

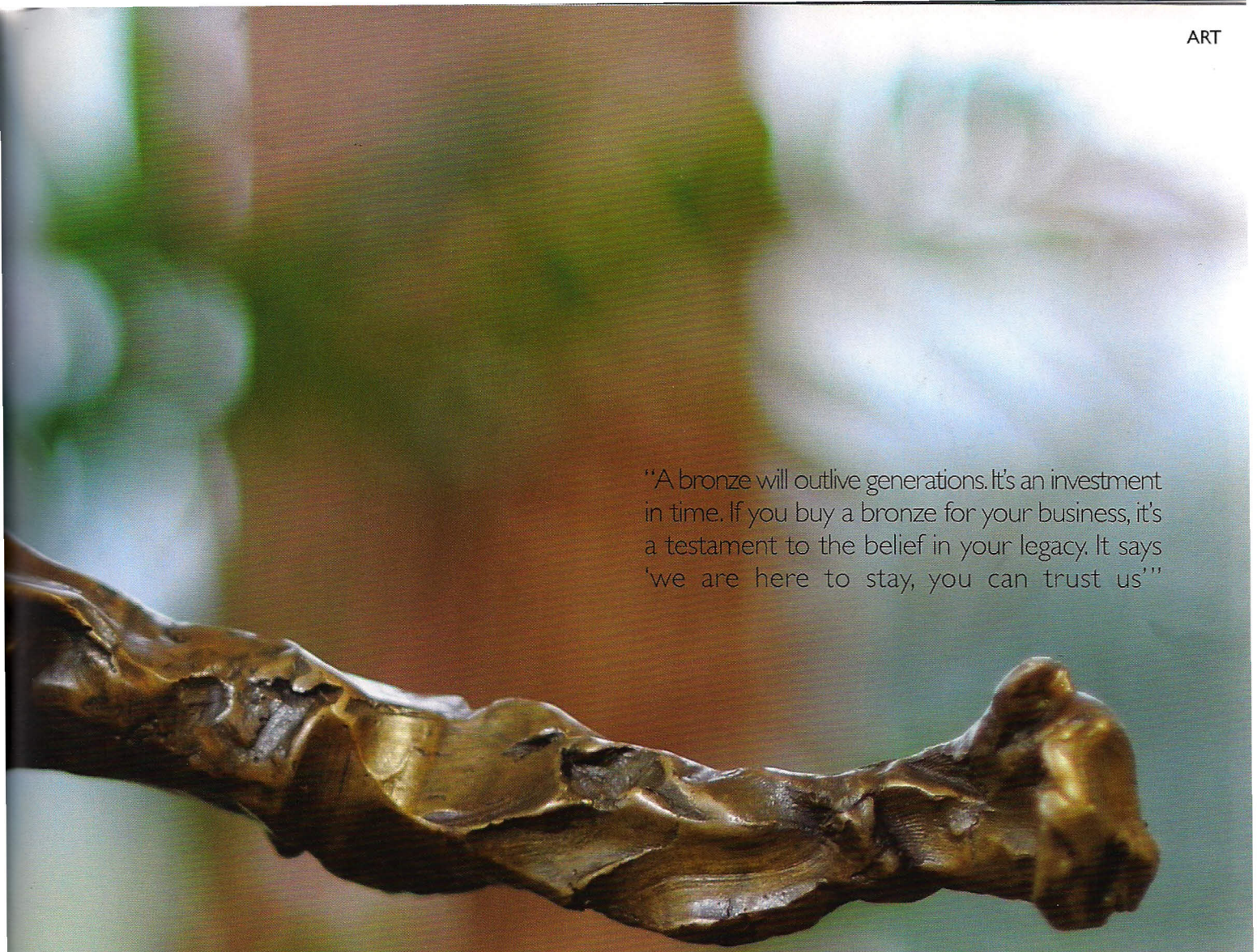
Bronze AGE

Two years ago sculptor Sarah Richards and her husband relocated from Durban to the Natal Midlands to build a home, studio and gallery. It took them a year to find the perfect piece of land which, when developed, will no doubt become yet another popular port of call for frazzled city-slickers on the trendy Midlands Meander. The effervescent 40-year-old sets aside an hour of her time to chat to **Paula Gruben**

Bronze is the most popular material for cast metal sculptures. "It is a highly skilled, extremely time-consuming, labour-intensive process," says artist Sarah Richards. "It's actually an ancient process, one that hasn't changed in about 5 000 years." Through her website she endeavours to bring you closer to understanding the true value of a bronze – not only in the artist's skills required and accumulated, but in the length and complexity of the casting process itself. Having interviewed many artists who work in all manner of mediums, I am suitably impressed. Not many people would have the patience for this kind of work!

So how did it all begin, I want to know. "Well, after finishing school in Pretoria I went on to do a Higher Diploma in Fine Art at Natal Technikon, majoring in sculpture. I graduated in 1989. After that I travelled overseas for four years. I then decided it was time to come home, and make a go of art as a career. That was about 15 years ago. I started teaching privately – both sculpture and painting, to adults and children – and slowly built up my confidence as an artist, doing commissions on the side." Four years ago she signed up for her Masters with the recently renamed Natal Tech, now known as the Durban University of Technology (DUT). Her thesis was titled Artist's Block: The creation of a workshop to re-engage visual artists with their creative process by using the natural environment as a facilitator. She qualified this year, Cum Laude.





"A bronze will outlive generations. It's an investment in time. If you buy a bronze for your business, it's a testament to the belief in your legacy. It says 'we are here to stay, you can trust us'"

These days, apart from facilitating both fun creative workshops and skills-based workshops at Nottingham Road, Richards is firmly entrenched in her work as a specialist bronze sculptor, employing the services of the Goodwin Foundry, not far from where she stays. "Working with clay has always appealed to me – the physical aspect of sculpture, making something with my hands. My work is about life, about things I see, things I feel; feelings you can't put into 'concreteness'. When I'm doing an animal I'm in the animal, I'm being a fish eagle, I'm imagining what it would feel like, how would the water move, what would happen. And if I'm doing a person I'm into that person – the little boy running along, screaming with excitement. And then there's the abstract work, which is purely about feeling. When I'm modelling it's a push, pull, play. And the surface must reflect that, the illusion of movement."

After conducting research, gathering images to work from and making a marquette – a small detailed study in wax – Richards upscales the piece if necessary and employs the bronze sculpture method known as investment casting. A dozen or so steps later – involving half a dozen materials and at least a dozen pretty physical techniques including welding, moulding, gating, dipping, pouring, firing, chipping, drilling, cutting, sandblasting, patination and sealing – the sculpture is ready for display. I was interested to learn that for the most part, bronzes are hollow. Like Easter eggs. Inside is what is called an armature, or skeleton, which makes the structure stable.

"I usually do editions of six to 15," she continues. "If somebody had to commission me and they said they didn't want anybody else to have this then it'd be a one-off, for which they'd pay a premium. But I prefer doing a small series because it means I've got extras to market and sell later. This also works in a client's favour if they can't afford a one-off – it's the difference between R60 000 for a one-off versus R7 500 for an edition."

In terms of commissions, Richards works with clients to create anything from naturalistic animals, birds or human figures or figurines, to abstract and gestural forms, for outdoor or indoor positioning. "The thing about bronze," she reminds me, "is that it's not going to weather. You can put it outside and it'll still be there in 500 years time. These sculptures can go in your garden. The colours might change because of the environment, but basically it's tough. It'll outlive generations. It's an investment in time. If you buy a bronze for your business, it's a testament to the belief in your legacy. It says 'we are here to stay, you can trust us'."



For info on the various galleries around the country where you can purchase a Sarah Richards original, visit her website www.sarahrichards.co.za. Or to arrange a commission contact her via email on sarah@sarahrichards.co.za