

▼ Richard MacDonald
working in his Monterey
studio on "Study for
Dance and Dream," 2007.



In 1985, Richard MacDonald cast a figure of Jesus Christ in 9,000 pounds of bronze.

A monumental commission for an Episcopal church in Atlanta, "Christus Rex" nearly overwhelmed the artist, who was then in his 30s and had only recently taught himself how to make a maquette when he submitted his winning proposal. "I had no business doing it," he recalls, sitting in his 25,000-square-foot Northern California studio, amid dozens

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▲ "Study for Rose, Half Life," 2005, bronze.

FIGURE



“Christus Rex,”
1996, bronze.

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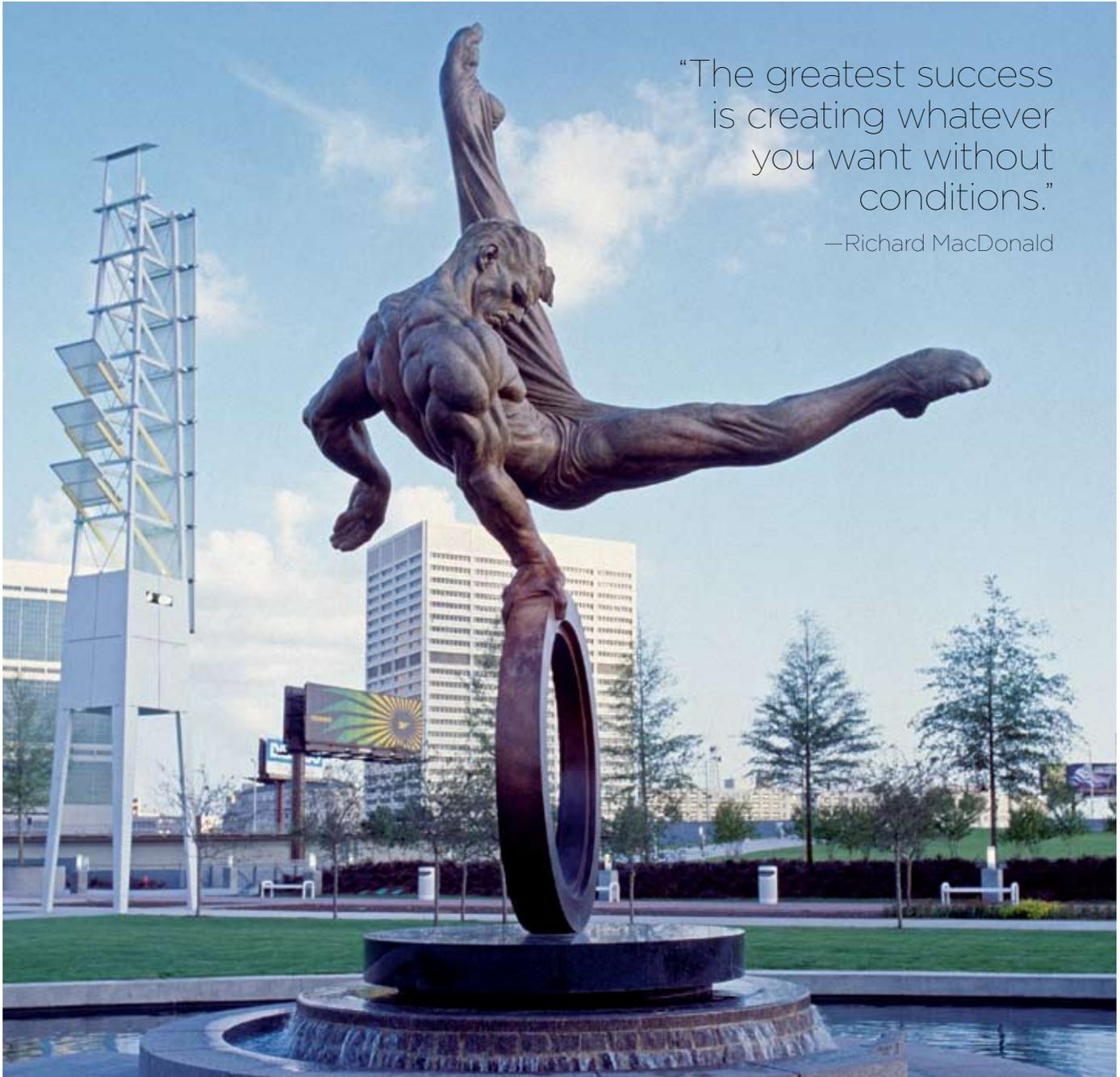
— Richard MacDonald

of works in progress, some of them 30 feet high. “It was my first sculptural commission, and the fourth or fifth sculpture I ever made.”

Yet MacDonald possessed a kind of training that most sculptors didn’t, which he has continued to draw upon while becoming one of the most visible figurative artists working in bronze: For nearly a decade and a half, he’d been a commercial illustrator, required to render the human

▼ “Nureyev, Half Life,” 1998, bronze.





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▲ “The Flair,” 1996, bronze.

figure accurately and according to the diverse needs of such clients as IBM and AT&T. “It was the training ground for who I am now,” he says. “It’s very disciplined. You have to make thousands and thousands of drawings before an illustration is perfected.” MacDonald began developing that discipline when he was 15 years old, shortly after his brother died in a car crash. “I was headed in the wrong direction,” he remem-

bers. “I didn’t think I’d make it to 21. My Uncle Chuck saved my life. He was a graphic designer, and he gave me my first sketchbook. In the front, he wrote, ‘Wear it like your underwear.’”

MacDonald followed the advice, but just in case the boy was inclined to change his mind, Uncle Chuck took him from his home in Monterey, California, to the Art Institute of Miami, enrolling him as a student, and taking a teaching job so as to be there as his mentor. Uncle Chuck was tough, putting him through

grueling critiques and then sending him on to the Los Angeles Art Center, his own alma mater, for the professional training he’d need to be a successful designer.

After one semester in Los Angeles, MacDonald changed majors. The drawing and painting he’d been learning were too tempting to give up for a life doing paste-up layout. Much to Uncle Chuck’s distress, MacDonald decided to make his own pictures. After graduating *cum laude* in 1971, he became a

MacDonald represents every muscle and sinew, choosing poses that show the body at its most anatomically taut.

freelancer. “I never had a job,” he says. “I bought my first house within a year of getting out of school, and I built a custom one four and a half years later. The Art Center didn’t teach much about business, but I learned a lot from the *Fortune* 500 companies that were my clients.”

Financially flush, MacDonald also had a knack for finding interesting assignments, especially sports illustration for the NBA and the Olympics. He hired live models. He drew and painted every day. Yet after a decade, the boy who didn’t think he’d make it to 21 was restless again. “I was tired of illustration,” he recalls. “You’d work so hard on a commission and it would go in to a magazine, and you’d turn the page and it was gone.”

MacDonald sought greater durability. He sought the permanence of fine art, and not in just any medium. “Sculpture will last a lot longer than painting,” he reckoned.

He’d already sculpted horses in clay as a means of studying the equine form in preparation for illustrations, but bronze was an altogether new medium to him. After a brief stint in night school to pick up the basics, he sculpted a bust and attempted his first cast. “I dug a hole in the ground for the mold,” he says, “and after pouring the bronze, I pulled it out with a rope tied to my

▼ “*Joie de Femme, Half Life*,” 1998, bronze.



▲ “*Elena III*,” 2005, bronze.





▲ "Diana and the Coursing Cheetahs," 1996, bronze.



▲ "Latim Bust" (right), 1994, bronze.

Jeep and started hacking at all the casting material, just to find that the bronze had no eye and no nose and no mouth. I didn't know any better, so I had a guy weld a ball on the eye and a ball on the nose and a ball on the mouth, and then I sat for 500 hours with a hammer, chiseling the bronze. And then I decided, wow, this is kind of fun."

He showed the bust alongside art by Andrew Wyeth and Mary Cassatt in a gallery he'd started with a friend. The bronze sold. He was in business.

Within a few years, he'd completed several major commissions, not only "Christus Rex," but also a monumental statue of Stephen F. Austin for the Texas sesquicentennial. He was working on another, for Anchorage, Alaska, when his studio and adjoining house were leveled in a fire. "It destroyed everything I ever had, everything I ever owned," he recalls. He spent the next few years rebuilding his career, on a different model. "The greatest success is creating whatever you want without conditions," he says. "I don't

do commissions unless I really want to, because it's like having a job."

While he has accepted a few commissions recently (including monumental sculptures for the 1996 Olympics and the 100th U.S. Open in 2000) MacDonald mostly sells multiples in galleries now. He still insists on using live models and usually works on approximately 30 sculptures at a time. Some take a few months; others require up to 15 years. What all of them share, whether depicting acrobats or mimes or ballerinas, is his interest in the figure. He is careful to represent every muscle and sinew, often choosing poses that show the body at its most anatomically taut. Through years of drawing, he's honed his observational skills. With that first boyhood sketchbook, Uncle Chuck was preparing MacDonald not only to paint, but also to sculpt. ☐

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