's self-image is dis-  
orted by advertising, movies, and social  
bles—a question that artists such as  
Barbara Kruger tackled in the 1980s and  
90s by juxtaposing text with media  
imagery. Subsequent feminist art criticism  
has thus been divided between concepts  
of a feminine art and an art without gen-  
der.<sup>4</sup>

*Diagram of Beauty #4*, 2003. Bronze, 35 x 26.5 x 6 in.

Ridgway's work combines many ele-  
ments from the realm of feminist explo-  
ration: redirecting stereotypical beliefs  
with text, questioning notions of beauty,  
and turning to personal history for inspira-  
tion. She chooses texts that repetitively  
insist on recognition or cleverly pose ques-  
tions. Language exists for us from the  
beginning of our lives—we use it to  
define self and others. In Ridgway's work,  
language serves to unnerve us, some-  
times with humor, and to lead us in an  
exploration of meanings. Like *The Con-  
versation* ("Pink is Weak," "Is Blue Strong"),  
*Choose Your Poison* (2006) offers two  
opposing, but mutually enabling philo-  
sophical and social scenarios. The piece is  
made of two triangles that resemble lace  
doilies with their binding strings trailing  
pitifully below them. One claims "guilt,"  
while the other flaunts "guiltless." They  
hang side by side on the wall, asking us  
to choose yet also warning us. *Choose  
Your Poison* serves as a permanent solidifier  
of human weakness—one cannot exist  
and be sane in either state, purely guilt  
ridden or purely guilt free. Moreover,  
being without guilt is often to be guilty.  
Finally, the two states declare their own  
gender. The forms portray fear, accusa-  
tion, realization, and isolation, made all  
the more unnerving and humorous by  
their delivery in seemingly soft, decora-  
tive terms. In this piece and others, the  
combination of text and materials typi-  
cally associated with the female subverts  
the stereotype of the medium.

An artist deconstructs and reconstructs  
experience, and Ridgway's work embraces  
this process of removal and return. Like  
Nevelson, Ridgway unites strength and deli-  
cacy in technique, form, and subject. She  
pursues art that is transcendent in its  
beauty, simplicity, and craftsmanship, as



well as in its ability to create a moment of  
recognition—of a memory or an experi-  
ence—that feels as if it stops time or takes  
us away from ourselves. She calls this  
moment the "collective human memory,"  
that which we all know or respond to intu-  
itively. "Artists ask questions," she says, and  
she calls it an obsession. Often Ridgway's  
sculptures seem to grow from the flat sur-  
face of the wall into space and into our  
consciousness. Her practice involves taking  
apart and rebuilding, which is exactly what  
her work invites the viewer to do. Because  
we see and often read forms and ideas in  
her work, recognizing them as beautiful  
and thought-provoking, we experience our  
own sense of removal and return.

*Tracee W. Robertson is a curator and  
writer based in Texas.*

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> All statements from the artist are taken from conversations with the author, from 2004 to 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Ellen G. Landau, "Tough Choices: Becoming a Woman Artist, 1920-1972," in *Making Their Mark: Women Artists Move into the Mainstream, 1970-85*

(New York: Abbeville Press, 1989), pp. 27-33.

<sup>3</sup> Nancy Spero, "Louise Bourgeois I-III," *late 19c*, Autumn 2007, pp. 50-61.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas McEvilley, "Redirecting the Gaze," in *Making Their Mark: Women Artists Move into the Mainstream, 1970-85*, op. cit., pp. 187-91.