

# GWYNN MURRILL

## TAKING FLIGHT

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Photographed by **NATE HOLTBERG**



**T**he big cat sits quietly in a kind of artistic purgatory, but clearly closer to damnation than salvation. His paws have been severed and dried epoxy oozes from the crack around the neck. The artificial glue is the only thing keeping his majestic head attached to the body. The pose is relaxed but the scene is chaotic. There has been violence here, and it is hard to see how even an accomplished artist will put it back together. But that is Gwynn Murrill's challenge. Seemingly calm and reserved, this L.A. sculptor admits that the mangled life-sized cat in her studio is a product of her anger and frustration. "I just got so angry I threw it against the wall. Actually I kicked it against the wall. I thought I would just start over, but then I thought I might be able to save it. But I'm still not sure," she says quietly.

**IMAGE:** Opposite page, *Flying Eagle*, bronze, 26" x 10" x 5". Below, *Circle Cat*, bronze, edition 9, 19" x 32" x 19.5".





# GWYNN MURRILL

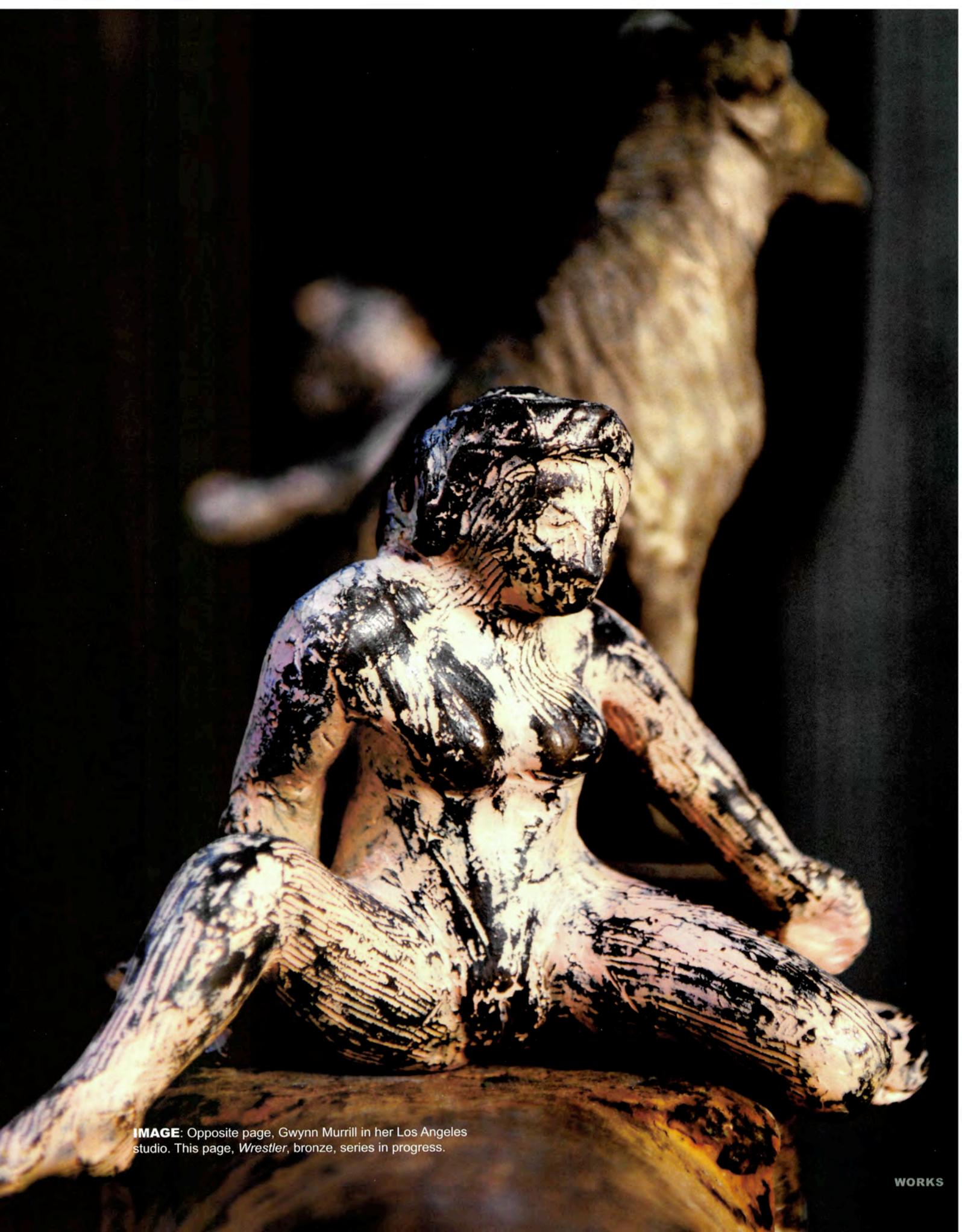
In her search for the perfect line and form, Murrill is relentless and sometimes volatile, but when she achieves the perfection she is searching for, the violent struggle seems more than worth it. Her animals are full of grace and dignity. The smooth lines somehow suggest stillness and movement at the same time, and if any piece falls short, there will be no afterlife. The big cat in her studio is a bruised and battered example of her commitment to get it right.

Murrill didn't start out as a sculptor. Born in Michigan and raised in Southern California, Murrill went to UCLA to study painting, but she was forced to take sculpture to fulfill her degree requirements. She started by putting 2 x 4's together and carving them with a chainsaw. "It was kind of scary," she admits. "I had to put a chair between it (chainsaw) and me because when I got through to the wood it would just drop. So eventually I started using a big sander." Her first real project was a wooden rocking horse. It was her first animal sculpture, but at the time she certainly didn't see it as a precursor to her life's work. She looked at it in purely practical terms. She figured it could serve as a piece of furniture after the class was over, so in her mind, it wasn't a total waste of time.

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"When I took the sculpture class in college, which I really didn't want to take, I thought it was stupid. You make something that you just have to walk around. I didn't see any point in it until I got interested in the process of making that first rocking horse – the sanding of it especially. There was a meditation that happened. I knew I was going to be doing this for a couple of hours, and I was interested in trying to find a form, and it really intrigued me," she says. Murrill was hooked.

After graduation she embraced the role of starving artist – maybe not starving exactly, but she wasn't making any money. To pay the bills she painted houses, taught a little bit, and worked for another artist as an assistant. She was lucky in that her mom helped her buy a house, but she had to rent out rooms to pay the mortgage. And on the side, she worked on her own sculpture – making no more than one or two pieces a year. Along the way there were a couple of shows, but for the most part, she worked in relative obscurity for the better part of a decade, until she got a big break. She was awarded a fellowship to study with master marble sculptors in Italy. "Rome was the first time I



**IMAGE:** Opposite page, Gwynn Murrill in her Los Angeles studio. This page, *Wrestler*, bronze, series in progress.



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got to be just an artist and it was so exciting,” she remembers. “Marble is so old-fashioned but there is a similar sensibility to wood. Even though I put wood together to carve it, I was still doing the take-away method. With the stone you just had to be a little more careful because you can’t add anything back.”

Marble required patience, and Murrill had that in abundance. She has always liked to work slowly. She made only two sculptures the whole time she was in Rome: A small cat to practice on and then a larger dog sculpture. As Gwynn says, “When you are working in marble, you can’t do anything in a hurry.” After returning from Europe, Gwynn and her soon-to-be husband settled in Hawaii, where she continued to work as an artist thanks to a Guggenheim grant. And then came a big commission from the California Arts Council. Gwynn was hired to create two life-sized cougars for a building in Los Angeles. It was a learning experience. “It was exciting and scary. I had to learn to work with other people. I had to learn to

talk to everyone all the time. I was talking to the councilperson in Sacramento about my plans for the sculpture, but didn’t talk to the people down here in Los Angeles. I didn’t realize that everyone needed to know everything all the time. In the end, the owner of the building wanted me to change some things, and I said, ‘No.’”

There may have been some misunderstandings on that first job, but the commissions continue to account for a large chunk of Gwynn’s income. Just recently she finished a big project in Pasadena. She and her husband David worked on site, carving the limestone façade of a building. “The owner saw columns I had carved in a library in Palos Verdes, and he contacted me about his building. It really was a leap of faith for him.” Gwynn admits that at important junctures in her life she has always had help, from that first fellowship in Rome to grants at opportune times to business people willing to incorporate art into a project, but she says that’s as it should be. “Even Michelangelo wouldn’t have been Michelangelo without

the Medicis,” she says. “I argue with art experts who say, ‘Even without support Michelangelo would have found a way to create his art.’ But I don’t think he would have. It’s true you have to want to do it, but you have to have a vehicle – some way of getting there. All artists need champions – always.”

First impressions are often deceiving, and that is definitely the case with Gwynn Murrill. On the one hand, she is soft spoken, polite and patient. She loves to garden and lives in the Santa Monica Mountains, miles from the harsh glare of L.A. She sculpts elegant animals that, while contemporary, exude a quiet stillness. That is the Gwynn Murrill you see at first glance. But there is more: the famous temper, the sculptures of “wrestlers” which are actually men and women entwined in sexual embraces, and the downtown studio where she spends most of her time. She likes to be provocative in a quiet sort of way. She sculpts animals not for any great affinity for the creatures but because she loves the form. “I have always used animals in my work



mainly because I could," she explains. "I knew in the sixth grade that it was just something that comes natural to me. I had to do a little Christmas present that we were supposed to take home to our mothers and I made a deer out of clay. And it really looked like a deer." She is known for her sleek portrayal of animals, especially big cats and deer, but she prefers that they end up in a minimalist environment.

"A lot of people like to put my work in a nice grassy area, but I don't," she says bluntly. "I have a dealer in New York who says people won't buy my deer because they hate deer. Back there they are a scourge – eating everyone's flower gardens – but I say you're not supposed to put them out there in Long Island. You're supposed to put them on the 24th floor of a building in the city. That's where they should be because that's where they would have industrial or straight lines around them – a minimalist environment. You have to look at the positive and negative form around them, and then it becomes real sculpture. Some-

times when it (sculpture) is out in the forest, I get a creepy feeling because it's too close to those funny little deer decorations people use as lawn ornaments." There is really no danger of that, but Murrill is right. Her animal sculptures are more striking when they show up in unexpected places.

Murrill's studio is equal parts gallery, apartment and working space. She often spends the night here when she is engrossed in a project. One wall is covered with small watercolor paintings. Although she started off as a painter so many years ago, now she only paints when she travels, so this group of watercolors will stay up until her next trip. She never shows the paintings because she "doesn't like the comparison people make with the sculpture." The back patio is clearly where Gwynn does the heavy lifting. It's filled with sculptures, in wood, stone, bronze and polyurethane, in various stages of completion. "I'm working on some wooden pieces. I went to India last year, and I took some small pieces with me. I call them

wrestlers even though they are kind of sexual figures. I had a couple enlarged in wood. I've been working on that idea for awhile," she says as she picks up two wooden figures that bear little resemblance to her silky smooth animal sculptures. With chisel marks clearly scarring the surface, the wrestlers have an almost folk art feel. They are intriguing and such a departure for the artist that it will be interesting to see where she takes them.

The cat that is causing so much consternation these days sits forlornly in the back next to its companion piece, which is developing much more smoothly from the sculptor's point of view. Gwynn was commissioned to do the two big cats for a home in Florida, but she has no idea when she will finish. "Oh, that cougar," she says, clearly

**IMAGE:** Opposite page, *Coyote VIII*, 1993, bronze, edition 6, 30 x 47 x 10 inches. Above, *Tiger 4* (detail) bronze, 2001, edition 6.

frustrated. "I've been working on it since last summer, and I just can't get it. I work in foam now – polyurethane foam (before bronze) – so I can cut it up and put it back together. I think I'm going to drive myself crazy with this one, but I will know when it's working." From start to finish, it is a spiritual experience, but she says, "It's a romantic notion to think the sculpture will reveal itself. I don't think of it that way. Sometimes you make a huge mistake, and then you have to change the whole thing. There is a lot of invention with the 'take away' method." She's counting on that ingenuity to solve the "problem" sitting in the back of her studio. She circles the sculpture slowly looking for answers, which she knows she will eventually find.

"I want my work to be contemporary and abstract," she says. "I want the work to be ethereal, but it has to happen my way, and I will never stop looking for it."



**IMAGE:** *Horse*, 1999, bronze, 76 x 99 x 21 inches.

**WEB:** To watch her video interview and see Gwynn in her Los Angeles studio, log on to [www.artworksmagazine.com](http://www.artworksmagazine.com)

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