

# Intercessions

Margaret Hunter



Nine years have passed since my earlier exhibition "Changing Places" was shown at the Collins Gallery and I was delighted to be invited to exhibit here once more.

The title *Changing Places*, referred both to the German unification, and my own coming to terms with a life divided between Berlin and Scotland. Events have moved on, there is a new Berlin, one that is still changing and rearranging itself. However, the influence of place as emphasised by Louise Johnstone in her excellent introduction, is still one of the most important catalysts for my work today.

The main paintings in the present exhibition were completed during a residency in Santanyi, Mallorca in the year 2000. Living and working in Berlin and Scotland, and on the periphery of other cultures and communities in Europe, provides a heightened intensity to my perceptions. It offers the opportunity and privilege of stepping into other worlds - not in a superficial way but directly into others' shoes.

The individuals whose paths I have crossed are now part of my experience and often surface, unasked, in my paintings. It is often only with hindsight - and when I achieve a degree of distance from the painting as something outside of myself -for instance when I consider a title - that I can recognise and trace the seed of the idea.

One of those paintings which grew out of the subconscious was *Woman with Apron*, currently on show in the Paisley Museum and Art Gallery exhibition *Holding Together*. In retrospect, I recognised the person whose story had left such an impression on me and who had inspired the work.

The heroine or protagonist is a friend, Christel who in the early sixties, (as a young woman and at great risk to herself), organised the escape of her boyfriend, (later to become her husband), through the canalisation system under The Wall. One outcome of her involvement in this harrowing tale of the dangerous flight through a tunnel from East to West Berlin was that she was blacklisted and could never leave or enter West Berlin by road or train again.

Around the time that I was working on paintings for the *Changing Places* exhibition I visited Christel in Munich. She is the only person I have ever known who has no family: no children, no siblings, no far removed aunt or uncle or cousins. Her husband had just left her and she kept repeating that she 'wanted to be the good housewife....'.

In the painting, the figure stands erect; one arm held protectively across her front - she is holding herself together. What she wears could be an apron or armour, it is the colour of metal - and it looks scored and battered. It is her mark of identity.

In more recent paintings made on Mallorca, I was inspired first by the colours of the landscape and the wonderful light. However, the idyll of the tourists' paradise was countered by the socio-political realities confronting the local people. It was a revelation for me to realise the disturbance caused to a small island community through the domination of a spiralling property market by outsiders who seldom live in their properties. Due to drought as well as massive extra demand, seawater is now seeping into ground water, causing acute environmental problems.

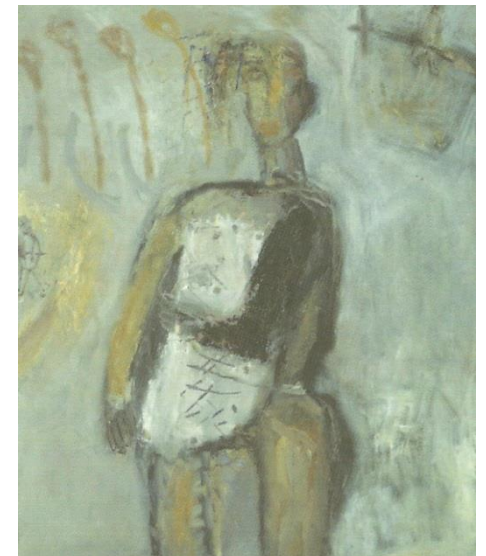
I experienced the life of the Mallorquin through friends I made like Antonia. A sophisticated and well-travelled woman, she is a farmer, struggling to work the land, which was passed down to her. She is passionately proud of her country, its special language and traditions. In the large paintings where the subject is reduced to a single figure with the cactus or leaf, I see Antonia.

The paintings and sculptures here are my interpretations of the mystery that lies behind the palette of human experience. This is the material for my artistic concerns.

The sculptures shown here were made in Northumberland, where my husband, Joachim Gross and my friend Alan Cairns assisted me. During this time my father, a vital, intelligent and sensitive man, died and I dedicate my work in the exhibition to his memory.

***Margaret Hunter, September 2001***

*'Woman with Apron'*  
Oil on wood  
120 x 95 cm  
1992



# Intercessions

Hunter's approach to her work is intuitive but her intuition works in collaboration with a rigorous critical and analytical understanding of the art of painting. The tension between two ways of working and thinking, intuitive and intellectual, is embedded in the work, as Hunter strives to preserve the energy and internal dynamic while also achieving clarity and resolution. In her studio practice the initial stages of open exploration and free expression through drawing are followed by a clear and disciplined method. The expressive use of colour and seductive paint handling is tempered by her determination to create works which probe beneath the surface and go to the heart of issues. Hunter's themes are universal: she addresses our fear of loss, displacement and transience and she does this with insight and gentle humour.

Since graduating from Glasgow School of Art, Hunter has followed a path which has allowed her to spend intensive periods working in locations other than Scotland, including Germany, Poland, Finland and Mallorca. During these periods she has gained real insight into the lives of the people - the kind of knowledge that comes from being involved yet slightly distant. Hunter believes that an understanding of the smaller incidents of life is a clue to comprehending the larger events and that our knowledge of individuals can be applied to an understanding of communities and cultures.

*'I now enjoy the opportunity of spending periods of two or three months working in other countries. My experiences and memories of people and places are transformed over time and eventually surface quite unexpectedly in the work.'*

Hunter's fascination with different cultures, and the experience of living in and observing another culture from the outside both date back to her time as a child in West Africa. The memories of that time have contributed to her awareness of the physical and psychological barriers that exist between individuals and communities as they strive to delineate personal and cultural borders and to exclude others.

Given its history, Hunter's choice of Berlin as a place to work and live seems apt, although what took her there in the first place was her obsessive desire to study with the German artist Georg Baselitz. The then divided city of Berlin with its dual identity and accompanying tensions and contradictions was mirrored in Hunter's sense of being split between Germany and Scotland.

With the fall of the Berlin Wall, the city has progressed from a divided and polarised community to an uneasy unity. Hunter, meanwhile, has moved from a position of being torn between two lives and cultures to a more comfortable accommodation of both. This has been achieved by solving the logistics of living and working between two countries while finding time

for family and teaching and has been helped by Hunter's increased facility with the German language.

The need to accommodate and adapt to changing conditions and circumstances is a theme running through Hunter's recent work. Her figures strive for stability and calm, a state that we sense is not easily won or maintained. This is relevant to the re-united Berlin where two communities with contrasting views and understanding of the past are involved in a process of reconciliation and readjustment. In coming to terms with the social, political and economic upheaval, it is necessary to recognise and deal with the accompanying tensions, as individuals and communities try to resolve their feelings of anxiety and forge a new identity for the city. Hunter stresses the importance of the sense of belonging and her work charts the physical, emotional and psychological damage that occurs when people feel de-stabilised and histories are challenged.

*'The sculpture is becoming more fragmented, human parts which can be displaced. This is linked to my feelings about the East Germans whose lives have been so altered and the psychological repercussions brought about by the radical changes in their lifestyle. It has been a time of immense change also for the West Berliners whose island situation came to an abrupt end.'*

Drawing is central to Hunter's practice and development as an artist. Since her time studying with Baselitz in Berlin she draws constantly. The passion for drawing was fired by a deep need to communicate her thoughts and emotions alone in a foreign country with little knowledge of the language.

The initial small drawings and sketches, expressions of free imagination and inventive mark-making, give birth to the ideas for paintings and sculptures. Certain themes relating to the human condition, the duality of the emotional and intellectual self and ideas of individual and collective identity are revisited.

Hunter returns to her drawings throughout the process of painting and the answer to resolving a particular painting will sometimes come from quite unrelated drawings.

*'At all stages in my work I return again to my drawings. The drawings come first. They are my visual thinking.'*

Both drawings and the related paintings are made up of complex layers; the history of the making is left visible in the finished work. The work documents a process of careful reduction to the vital elements of expression.

The large acrylic or mixed media paintings in the exhibition were completed on the island of Mallorca.

*'Each painting or sculpture is part of a continuous process, a way of working that allows me to revisit, reconsider and reinvent. Something new always emerges from the acts of drawing and painting.'*

It is Hunter's practice to work in blocks of time, carrying elements and ideas over from the previous period. So there is an organic development in the work as ideas and drawings begun in Berlin were developed in Mallorca and drawings made in Mallorca formed the basis of sculptures carved in Northumberland.

Certain forms or symbols are repeated over time but then developed in new ways that challenge and change their meaning. This continuum of repetition and change is an important element in the work.

*'These repeated forms matter to me; they are my personal symbolic language. I know the origins of each of the forms, the moment of discovery, and can trace their gradual evolution.'*

Archetypal forms like the cross and spiral have appeared in many of the works and gone through many subtle transformations. Hunter recognises and utilises their aesthetic and formal qualities while aware that at another level they resonate with deeper poetic meaning. By manipulating the qualities of paint and scale, a symbol may dominate the figure or may be no more than a faint trace or echo registered almost subliminally. The paintings are not illustrated or consciously constructed tales: it is only in retrospect that Hunter can identify the characters and verbalise their narratives. We are presented with a fragment or remnants of other lives and construct the narrative in relation to our own experience. The ordinary is made extraordinary through its translation in paint.

*'I do not set out to tell particular stories. They surface in the act of drawing or painting. I'm not interested in big dramas I am more concerned with excerpts from life which reveal aspects of the human condition that we can all identify with.'*

Hunter's initial conscious concern is with the dynamics and formal qualities of the image but her way of working allows

subconscious material to surface and enrich the work with additional layers of meaning. While her figures are stylised and abstracted Hunter takes care not to over-exaggerate or simplify to the point that it loses touch with reality.

*'It is important that the connecting thread of humanity is not overstretched.'*

These paintings in the exhibition are rich in allusions and offer a metaphor for the spoken word. For all that is said there is much that is inexpressible. Areas of the paintings are clearly articulated, others are left ambiguous or veiled in layers of semi-transparent pigment. As in speech, the meaning is expressed by different stresses and intonations.

Here, the variety of weight given to compositional elements, colours and qualities of line and mark-making are deployed to extract nuances of thought and meaning. Ochre and burnt sienna, the colours of Mallorca give a warm Mediterranean glow to the paintings in the exhibition.

The carved wooden figures stand life-size and occupy the same physical space and eye level with the viewer, which helps us to relate directly to them both physically and psychologically. The stylised figures, while not imitative of appearance, are invested with understanding of real bodies stripped of non-essential detail. They are real in the same way that the sculptures of Brancusi or Giacometti are real; they are invested with the beliefs and personality of the artist and go beyond a concern with appearance. Hunter's sculptures show an affinity with African or archaic art forms and with the honest approach to materials practised by Brancusi.

*'The sculptures themselves take on a persona: they have a real presence and I enjoy having them around me. I feel I invest them with a lot of myself because of the very physical work involved in the making. I enjoy the finishing process of creating depth to the patina by working in layers of wax and polish.'*

Hunter's approach to sculpture is direct: the figures' construction avoids artifice or extravagant gesture. She responds to the warmth of wood as a living material and enjoys its tendency to shift and move, a process that is ongoing. The surfaces of the sculptures are hacked into and these raw wounds or incisions are rubbed with oil pigment. These hacks and incisions like African tribal ritual scarification, a declaration of identity or stamp of belonging, are here also evidence of the artist's hand and her claim to the figures.

The idea of attachment and belonging is an important theme that runs through this group of sculptures, making and maintaining contact in a variety of contexts. Figures attach

themselves to other figures, to animals, to places, to ideas, to the future and to the past.

The figures are reduced to the vital and essential and are free of pretensions and conceits. Her development as an artist shows a determination not to imitate others or follow current trends but to base her work on her personal life experiences. Her vision has grown out of her involvement with life and her desire to understand our relationship to the past and to the present.

Throughout her work she presents a positive message, urging us to accept life's challenges and recognise and celebrate the strength of the human spirit.

**Louise Johnstone**

**Lecturer in Historical and Theoretical Studies**

**Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art and Design, Dundee**

# The Sculptures

## Cycle

*'This sculpture is about cycles of movement, the figure is holding on to something that's always moving.'*

The wheel as a symbol can represent the life force, creative energy, or a desire to remain connected with the past while moving into the future. It represents a cyclical rather than linear view of time: 'What goes round comes around. The stylised figure is at full stretch to seize the wheel, an expression of the effort and perseverance involved in holding on to what is important in life.

There is a sense of insecurity in the sculpture. The figure has thrust her torso forward to counter the pull of the stretch. While she seems grounded, it would not take much to destabilise the figure. She seems to embody the belief that a certain amount of risk of destabilisation is necessary in order to stay in contact with the energy and creative potential of life.



**Cycle**  
ht: 193 cm, 2001



## Holding the Eggs

The figure has an egg-shaped head and this identifies her role as keeper or guardian of the eggs. The figure is physically defined by her function and this is echoed in the creamy eggshell tints of her patina. The egg forms are heavy and made of lead but they sit quite comfortably in the scooped out triangle of the torso, whose base is widened to accommodate the load. The figure stands strong under the burden of her attributes. As a concept, and formally, the two have come to terms and have reached a quiet resolution.

This unexpected use of materials challenges our usual reading of the egg as symbol of fertility. These eggs suggest the opposite - sterility. The poisonous and unnatural quality of the lead contrasts with the delicacy and lightness of real eggs. The contradiction here raises questions about our relationship with - and treatment of - farm animals in the light of the various self-induced food crises our country has endured in recent years.



**Holding the Eggs**

ht: 90 cm, 2001

Private Collection

## The Arrangement

The two figures of *The Arrangement* are split but designed like jigsaw pieces to fit together. They represent two individuals who, when joined, become a single strong unit in the shape of an arch. In earlier works we are often shown two sides of the same figure - a dual identity and an expression of the tension created by contradictory demands of mind or heart. However, in this sculpture there appear to be two distinct individuals, separate yet joined, a couple. They have adapted to each other, appear stable and are linked physically by the energy of the metal coil, which has the potential to contract and expand. Reminiscent of a heat exchanger, the metal coil symbolises the creative energy that flows between the two. The deep blue staining of the patina, colour of intellect and peace, suggests that the figures are compatible in mind as well as body.

The work celebrates a balanced and harmonious relationship where the figures are compatible at all levels. Individually the figures appear awkward, vulnerable, jagged and incomplete. Together they suggest symmetry and inner peace as each balances and defines the other.



**The Arrangement**  
ht: 140 cm, 2001

## Almost

Despite being positioned on the edge, the figure here is stable and remarkably unconcerned; she seems to be at ease with her situation. There is a sense of partial displacement and of having come slightly adrift. The tension and separation between the figure and her place are echoed in the change of colour from the neutral wash of the base to the red-orange stained torso, colours that depict energy and movement. She looks proud and quite regal and composed, having adjusted her pose by inclining backwards to accommodate the slope. The figure has reached a sort of equilibrium, although we are aware that there is still the potential for further movement.



**Almost**  
ht: 164 cm, 2001

## Listening

This dark archaic figure has been stopped in her tracks and she is turning to listen, pulled back by an echo of something that has gone before. Memory is given the form of a rod which functions like a root holding her close to what she knows, to whom she is and where she belongs. The metal rod of memory twists and turns, marking the distortions that occur in the process of remembering. This process of trying to hold on to the past and keep our memories alive is an important part of our sense of identity. The figure here is straining to pin the truth down and to consolidate and preserve the memories before they fade. Security and harmony come from shared remembrance, which is a core element of our sense of individual and family identity. The metal winds its way back to the earth to which we all return.



**Listening**

ht: 173 cm, 2001

Private Collection

## Woman with Hen

The idea of interdependence of the plump chicken and the equally plump woman is underlined by the similarity of form. The stimulus for this particular sculpture was the comical social behaviour of chickens and geese around the workshop in Northumberland. Hunter was able to watch the mechanism of the social pecking order at work within the flocks and witness the birds' instinctive ability to respond as a group to perceived danger. This instinctive survival behaviour suggested parallels in the artist's mind with her response to the recent death of her father, which she perceived not only as a terrible personal loss but also as a severe assault on the family as a unit. She was also acutely aware of the extent to which the death of parents can cause feelings of abandonment and vulnerability in the children, no matter how old. With the loss of a strong father-figure, her family group has sustained a hurt and in grieving, the individuals come close together, exchanging reminiscences to keep his memory alive. At such times of stress and bereavement we revert back to purely instinctive behaviour in the search for comfort and consolation.



**Woman with Hen**  
ht: 87 cm, 2001



## Dogman

In the sculptures the stomach as the centre of feeling is often made the site of tension or location of meaning. In the *Dogman* the centre is hollow and coils of twisted metal hold the figure together. His dog is a substitute or surrogate for human contact: it fills an emotional void. Man and dog depend upon each other; the dog is the man's companion piece. The colour of the dog bleeds into the leg of the man and, thus, the man is marked by the dog - a visual sign of their emotional interdependence. The dog is physically pinned to the man's leg. Its feet don't touch the ground so wherever the man goes the dog must also go.



**Dogman**  
ht: 178 cm, 2001

# The Paintings

## Parts of the Landscape

The female figure is held in place by the landscape on one side and pinned down by the cactus on the other. The strength of the Mallorcan sun is reflected in the warm ochre and yellows of the background and in the figure itself, which is also touched by the colours of the sun. This figure is at one with the landscape, but not entirely comfortable. Her association brings a certain amount of pain but she has adjusted to her situation and belongs to the landscape.

Life on the land in Mallorca is hard and there is a major problem stemming from the shortage of water. Hunter's painting makes us aware of undercurrents of anxiety underpinning the idyllic landscape. The climate dominates the lives of the people on Mallorca, where the heat of the midday sun keeps everyone indoors.

The cactus, while contributing to the figure's unease, can also be read as a positive symbol because it has evolved strategies to survive the conditions of drought.



**Parts of the Landscape**  
200 x 140 cm, 2000



## Companion

The figure here is isolated: his small body inhabits a huge, empty environment. Some comfort is afforded by the warm shadow round the figures uniting man and dog and distancing them from the filmy pale colours of the outside world. They stand on an island and the coil in the man's stomach is repeated as a trace or ghost image in the void around them.

This image is an example of an idea, given expression in a painting which was later translated into the sculpture 'Dogman', where Hunter explores further variations on the ideas of belonging and attachment.



**Companion**  
200 x 140 cm, 2000



## Next Move

The gentle fresco-like colour in this sun-bleached work evokes an atmosphere of quiet contemplation. The figure is at a crossroads or turning point and it will be necessary for him to take action if his situation is to be resolved. The figure finds himself literally up against the edge and cornered. His torso is falling over, suggesting dislocation, while his legs form a triangle, suggesting a contradictory stability. Positive and negative readings are set against each other and the walls themselves may offer comfort and support as well as a feeling of being trapped.

The motif of footprints is reminiscent both of the forms of gourds and traces left by walking in the sand. The two oversized footprints representing stability and potential freedom offer the means of leaving the corner. The figure is caught in a moment when he is contemplating his next move.



**Next Move**  
200 x 140 cm, 2000

## On Going

This painting deals with the idea of a trace of something that has happened, holding sway over the future of the small figure. The figure is swamped by the size of the footprint but, at the same time, it offers a symbol of stability in the empty space around him. The idea of human traces as a visual documentation of life's journeys is expressed here, along with the idea that we need to understand and accept the past in order to negotiate the future more successfully. The strapping across the footprint could be read as our attempts to pin down memories or moments of insight.

The figure is not the main or active character in this work. He is neutral, perhaps even incidental. It is the footprint as symbol of the past that dominates the composition. The idea of memory is further evoked through the time-aged fresco-like colours of the background and the delicacy of the transparent and fluid pigment, which seems to echo the effects of the passage of time.



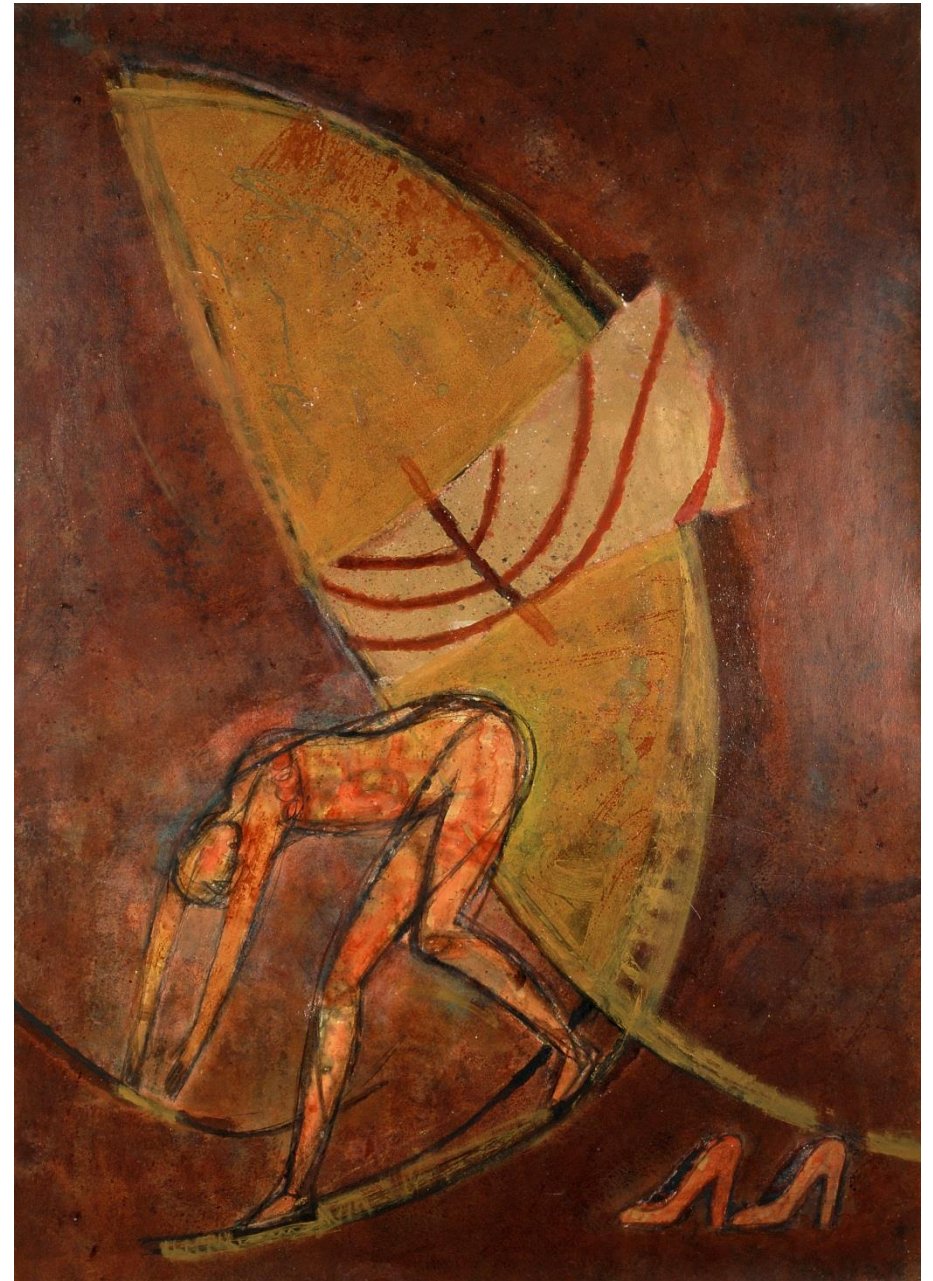
**On Going**  
200 x 140 cm, 2000



## Leaf

The figure in this painting displays a feeling of active involvement with the landscape, represented by the large leaf shape. This natural form stands as a landmark, a symbol of the strength of the bond between the woman and the land. The arching composition indicates that things will continue and that this is a fragment of the larger landscape. The pose of the figure with her back bowed suggests that her commitment to the Land is one of some hardship and struggle. The passion and energy of this woman is suggested by the vibrancy of the warm raw-earth colours. Her love for the land requires her to step out of the high-heeled shoes, which suggest the possibility of an alternative city-based life of glamour and sophistication.

In retrospect, Hunter can identify the character in this painting as a friend who runs a small farm in Mallorca and is an example of someone who has made a strong impression on the artist, appearing later as a leading character in a painting.



**Leaf**

200 x 140 cm, 2001



## Sensing

The box in this painting appears to be holding the figure in place. The container both shelters and partially confines her. The arms are free and this suggests a possible sense of direction out of the box. There are tabs visible on the edge of the box. These look like the tabs on the paper dolls' clothes from childhood, suggesting perhaps that the box could be changed as easily as those paper clothes.

The triangular Nuremberg Trichter motif representing the source of knowledge in earlier paintings appears suspended above the head - and no longer seems to have any influence over the figure. The clear separation of figure and ground, where the background textures and mark making have been softened by the depth of the burnt sienna hue, leaves the figure and box somewhat isolated. The image suggests that if the figure leaves the box it will be on her own initiative and in the direction of her own choosing and not on the basis of external advice.



**Sensing**  
200 x 140 cm, 2000

## Margaret Hunter: Intercessions

### Collins Gallery

The Collins Gallery first represented Margaret Hunter in 1992, in "Changing Places" a major touring solo exhibition comprising paintings, drawings and sculptures influenced by the artist's experiences of living and working in Berlin and the West of Scotland.

In Intercessions, we welcome the opportunity to focus on new developments in Margaret Hunter's work and in particular, the influence which residencies in Mallorca and Finland, as well as the changing social and cultural climate of Berlin, have had upon her use of symbolism and colour.

"Intercessions" also focuses on the artist's growing confidence as a sculptor, in its inclusion of a series of vigorously carved and emotionally charged wooden figures.

Examined by writer Louise Johnstone within this catalogue, the sculptures are also discussed by Margaret Hunter in a 20 minute video, produced by AV Media Services and available from the Collins Gallery.

*Laura Hamilton, Curator, Collins Gallery*

**Intercessions: 20 October - 17 November 2001**  
**Collins Gallery, University of Strathclyde, Richmond Street, Glasgow**

## Margaret Hunter: Holding Together

### Paisley Museum and Art Galleries

On an intimate scale Paisley Museum and Art Galleries offers a review of the artist's early work. Based around two recent gifts received from the Contemporary Art Society, the sculptures, paintings and drawings in this exhibition mark significant points in the development of an artist whose work has been shaped by an uncompromising alertness to her own inner journey in relation to the external world. "Holding Together" reveals the integrity of Hunter's way of working where paintings and sculpture are manifestations that emerge from the ongoing process of thought and emotion that is alive in her drawing.

The sculpture "Holding Together" (1994) and the oil painting "Passage" (1992) were gifts from Dasha Shenkman, in memory of her mother Belle Shenkman, through the Contemporary Art Society.

*Charlotte Rostek, Assistant Keeper of Art, Paisley Museum and Art Galleries*

**Holding Together: 21 September - 4 November 2001**  
**Paisley Museum and Art Galleries, High Street, Paisley**



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**For definitive information or images, please consult Margaret Hunter through her website:**

**[www.margaret-hunter.com](http://www.margaret-hunter.com)**

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