Grace Bakst Wapner’s Heart

*By Sara Lynn Henry*

A central font of Grace Bakst Wapner’s works is her heart/body filled with the most intense emotion. For Wapner there is the intense emotion of her relationships to other people and with the world around her and with her art.

During one of my personal times of troubles, Grace quoted to me the ancient proverb that only a broken heart can be filled. To Illuminate this further in terms of her work, I looked to Chögyam Trungpa, a Buddhist teacher who made the bridge between the East and the West in the US in the 1970s-80s. Trungpa talks about the heart and about searching for an awakened heart. He says, “If you put your hand through to your ribcage and feel for that ribcage there is nothing there except for tenderness. You feel sore and soft with the awakened heart, and if you open your eyes to the rest of the world, you feel tremendous sadness.” (*Shambala,* *The Sacred Path of the Warrior*, 1984, 45-46.)

Now this sadness is interesting. It does not come from being mistreated. As Trungpa says, “You don’t feel sad because someone has insulted you or because you feel impoverished. Rather this experience of sadness is unconditional. It occurs because your heart is completely exposed.” So, it is the experience of this exposed heart in Wapner’s recent works.

What is interesting in Trungpa, and in Wapner’s works, is that the result of this open heart—this broken heart, this exposed one—is a kind of honesty. “Because you feel that this heart of yours is full, and you’d like to spill it out and feel it for others. It’s what gives birth to fearlessness.”

There is something fearless in Wapner’s work, honest and direct. It comes from this tenderness; it comes from “letting this world tickle your heart, your raw and beautiful heart. You’re willing to open up without resistance or shyness and face the world. You are willing to share your heart with others. If this heart is broken, it has this tenderness that is simply willing to be exposed.” So, the result is not maudlin or sentimental. It is rather an open heart and open body sensory experience found in her recent layered works with tender openings through the center. It is like the metaphor of a hand going through the ribcage.

*From S. Henry, Grace Wapner’s Scholar’s Garden: An East-West Aesthetic Dialogue, Hyperion*, *Volume III issue 4, and S. Henry, dialogue in the video by Gert Stern, Grace Wapner’s Sculptures, 2003-2005.*