"Thinking is necessary, but equally necessary is to go beyond thinking to an intuitive, semi-conscious state, given over to the incomplete, the unsolvable, the unforeseen."

DAWN MacNUTT

Dawn MacNutt: Figures of Mystery

by Doug Pope

Dawn MacNutt's woven sculptures are mysterious and startling. They turn spaces into theatrical environments, with forms that are human-like, yet distinctly different from people. Often large and monumental, the sculptures paradoxically suggest frailty rather than strength, and change rather than permanence. There have been considerable differences in opinion among critics about how these works should be interpreted. Art histor-ian Mary MacLachlan described the sculptures' appearance as being more like that of extra-terrestrials than like that of people.[1] Jack Lenor Larsen compared them to stone age monoliths.[2] Deborah A. Young wrote of "tragic figures [that] convey a myriad of sensations ranging from homelessness and shared suffering, to grief-nurtured strength."[3] Gil McElroy saw humor and irony at play, and compared MacNutt's figures to pieces from a giant chess set.[4] Sandy Miller urged us to think of the sculptures not as individuals, but as a group engaged in a "silent and curious dialogue" with each other and with the viewer.[5] All agree that they are dealing with a highly expressive and inventive artist.

I see in MacNutt's work a sense of paradox and mystery that owes much to surrealism and the exploration of the unconscious. The artist stresses her subjective vision. In a public speech in 1997, MacNutt defined art as a "manifestation of peculiar perception," and suggested that what we should treasure from such original artists as Giacometti and Picasso is "the very oddity of their thoughts."[6] Explaining her interest in dreams and the unconscious, MacNutt said this about the creative process: "Thinking is necessary, but equally necessary is to go beyond thinking to an intuitive, semi-conscious state, given over to the incomplete, the unsolvable, the unforeseen." [7]

MacNutt adopts the human form as a point of departure. She uses weaving techniques and unusual materials to create sculptures that vary in size from two inch tall figurines to twelve feet high public monuments. Her treatment is not realistic, but involves abstraction and fragmentation. Metamorphosis is a strong element of her work. Her sculpture draws attention to the process or evolution of a work, with affinities to the processes of decay and growth, time and memory. Her figures are generally portrayed without arms, legs or facial features; this abstract treatment gives them an anonymous and androgynous appearance. One could call them whimsical, anxious, even inscrutable; they confront us like actors, wearing masks, that shift in and out of different roles. A fuller appreciation of these mysterious figures is helped by an understanding of the artist's background and influences.

He and She
2006-2007
live willow, 10' high
and growing

collection of Merle Pratt

FAMILY BACKGROUND AND ARTISTIC TRAINING

Dawn MacNutt was born in 1937 in New Glasgow and grew up in a middle class household in rural Nova Scotia in the 1940s and 1950s. Nova Scotia is one of the poorer regions in Canada, but it is renowned for its vibrant local culture, with a strong tradition of crafts, folk art and music. MacNutt's father worked as a welder in an aircraft factory in Quebec during World War II, then returned to Nova Scotia to work at the Pictou shipyards; MacNutt's mother was a school teacher. At the age of nine everything changed for the future artist when her mother became ill with diptheria. Her father ran off with the attending nurse whom he later married. MacNutt's mother went into a severe depression that caused her to be hospitalized and prevented her from working. "I moved eighteen times by the time I was 15-years-old," MacNutt told me. "From grade two to grade ten, I didn't finish one year in the same classroom. The disruptions were hard. I hated moving away from friends but learned to form new friendships. When I was nine, childhood took a break."

One of MacNutt's survival strategies was the invention of a rich fantasy life. "I stopped reading and started daydreaming," she said. But she also credits

her ability to communicate her feelings and troubles to close friends and was able to draw support from them. Her brother, she said, could not do this, and his feelings remained bottled up inside him. He was later diagnosed with cancer from which he died in 1991. MacNutt wonders if there was any connection between his illness and his unexpressed feelings. Questions like this are hinted at in MacNutt's mature art work, which draws parallels between broken and fragmented human forms and the concurrent illness and death of close members of her family.

I asked MacNutt if she could remember the first time she had a sense that she was an artist. When she was five years old, she told me, she had a piece of silk that she admired and handled from time to time. Through this handling, the silk would get crumpled and MacNutt would have to iron it. One day she left the silk under the iron too long and the fabric burned and melted in spots. MacNutt wondered at the transformation and felt as if she had stumbled upon a fascinating experiment. "I understood the secret of weaving before I could read," she told me. A great aunt had worked in a silk factory making men's neckties in Massa-chusetts. Though MacNutt never met this aunt, she was allowed to play with a box of prized fabric scraps the old lady had left behind. The future artist would fray the edges of some of the silk to see how the threads and colors interwove with one another. These childhood experiences contributed to MacNutt's life-long love of fabric.

Timeless Figures and Timeless Forms
1997
twined willow and seagrass, 5' - 7'

various collections

MacNutt's mother eventually recovered her health and worked her way up to a permanent position as a kindergarten teacher. MacNutt remembers her as a creative and unconventional teacher. With her encouragement, MacNutt did well in school and skipped a grade. In 1954 she enrolled in Mount Allison University, majoring in psychology in preparation for a career in social work. She had taken some private lessons in art in high school and minored in Fine Arts at Mount Allison which had an excellent department of fine arts, with noted painter Alex Colville among the faculty. Though Colville worked in a completely different style and medium than Dawn MacNutt, it is worth noting that he too was influenced by surrealism and had an interest in exploring the psychology of

the human figure. MacNutt's classmates included the noted future artists, Christopher and Mary Pratt and Tom Forrestall. There was also a craft division at the university and it was here that MacNutt took her first courses in weaving.

After graduating from university in 1957, MacNutt married and started a family of three children, and at the same time worked as a social worker and family counsellor. This experience exposed MacNutt to people in need, often living on the fringes of the social system. They were people with whom MacNutt could identify because of her own childhood and her compassion for others. MacNutt was present as a helper at one of the worst mining disasters in the province's history when a bump caused by underground pressures resulted in a cave-in at the deepest coal mine in North America located in Springhill, Nova Scotia, in 1958. In all, seventy-five men died. For the handful of survivors the ordeal stretched out over eight days of anxious waiting and was felt by all members of the small town. Such experiences contributed to her sense of community and commitment to others.

Columns I-V
1997
twined willow, 5' - 10'

various collections

However her creative urges prevailed and MacNutt installed a loom in her home and began experimenting with tapestries and wall hangings. She worked on both an intimate and grand scale, creating a few woven pieces many times bigger than her seven foot by seven foot working space behind the furnace in her basement. As she became more serious about this activity, MacNutt got involved with local guilds, taking workshops in traditional weaving and basketry techniques. While fortunate to find skilled artisans in both these areas in her native Nova Scotia , MacNutt did not confine herself to local instructors. She was involved in bringing artist, curator and craft historian Jack Lenor Larsen from New York to Halifax to speak about fabric as an art form.

Larsen had helped promote an international "Art Fabric" movement, led by such figures as Lenore Tawney in the United States and Magdalena Abakanowicz in Poland, both of whom were included in the Wall Hangings exhibition Larsen curated for the Museum of Modern Art in New York, 1968-69. Larsen advocated the innovative use of craft and championed the exhibition of a new field of craft-inspired artworks. He and MacNutt became friends. At a decisive

moment in her career, he urged MacNutt to come to New York to meet other artists working in an international context. MacNutt did so, and one of the first artists she met was Lenore Tawney. Tawney had studied at the Art Institute of Chicago, founded by former members of the Bauhaus school, in exile from Nazi Germany. This training blurred the divisions between art and craft and helped Tawney discover her own style of fabric creation. She brought weaving off the wall and incorporated it into a volumetric space, creating an art environment.

This was similar to experiments MacNutt was working on and it accelerated her transformation into an artist using weaving techniques to create sculpture. Jack Lenor Larsen noted how leading fabric artists stretched the limits of weaving and sculpture by using an "environmental approach [that] borders on mysticism and the surreal and is identified with bowers and lairs, the shrine and the womb." [8]

Columns and Timeless Forms
1997
twined willow, 5' - 10'

various collections

MacNutt welcomed these international breakthroughs and was able to view Abakanowicz's fabric sculptures during an exhibition of "Polish Tapestries" that came to Halifax, Nova Scotia, in 1975.[9] In 1985 MacNutt exhibited her own fabric sculpture at the 12th International Biennale of Tapestry at Lausanne, Switzerland, the first of many foreign venues for the artist. After this, MacNutt began to travel more widely, exhibiting her work in Canada, the USA and abroad. In the 1980s and 1990s, she both taught and attended courses at the Haystack Mountain School of Craft in Maine. It was here that MacNutt learned the technique of bronze casting, which broadened her range of skills and added new layers of meaning to her treatment of materials.

The former director of the Mount Saint Vincent University Art Gallery, Mary Sparling, became an early champion of MacNutt's work. The craft origins of MacNutt's sculpture gave it a sense of place. At the same time, the art was exploring new ground. MacNutt used skills traditionally associated with women, but put them to another purpose and allowed rules to be broken. This troubled some in the craft field who were reluctant to include MacNutt in their craft exhibitions. In the fine art galleries, the reaction was quite different, where innovation was seen as a prerequisite for success. MacNutt was naturally an innovator,

who welcomed mistakes and accidents as a spur to her imagination and as a reflection of the spontaneous nature of her process. Her methods and forms suggest some of the uncontrollable qualities of the unconscious.

For the surrealists, the unconscious served as a model for a world in which everything operated in a state of flux. In dreams nothing is fixed or permanent. Artists depicted objects as if they were warped, elasticized or half-melted, bringing the hard materiality of the subject's surface into question. This metaphoric treatment alluded to the ability of the unconscious to move effortlessly forward and backward in time and from one state to another. MacNutt's figures are notable for their free-flowing, undulating shapes that open out to the surrounding space. Like the surrealists, MacNutt introduces cavities in bodies, confuses bodies with mysterious containers, and covers figures' heads with hoods or plant forms. Masks and hoods add mystery to surrealist figures, but it also increases their vulnerability. MacNutt's figures often look as though they are shrouded or disguised; the heads, invariably open at the top, suggest a free flow in and out of spirits, thoughts or memories. There seems to be a correlation between the masking of outward identity and the accessing of an inner spirit. MacNutt plays with the tension between inner space and outer form, as she fashions her figures with dynamic spiraling contours.

Kindred Spirits
1985
woven copper wire
and seagrass, lifesize

various collections

Are MacNutt's figures clothed or naked? Made of fabrics, as clothes are, some works do seem more like clothes than people; they are clothes that have come to life to mimic people. One of MacNutt's most elegant pieces, *Athena*, 1996, at KES has a pleated skirt and an hourglass shape that gives it the sense of a body or a gown twisting at the waist. Without too much effort of the imagination, the sculpture can be envisioned as being worn and serving as a costume. A review from 1985 appearing in the *International Herald Tribune* described an early work as fitting like a stocking over its half-hidden infrastructure,[10] a comment that is sexually suggestive and perhaps better captures the transparency and sensuousness of MacNutt's material.

The "Man in Pain" series, 1986-68, featured a small work called *Man in a Black Coat*. It was based on an observation of a person who awaited trial in a

local courtroom. His damaged self-esteem caused the young man to shrink and almost disappear inside his coat, a feeling perfectly captured by MacNutt's tense work, made of copper wire and tightly woven dark navy sisal. Several years ago, MacNutt's mother, interpreting a figure in her daughter's studio as naked, asked whether she was going to put clothes on that one. Some of MacNutt's figures seem skeletal; the sticks and twigs they are constructed from are reminiscent of ribs and bones. While many figures alternate between amorphous and kinetic body shapes, at the same time their exaggerated hollowness signals a degree of weightlessness, expressive perhaps of a figure in a void. It is this combination of monumental form and void-like transparency that frequently results in a feeling of strangeness and paradox. Her figures raise questions about identity and gender, and juxtapose heroic communal values, having to do with family and the recognition of ancestors, with more elusive and ephemeral ones pertaining to memory and the unconscious.

Sentinel
2002
bronze cast from twined willow, fruit tree branches and grapevine, 12' high

collection of City of Kelowna, BC

COLUMNS AND HUMAN FRAILITY

Inspired by a trip to Greece in the 1990s, MacNutt began a series of freestanding columns. Unlike the marble columns on classical buildings, MacNutt's woven columns are modest and unpredictable. She interweaves slender willow branches to form hollow tubular towers that twist and bend unpredictably as they rise above the ground. The whimsical frailty of these works opposes Greek ideals of order and permanence. When one sees several of MacNutt's columns standing together, one gets the impression of considerable variability. The heights vary, the circumferences vary, and no two columns bend and twist quite the same way. In fact, these twists are not fully within the artist's control. The artist speaks of the material having a life of its own. As she works she encounters continual surprises.

In classical art, columns terminate in elaborate "orders" composed of capitals, friezes, and entablatures that sit like majestic crowns upon the columns' heads. In a work like *Sentinel*, 2002, MacNutt not only questions the idea of

order, but the idea of completion as well. She deliberately leaves her work unfinished, refusing to tie off her branches at the top, as most craftspeople using interweaving techniques would do. Bare sticks reach into the air like pins from a cushion, or like stamens from a flower. They resemble the whiskers or antennae of a living creature that is sentient and openly receptive to the world around it.

For the sake of weathering outdoors, MacNutt has occasionally cast her tenuous towers in bronze, as she does her other willow figures intended for outdoor sites. Bronze is a permanent material often associated with classical statues and the Renaissance revival of these statues; the material was also used by early imperial cultures in Anatolia, Iran, India, China, Nigeria and many other places. Given her themes of transience and organic growth, MacNutt's use of bronze is more than a little ironic. She is making monumental sculpture to express themes not usually touched on in public art.

Return to Delos
2000-2005
willow, 5' - 8' high

Brown Grotta Gallery

MacNutt has described her theme as "the beauty of human frailty."[11] Most monuments impress upon us ideas such as courage, strength, will-power and accomplishment. A monument that celebrates frailty seems a little odd, but MacNutt explains: "We may admire people's skills and perfections, but what we love about them are their vulnerabilities, their imperfections." [12] One gets to know others only when one comes to some understanding of their flaws. This is true, as well, with our own sense of identity: recognition of one's flaws is a sign of maturity and self-awareness. Human frailty can also be thought of in conjunction with human interaction. People come together because they need each other. Only as a group do ordinary people have any real strength. This equally relates to the principle of weaving, where the individual threads or shoots are not particularly strong, but woven together they take on a structure that is enduring. MacNutt often plays with this principle, by varying the spacing of her material to such a degree that the separate pieces, whether bands of seagrass, willow or copper, lose their compacted uniformity and acquire a greater individuality, and, in the process, instill a sense of delicacy and fragility to the overall form.

Illness is a special form of frailty and sometimes it takes a serious illness to bring people together. MacNutt lost a brother to cancer. Her mother was very

ill when she was growing up. She was part of the 1995 "Survivors in Search of a Voice" exhibition in support of breast cancer patients and MacNutt's work can be seen in the lobbies of several hospitals in Halifax. While some of MacNutt's work, such as *Requiem*, grapple with the subject of infirmity and mortality, it also conveys a psychic need for fantasy and release. Illness is never just a matter of the body; the mind plays a part as well. MacNutt explores brokenness and frailty without ever losing the sense of mental energy and the unbounded powers of the imagination. MacNutt conducted a unique personal experiment in the mid-1980s. She placed three figures outdoors over an extended period, a group she called *Vulnerability*. The figures were made of a fragile natural fabric not intended to withstand snow and rain. Over time, MacNutt watched her figures dematerialize and cave in upon themselves. The exact nature of their disintegration was impossible to predict, but she was fascinated by the process. A similar situation arose when one of her works was damaged in the casting process. The damage involved a burning away of the wall of her material, leaving wound-like gaps, jagged splinters and unpredictable voids. To others, this would have been a disaster, but MacNutt felt it actually enriched the symbolism of her work, and titled it *Broken Head*. The artist deliberately used a similar technique in a later piece called *Requiem*, a memorial tribute to her brother.

Vulnerability
1986-1996
woven seagrass and copper wire, 5' - 7' high, purposefully exposed to the elements and eventually composted

Concerning another work, which was intended for an exhibition celebrating cancer survivors, MacNutt wrote: "My sculpture was woven on a loom from copper wire. After shaping it, I electroplated the piece, a process where electrical current causes a chemical solution to plate and stiffen the work. After plating, more chemicals and heat are applied to create the patina. I was surprised by how similar the processing I used was to breast cancer treatment." [13] The artist's techniques affect not only her forms, but the content and meaning of the work as well.

MacNutt has also conducted experiments, using chance again as a catalyst, that are the reverse of these "wounded pieces." These experiments involve what MacNutt calls "living sculptures." Her first was a *Living Fence*, created for the Longhouse Reserve in East Hampton, New York, planted strategically on a

lawn behind Yoko Ono's giant all white chess set, *Trust*. MacNutt's fence grows as the trees grow, though they are interwoven with one another like the cross pieces of a trellis. The work will expand and evolve, its final outcome impossible to predict. MacNutt has planted and interwoven two similar pieces in her own backyard. One sees similarities with her other art work, which accentuate the connection between figures and landscape, organic change and artistic experimentation, chance and creativity.

Requiem
1991
bronze cast from
twined paper

collection of
Mulgrave Machine
Company/ Reid Family

There was a tendency among modern artists to take symbols of strength and prestige and divest them of power and, vice versa, to take despised objects and treat them with disproportionate respect. This is one of the ideas behind Marcel Duchamp's readymades and behind the surreal object which the readymades developed into. MacNutt also uses materials in an ironic way. For instance, a typical bronze statue of a male hero might suggest strength, endurance and power. But what if the statue is made out of twigs and fishermen's rope? What if the statue is anonymous, as if covered beneath a cloth? What if this anonymous, unisex stick-figure were then transformed and cast in bronze? MacNutt's monumental treatment of transient themes does not nullify her themes. If anything, it adds a poignancy and punch to them.

Working in a variety of media, MacNutt defies easy categorization. She is a sculptor who uses weaving and basketry techniques to express themes about the unconscious, imagination and memory, as well as conveying feelings about illness and human frailty, none of which are themes usually associated with basketry or with the kind of permanent public monuments she is frequently asked to provide. Sanctuary and birth motifs abound in MacNutt's work. Her woven sculptures suggest birds' nests, thickets and protective containers. The theme of maternity and birth in such works as *Blue Madonna, Mother and Child* and *Expectancy* play in different ways with the notion of woman as a container, which links the maternity theme to the technique of weaving.

MacNutt's *Blue Madonna* further develops the container theme.The sculpture has a mirror-like construction of two inverted cones or funnels that appear to flow into one another. The upper funnel, representing the head, is

tightly woven; the lower funnel, representing the body, looks open and exposed, possibly unfinished or inviting additions. While both containers are empty, there is a strong suggestion that something is indeed inside the figure, though it may be invisible to the viewer. This invisible force could be a new emerging life, consciousness or a visiting spirit. The work is enigmatic, yet connects the ideas of containment, protection, birth, spirituality and imagination in a way that is concise and endlessly suggestive.

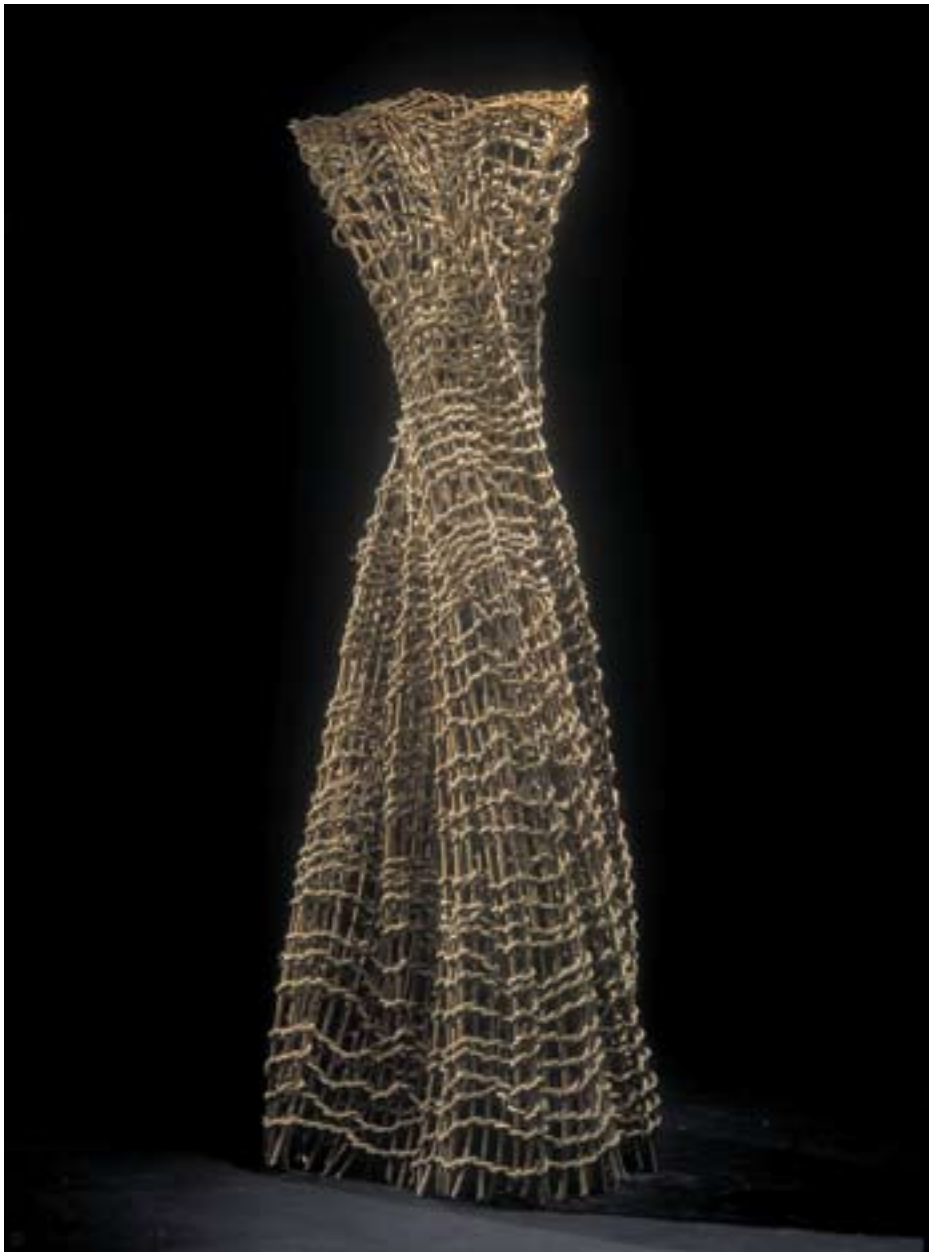
CONCLUSION

Timeless Form
1996
twined willow

collection of the artist

During the era of the Cold War, artists exercised the free play of their imaginations, but this play was often accompanied by a feeling of loss and uncertainty. The sense of surviving an ordeal that has left visible scars is given a personal interpretation in the work of many artists of this period. Frida Kahlo and Magdalena Abakanowicz used scar motifs to reflect both personal trials and general social conflicts. MacNutt is similarly interested in psychic survival. Like Kahlo and Abakanowicz, MacNutt draws attention to her wounded figures, arranged as groups of misfits and as vulnerable bodies coming together in a vision of alternative worlds and new communities.

MacNutt has a strong interest in the human form. She abstracts, fragments and distorts her forms and embues them with mystery. MacNutt's beings may not be of this world, but of an unconscious world that is receptive to change, flux and metamorphosis. MacNutt offers a critique of those traditional statuesque heroes that aggrandize the value of physical prowess; instead she accepts human frailty and acknowledges the need of others. MacNutt uses theatrical devices, masks, gestures and striking tableaux, to pose questions about gender and identity. Despised materials are developed and displayed in an ironic and imaginative way that revitalizes the relationship of art to craft. Through her use of natural materials, MacNutt links the body with nature in a way that emphasizes its mutability and celebrates its transformative potential.



A large part of MacNutt's appeal is her ability to span different media and link together seemingly irreconcilable cross currents. Her work suggests possibilities for how craft might expand into the fine arts, how it could experiment more radically with form and find connections with larger social and artistic themes. Her work also suggests how fine artists can reuse traditonal skills to comment on the changing values of their communities.

PHOTOS BY PETER BARSS

NOTES

1. Mary MacLachlan, personal conversation, 17 March 2005, Halifax, Nova Scotia.
2. Jack Lenor Larsen, "Foreword," *Dawn MacNutt: Woven Forms*, 16 August-16 September 1984 (Halifax: Art Gallery of Mount Saint Vincent University), 3.
3. Deborah A. Young, *Journeys: Three Nova Scotia Artists,* 16 December 1988-5 February 1989 (Halifax: Art Gallery of Nova Scotia), 12.
4. Gil McElroy, review, *Fibrearts*, Vol. 24, No. 4, (Jan/ Feb 98), 55.
5. Sandy Miller, *Dawn MacNutt: Woven Forms*, 4.
6. Dawn MacNutt, "Tapping the Creative Spirit," keynote address, conference sponsored by the Department of Human Resources, Charlottetown, PEI, 14 February 1997 (MacNutt collection), 7.
7. Dawn MacNutt, "A Summer's Adventure," *Hope and Healing* (Fall 2002), 14.
8. Mildred Constantine and Jack Lernor Larsen, *Beyond Craft: The Art Fabric*. (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1972), 11.
9. The show, "Polish Tapestries," October 2-26, 1975, appeared at the Mount Saint Vincent University Art Gallery in Halifax, Nova Scotia. MacNutt, Personal Interview, May 18, 2005.
10. The exact quote is "Dawn MacNutt's tall haunting figures are woven of copper wire and seagrass like giant hose." Mavis Guinard, *International Herald Tribune*, 22 June 1985.
11. MacNutt, Interview, 22 January 2005.
12. MacNutt, "Tapping the Creative Spirit," 2.
13. Barbara Amesbury. *Survivors in Search of a Voice: The Art of Courage.* 17 February-22 May 1995, Royal Ontario Museum, travelling exhibition. (Toronto: Woodlawn Arts Foundation, 1995), 27.