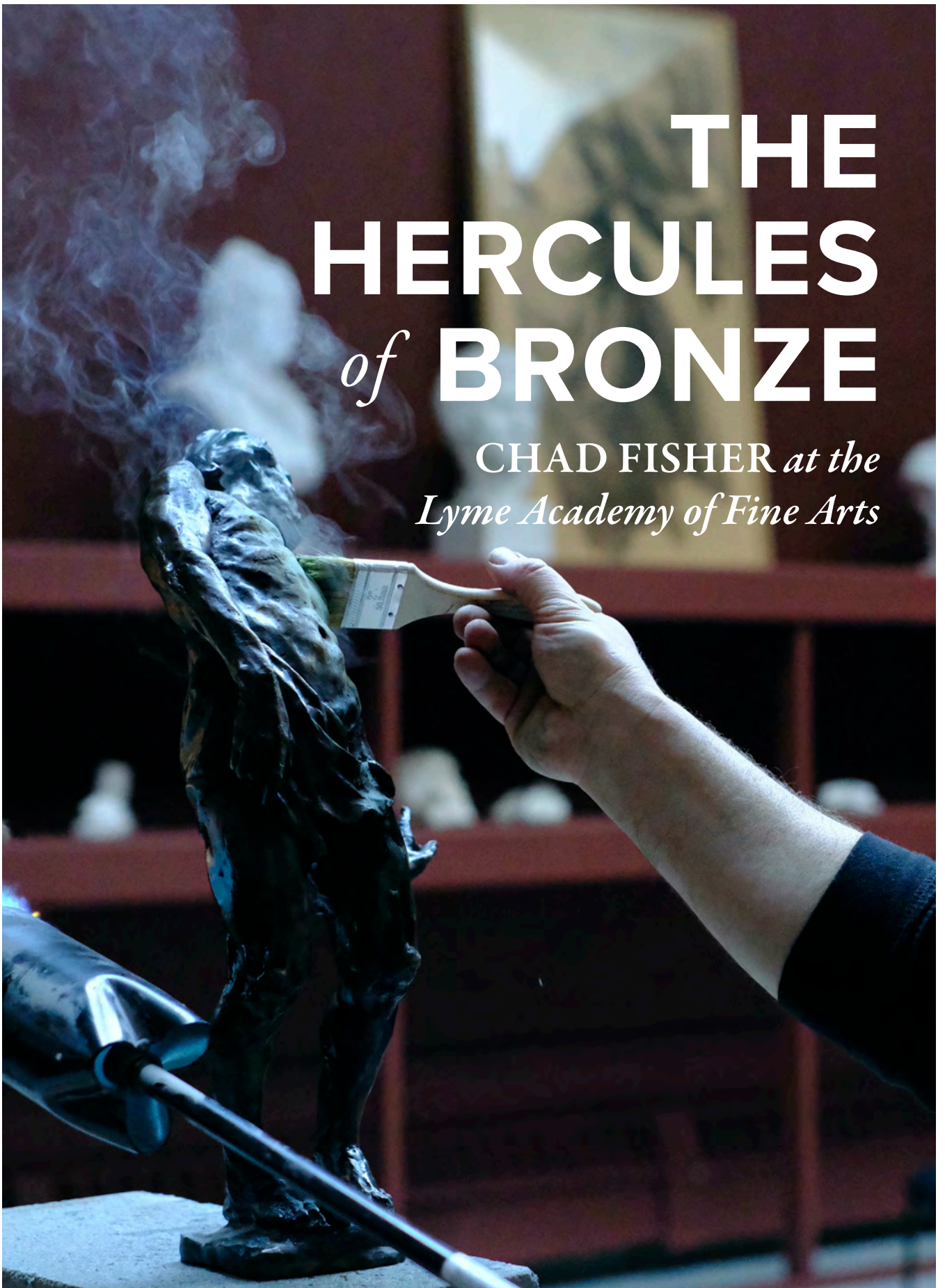
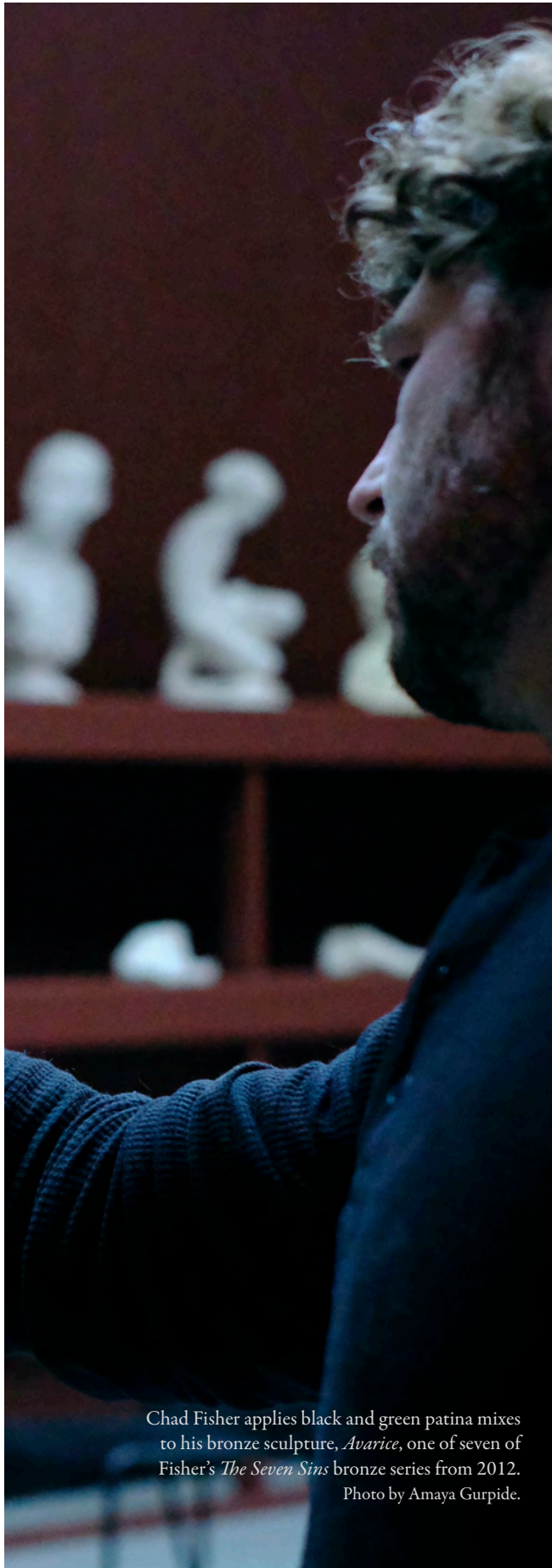


# THE HERCULES *of* BRONZE

CHAD FISHER *at the  
Lyme Academy of Fine Arts*





Chad Fisher applies black and green patina mixes to his bronze sculpture, *Avarice*, one of seven of Fisher's *The Seven Sins* bronze series from 2012.  
Photo by Amaya Gurpide.

BY EMILY M. WEEKS, PH.D.

When Chad Fisher walked through the doors of the Lyme Academy of Fine Arts as the new Sculpture Chair on January 1<sup>st</sup> of this year, he carried both the prestige of history and the promise of contemporary figurative sculpture with him. Fisher, who traces his educational lineage directly to nineteenth-century Parisian sculptural traditions, is the Academy's latest in a string of illustrious hires. "My path has solidified a strong belief in the incredible impact art education can have on an individual and a community," Fisher states. "My goal now is to create a world-class sculpture program and provide students with all of the tools needed, from studio to boardroom, so they thrive post-graduation." It is this same drive and deep-seated conviction that has propelled Fisher to national recognition in recent years, and that makes his arrival at the Lyme Academy—an institution with equally impressive aspirations—feel like both his latest adventure and a coming home.

Fisher was not yet born when the Lyme Academy of Fine Arts was founded in 1976 by Elisabeth Gordon Chandler, a prominent sculptor in her own right. Dissatisfied with the state of modern Fine Arts education, she advocated for a rigorous and comprehensive curriculum for artists that followed in the tradition of Renaissance and Beaux-Arts schools. This skills-based program, built on the idea of methodical progression, would be the same that Fisher followed during his own artistic training, largely under the direction of Gary Weisman, who would become both Fisher's mentor and close friend.

"Lineage and traditional practices," recalls Fisher, "inspired me as a student to search for and discover sound techniques and visual literacy. Through intense and concentrated classroom sculpture studies my instructors shared several methods, or 'maps,' when approaching figurative life studies in art. These provided simplicity within complexity, and created a foundation on which I could build. After four or five years of honest and diligent study, I began to intuitively experience the figure through clay. The methods and maps were no longer the focus, and, like the virtuoso violinist, I could begin to create with expressive freedom and confidence."



Chandler would certainly have approved. Her own program at the Lyme Academy had begun with a similar, bold idea—to offer a traditional education in figurative and representational art at a time (the freewheeling ‘70s and ‘80s) when academic principles had fallen out of favor. Intense observation and a structured, sequential approach to drawing, painting, and sculpture, she believed, would provide the foundation on which creativity and self-expression were built. Classes would be taught near her home in the picturesque coastal town of Old Lyme, Connecticut, a site of great art historical significance and personal meaning.

In order to execute Chandler’s plan, a faculty of recognized artists was hired, including, after 1979, her husband and fellow sculptor Laci de Gerenday. Robert Brackman, newly retired from teaching at the Art Students League in New York and a giant in his field, was among the Academy’s earliest and most revered teachers; he was followed by Deane G. Keller, whose lessons in drawing and painting had a profound impact on the Academy’s students for more than twenty-five years, as well as on Fisher himself.

As the quality of the Academy’s curriculum became more widely known, enrollment began to climb. By the 1980s,



**Top:** Lyme Academy’s historic Sill House, built in 1817, stands at the entrance to the Academy’s picturesque campus. Photo by Kayla Lilli. **Bottom:** Elisabeth Gordon Chandler (center), founder of the Lyme Academy, teaches a class in the early days of the Academy. Photo Courtesy of Lyme Academy of Fine Arts.



students were applying to study at the Academy from across the United States. The single sky-lit studio rented at the time from the neighboring Lyme Art Association soon became too small; this led to the purchase and renovation in 1986 of the historic ca. 1817 John Sill House, which stands at the center of the Academy's campus to this day. As the Academy continued to grow—north-lit studios, a dedicated art gallery, and a substantial student library were added on four idyllic acres of land in the town's historic district—Chandler's vision seemed a model of grass-roots success.

The decision to seek accreditation as a college in the early 1990s was felt a natural evolution, and in 1995 the

Academy began granting Bachelor of Fine Arts degrees. The requirements of this new role, however, and the infrastructure that it demanded, would prove a distraction from Chandler's original mission. In 2021, twelve years after Chandler had passed, the school reclaimed its status as an Academy rather than a college, to unprecedented pedagogic effect. With fresh leadership at its helm, including educator and community leader Michael Duffy as Board Chair and, as Co-Artistic Directors, internationally-acclaimed artists Jordan Sokol and Amaya Gurpide, the Lyme Academy of Fine Arts reopened its doors, welcoming a new generation of students committed to the figurative and representational arts.



**Top:** Fisher's first bronze sculptures, *The Seven Sins* series, created in 2012. Photo by Fran Fisher. **Bottom:** Fisher lights his furnace, preparing for a large bronze pour. Photo courtesy of the Philadelphia 76ers.

What Fisher adds to this veritable renaissance of art and education in Old Lyme is nothing less than the fulfillment of Chandler's dream. His respect for tradition and belief in the artist as both individual and community member resonates throughout the Academy's halls. The ideals he shares with the Academy's leaders, moreover, of artistic camaraderie, creativity, and innovation, have been integral to the site for more than one hundred years. Miss Florence Griswold's famous boarding house for artists, called the "home of American Impressionism" since Childe Hassam's arrival there in 1904, is located just a few steps down the street.

The natural and architectural beauty of the Academy's campus reflects an appreciation of its history, as well, but not at the cost of meeting the needs of the working artists who populate it today. Ten thousand square feet of north-light studios, individually designed for drawing, painting, sculpture, casting, and print-making, a designated museum-quality art gallery with a soaring ceiling and over one thousand square feet of exhibition space, a curated fine arts library of over fifteen-thousand books, and an art store inspired by the legendary purveyors of supplies in France and England (and fittingly called *de Gerenday's*, after Chandler's husband and beloved Academy professor), are today among its notable features. Additional student and public resources hover tantalizingly on the horizon.

For the contemporary artist, this is a haven. The drawing, painting, and sculpting studios are among the most exceptional working spaces of their kind—in part, no doubt, because they were built by artists for the artists they would teach. Elisabeth Chandler's belief that "painters need to take sculpture and sculptors need to paint," drives the cross-disciplinary nature of the campus, with each medium's unique practical and theoretical contributions to a well-rounded education in the arts being recognized and accommodated, as they integrate seamlessly into a larger physical and philosophical whole.

The largest of several communal studios on the Academy's campus is Chandler, named, of course, for the Academy's founder and in honor of her vision. Fittingly, it is also the site of Fisher's impending sculpture classes. An eighteen-foot skylit ceiling covers a sixteen-hundred-square-foot interior, which is bathed in that precious

northern light that has attracted a steady stream of artists for a century and more. Nearby is a study gallery of imported life-size plaster casts and friezes, standing eternal guard over original drawings by nineteenth- and twentieth-century academic artists from around the world. Fisher's inaugural student class will, then, have no shortage of inspiring spaces in which to work.

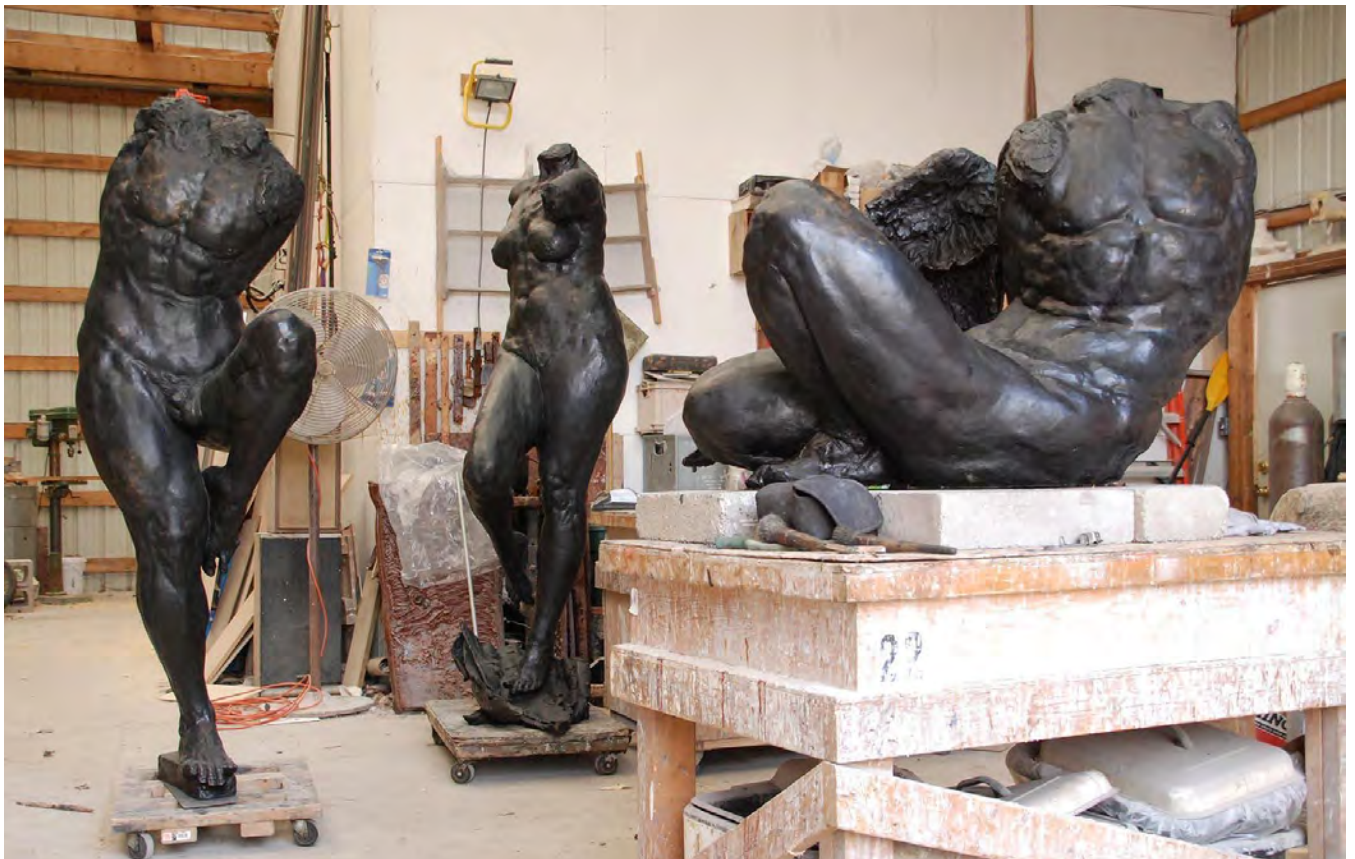
But the Lyme Academy is more than a well-equipped site to come and draw, paint, and now, to sculpt. Its academics are impressive, too. Drawing and painting students at the Academy commit to a rigorous two-year foundational Core Program, which is both grounded in tradition and progressive in its vision. During their first year, students focus on historical approaches to the development of critical observational skills and technical facility. Academy students work from direct observation of plaster casts and live models, utilizing a sequential, systematic progression, first taught in the Renaissance academies of Europe and, later, in the nineteenth century, at Paris's *École des Beaux-Arts*. In year two, these methodologies are applied to painting, through increasingly challenging studio work with the cast and in the model room. Students who choose to pursue their studies at the Academy past the second year may stay for a third and fourth year of advanced study, honing their skills, developing a unique visual vocabulary that represents their own artistic intentions, and receiving the individualized support and education that will prepare them for the demands of today's art world. The intimate class sizes that the Academy has designed for each year of the program allow for in-studio demonstrations and individualized critiques, as well as a sense of community support.

The curriculum in the Core Program is comprehensive and intense: Classes are conducted five days a week, from 9 a.m. until 8 p.m., with weekly supplementary instruction in anatomy, sculpture, and the histories of art. The storied geography of the Academy is not neglected in this program: landscape, still life, and dedicated explorations of the properties of natural light are part of every term, ensuring that each student understands the historical continuum of which they and the Lyme Academy are a part. In addition to these lectures, students at the Academy have the opportunity to visit regional muse-



Above: A nighttime bronze pour at Gary Weisman's Foundry, with Gary Weisman, Fisher, and Kate Brockman. Photo by Jack Weisman.

Below: Gary Weisman's studio. Photo by Gary Weisman.



ums and galleries, going behind the scenes of renowned collections and enjoying private tours. The faculty that drives this broad-minded education is small in size but not ambition or repute: these are world-class professional artists and scholars, whose areas of expertise dovetail with the Academy's conviction in the relevance of representational art and the academy model today.

First-year Core Program students attend the Histories of Art, taught by Emily M. Weeks, who holds her doctorate from Yale. The authority on the nineteenth-century artist Jean-Léon Gérôme (1824–1904), arguably the *ne plus ultra* of academic teaching and art, she is also a specialist in cross-cultural studies and the visual representation of the Arab world. These topics, fraught as they are with theory and discourse, are among those examined in her second-year class, *Thinking Critically About Art*.

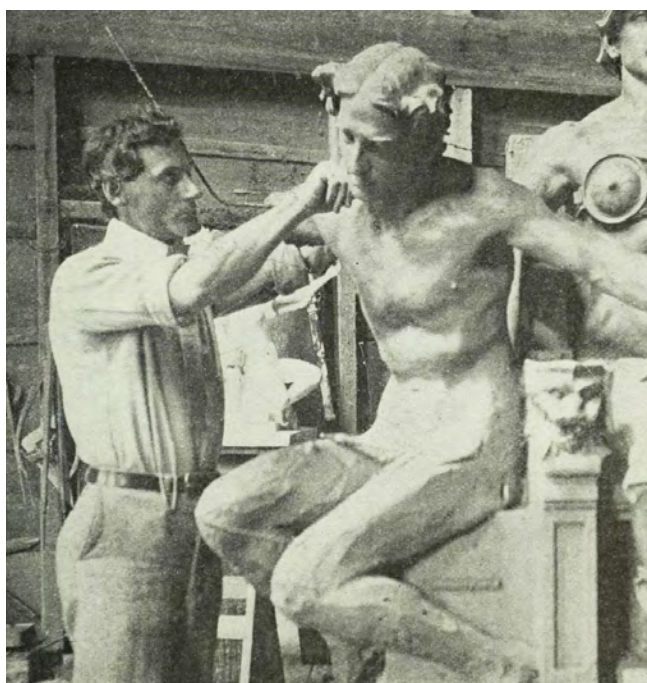
Jordan Sokol and Amaya Gurpide, the husband-and-wife power team behind the Academy's new artistic direction, lead the students through hours of drawing (in the first year) and painting (in the second), all in the name of the kind of foundational training that will provide each student with the confidence and capability to succeed in the contemporary art world, with a voice that will become all their own. They are supported in this effort by internationally-recognized artist Hollis Dunlap and Principal Anatomy Instructor Edmond Rochat, who offers anatomical lessons specifically designed for artists.

Integrated into this instructional framework is the progressive philosophy of the Lyme Academy, and its commitment to the community that has supported it through its evolutions. The Academy offers a part- and full-time Continuing Education curriculum, also taught by Rochat, an after-school youth program, led by acclaimed artist Rick Lacey, and workshops throughout the year. Open Figure Drawing classes are held three days a week, as well, for aspiring artists of all levels to work from a live model in a structured studio environment. The Academy's team of accomplished and dedicated instructors wants no one to feel as though the arts are out of reach.

In addition to these studio and student offerings, a dynamic series of public lectures by leading artists, makers, scholars, and critics is in full swing, ranging in topics meant for a general audience (American art in the '60s



**Above:** Exceptional sculptors and teachers, the husband-and-wife team of Gary Weisman and Treacy Ziegler are close friends of Fisher. Photo by Barbara Hall Bloomer. **Below:** Master sculptor Charles Grafly working on his multi-figure group *Electricity* for the Louisiana Purchase Exposition (St. Louis World's Fair) in 1904. Photo: Unknown, Public Domain, via Wikimedia Commons.





Above: Chad Fisher, *V.O.G. Torso*, 2011, bronze, 18" h x 7" w x 7" d. Photo by Jordan Sokol. Below: Chad Fisher applies black and green patina mixes to his bronze sculpture, *Avarice*, one of seven of Fisher's *The Seven Sins* bronze series from 2012. Photo by Amaya Gurpide.



and '70s; depictions of the human figure in Ancient Egyptian reliefs) to those with more technical interests (artists' palettes and their history). Public art displays within its dedicated gallery space and outdoors on its grounds, including a regular and rotating exhibition schedule featuring both historic works and the best of contemporary figurative art, have already launched, with a critically-acclaimed retrospective exhibition featuring the American artist Lennart Anderson (d. 2015) and an international roster of artists exploring a limited palette in *Monochrome* among those to date. (This last has attracted the likes of Michael Grimaldi, a contemporary legend in the field of figurative art.) As are many of the events and programs at the Lyme Academy, admission is free—one more indication of the connection and commitment of the Academy to the community that has supported it since its founding nearly 50 years ago. It is arguably this community, in fact, resilient and enduring, that takes the most pride in the Lyme Academy's accomplishments and goals of late. In the quiet town of Old Lyme, Connecticut, they recognize that they are watching nothing less than history and future simultaneously unfold.

The sense of history and lineage that Fisher and his new colleagues highlight and promote is the ground upon which the Academy is built. Its founding in the twentieth century, and Fisher's arrival in the twenty-first, is part of a larger, art historical story. The first art academies in Europe may be traced to Plato's garden in 387 BCE, and to Renaissance workshops in the great Italian cities of Florence, Rome, and Venice. Their heyday as an institutional presence, however, was during the nineteenth century, in France, the then-unrivaled capital of the art world.

For aspiring artists in Paris at this time, there were two interconnected institutions around which their world revolved. The first was the government-run Académie and the second, the École. Founded in 1648 by Louis XIV, the Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture was envisioned as a meeting place to exchange ideas and as a school for young artists. At the center of the school's curriculum was the representation of the human figure, and, at its pinnacle, drawing the nude from life. This educational program would become the gold standard for art establishments throughout Europe, America, and abroad. "The naked human body," wrote the American art



critic Clarence Cook, “is the standard of all art ... ; artists are trained from boyhood to look upon the successful painting of the nude as the proof of their proficiency; if they can do that, they can do anything; if they cannot do that, they can do nothing; the painting of the nude is the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end of art” (*Art and Artists of Our Time*, 3 vols., New York, 1888; reprint, New York, 1978, vol. I, p. 266).

The École’s figure-based or “academic” approach to art education was built on a strict, sequential process that all students were mandated to follow. Having graduated from their local art schools or academies and made application to one of the three painting ateliers within the École, famously led in the mid-nineteenth century by Alexandre Cabanel, Gérôme, and Isidore Pils, a student between the ages of 15 and 30 would undergo a period of supervised work as an aspirant, drawing from casts of antique and Renaissance sculpture in one of the (often rowdy) classrooms located on the ground floor. After proving themselves proficient in this foundational practice, they would then be certified by the *chef d’atelier* to enter the studio they desired, make their way upstairs, and begin to draw from life. As their pencils, charcoals, and chinks were traded for brushes and paint, there were additional lessons to be learned; the visibility of their brushstrokes, their palette, and the degree of realism in their pictures were also monitored by the *chef*, or studio head.

Classes at the École took place six mornings per week. Students’ work was critiqued twice a week by the *chef* and their rank was determined at the end of each month based on their performance. “On Tuesdays and Fridays,” recalled a student of Gérôme’s, “a hush of anticipation could be felt in the noisy studio, and about nine, a whisper of ‘Le patron’ gave the signal, passed from one to another in studio slang, that the master had come. Until his departure not a sound disturbed the measured cadence of his voice as, with few well-chosen words, he went his round of criticism. Once in a while he would take the stick of charcoal from the student, and, with a line, which seemed as absolute as the written law, correct the drawing, and occasionally his long thumb-nail would serve a like purpose, making an incised line down the contour of the figure drawn, accompanied by a word—*Comme ça*—of comment” (Will Hicok Low, “Jean-Léon Gérôme,”



Above: Fisher’s *Memorial of MSG Gary Gordon, MOH*, 2021, a 10-foot-tall bronze monument located in Lincoln, Maine. Photo Courtesy of Fisher Sculpture. Below: Fisher lights his furnace, preparing for a large bronze pour. Photo courtesy of Philadelphia 76ers.



in John C. Van Dyke, ed., *Modern French Masters*, New York, 1896; reprint: New York, 1976, pp. 39–40).

Though open to all nationalities and tuition-free, matriculation into the École itself was even more difficult than finding a place in a mentor's atelier. Until 1883, when admission numbers rose by ten, entrance was offered to only seventy students, out of a pool of approximately two hundred. (Women were still not allowed to enter, however; their access would be denied until June of 1897.) Admission was largely determined by the semi-annual *concours des places*, a rigorous competition consisting of exams on anatomy, perspective, ornamental design, and ancient and modern world history.

Life for Fisher's students will be only somewhat less intense, though infinitely more collaborative and inclusive. (Indeed, it is one of the Academy's goals to reimagine the art academy for a diverse twenty-first-century world.) "My pedagogical classroom approach," states Fisher, "will be based upon observation, theoretical concepts, and phenomenological experiences. The classes will be centered around in-class instructor demonstrations and group classroom discussions. Students will create figurative sculpture studies through layered hierarchies of line and geometric form abstractions. At the start of each sculpture study, students will simplify the figure to its most basic architectonic forms, slowly followed by layers of harmonic geometric planes, to the eventual emergence of specifically related organic forms acutely observed from the life model."

Fisher's methods are a combination of contemporary progressiveness and historical precedent. With great care, he has traced his educational lineage back to a roster of late nineteenth-century greats, including Auguste Rodin, Thomas Eakins, and William-Adolphe Bouguereau. More recent luminaries on this artistic family tree, which includes both professors and influences, are Myron Barnstone, Kate Brockman, Stuart Feldman, Fran Fisher (Fisher's own, highly accomplished artist-father), Michael Grimaldi, Stephen Perkins, Dan Thompson, Treacy Ziegler, and, of course, Gary Weisman, from whom Fisher learned as much about life as about art and teaching. "I learned authentic historical principles in fine art and design," Fisher recalls, "and experienced the human figure through a beautiful and unique visual journey."

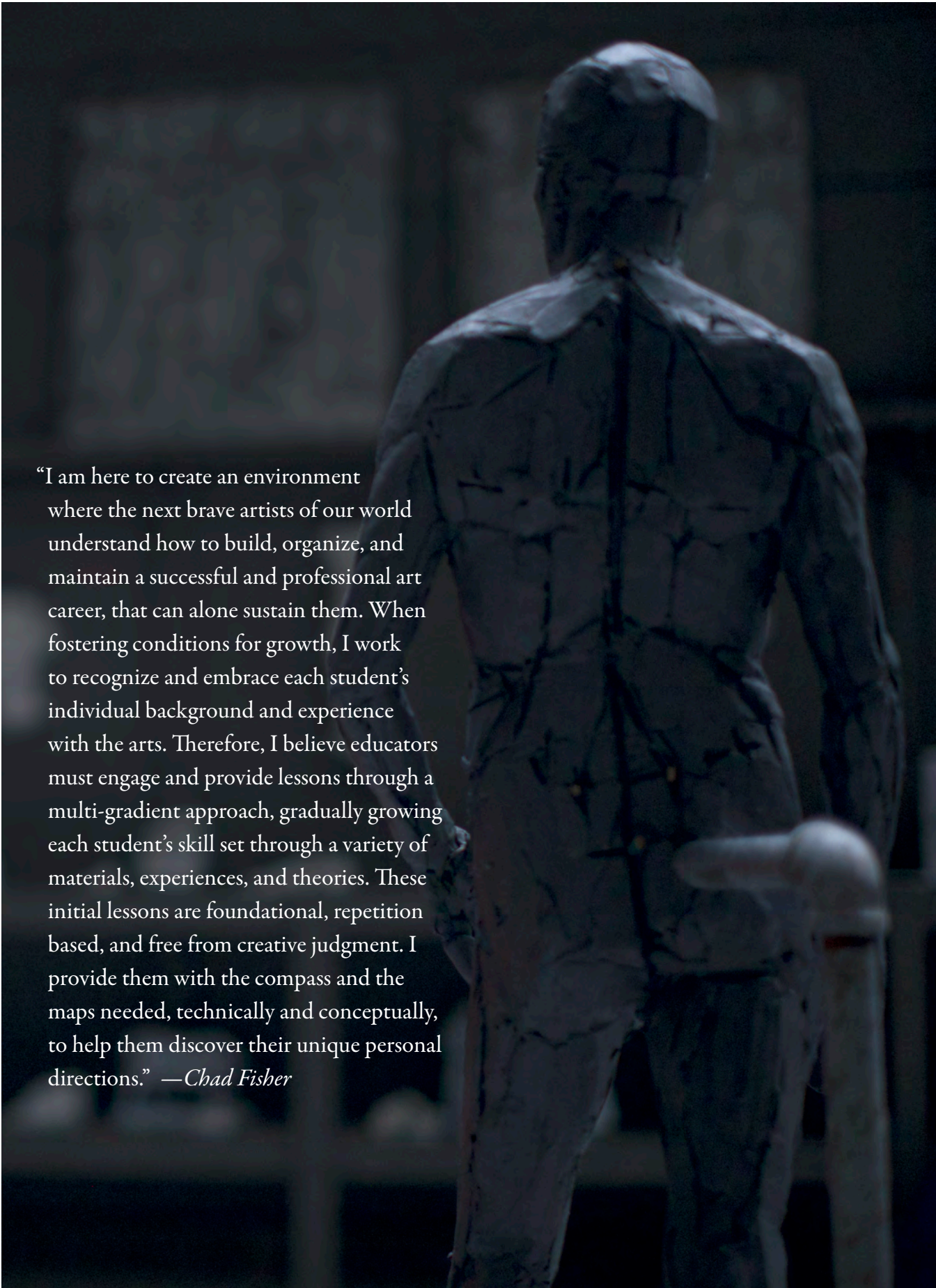
Key in Fisher's artistic lineage is Charles Grafly, the "father of American figurative sculpture." A founding member of the National Sculpture Society (1893), Grafly taught at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts for thirty-seven years, the same school where he had studied under Eakins. At the Académie Julian in Paris in 1888, he studied drawing under Tony Robert-Fleury, painting under Bouguereau, and sculpture under Henri Chapu. During his tenure at PAFA between 1892 and 1929, he is credited with raising the stature of sculpture to that of painting—an exceptional accomplishment at that rather judgmental time. His own sculptures, which ranged from heroic works for international expositions and war memorials to small bronzes and portrait busts, as well as his academic prowess, were recognized by numerous awards.

The historical heft of Fisher's lineage is impressive, but it is only one of the reasons why his appointment at the Lyme Academy has caused so much buzz. Trained at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts (Philadelphia), the Schuykill Academy of Fine Arts (Philadelphia), the Janus Collaborative School of Art (New York), and at the Maryland Institute College of Art (Baltimore), among several other schools, Fisher holds place as one of the most progressive traditionalists of our age. In 2017, along with his father and wife, he established Fisher Sculpture, a foundry in Pennsylvania and a pioneering venture in the field. Casting his own bronzes and sculpting on site allowed him unprecedented artistic freedom. It is this freedom, in fact, which has led Fisher from prestigious commissions to the classroom at Old Lyme. Following in the footsteps of his own teachers and the teachers before them and before that, Fisher now finds himself at a point where he is ready to pass on the discoveries he has made in his craft. "I am beyond thrilled and honored to be the incoming Sculpture Chair at the Lyme Academy," says Fisher. "To teach is to provide students with a space to grow emotionally, intellectually, and experientially. As an art educator, I am here to help amplify each student's dream, through a very human and personal experience, providing students with the tools needed to become the next generation of artists."

Fisher's official title at the Lyme Academy will be the Charlotte Colby Danly Sculpture Chair, in honor of the alumna who funded the position. A former Lyme



Fisher contemplates his work during a break between sculpting sessions at Lyme Academy. Photo by Amaya Gurpide.

A dark, textured sculpture of a human figure from the back, with a smaller figure in the foreground. The sculpture is made of a material that looks like cracked stone or plaster, with a network of dark lines running across the back, possibly representing a spine or a network of veins. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the texture and form of the sculpture against a dark background.

“I am here to create an environment where the next brave artists of our world understand how to build, organize, and maintain a successful and professional art career, that can alone sustain them. When fostering conditions for growth, I work to recognize and embrace each student’s individual background and experience with the arts. Therefore, I believe educators must engage and provide lessons through a multi-gradient approach, gradually growing each student’s skill set through a variety of materials, experiences, and theories. These initial lessons are foundational, repetition based, and free from creative judgment. I provide them with the compass and the maps needed, technically and conceptually, to help them discover their unique personal directions.” —*Chad Fisher*

Academy student, Danly endowed the Chair with a \$1 million donation, to help others learn sculpting in the figurative tradition, as she herself did under the tutelage of Elisabeth Chandler.

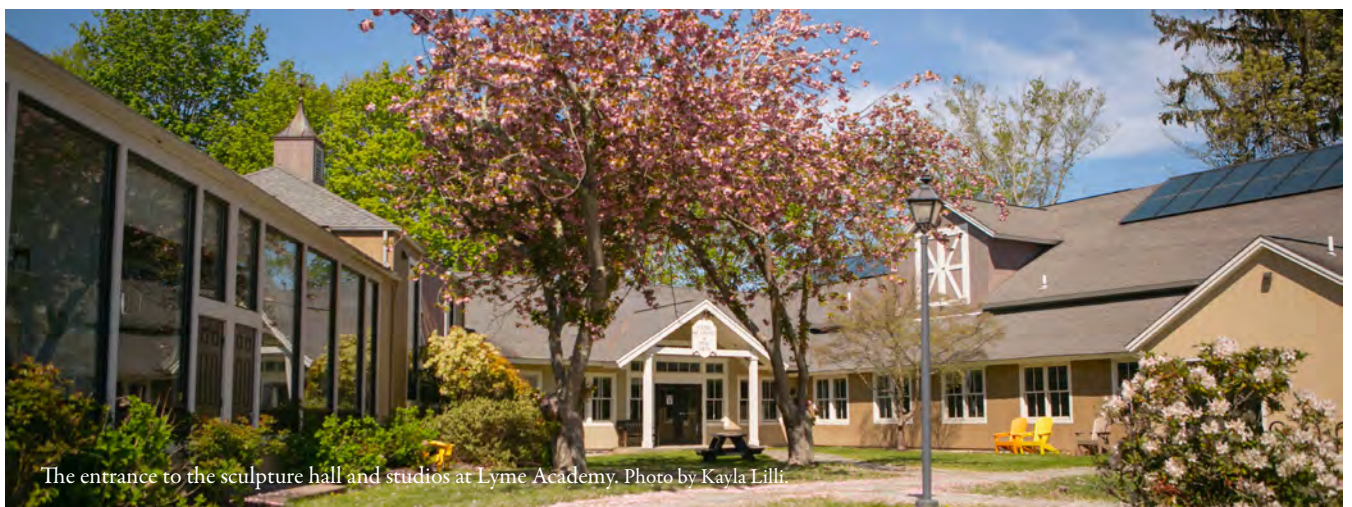
Danly's philanthropic act was the culmination of what had been for the Lyme Academy an extraordinary year. Also in 2022, the school had received two generous gifts, the first in May of the Karlheinz Kronberger Collection of Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century French Bronzes, numbering well over two hundred museum-quality objects, and the National Academy of Sculpture's long-term loan of twenty-eight nearly life-size plaster casts. These exemplary casts, modeled after some of art history's greatest figurative, anatomical, portrait, and animal sculptures and reliefs, including Donatello's *David* and the *Apollon Belvedere*, join the Academy's extant holdings, which were imported from Europe to provide students with an inspiring study collection following Renaissance and Beaux-Arts tradition. Their addition now allows the Academy to boast a cast collection unmatched in any teaching institution in the United States.

As for the Kronberger Collection, it too features sculptures by the leading artists of the day, this time from post-Republican France. Highlights (and some of Fisher's favorites) include several bronze sculptures by Gérôme, who became one of the most important sculptors of the second half of the nineteenth century, as well as works by Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux, Jules Dalou, Jean-Antoine Houdon, Antonin Mercié, Emile Louise Picault, and numerous others. Also represented are the leading bronze foundries of the day, including Barbedienne. Fer-

dinand Barbedienne (1810–1892) was an ardent promoter of the medium—contemporaries called him the “Hercules of bronze”—and of classical and cutting-edge casting techniques. He had an eye for determining which sculptures to edition, and which artists with which to partner—no small feat in an age in which, by 1889, there were no less than one hundred and fifty-three bronze foundries in France alone.

The Kronberger Collection, unrivalled in size, scope, and quality, and the NAS's loan, along now with Fisher's arrival, add new superlatives to Lyme Academy's burgeoning list. As the soon-to-be site of the most comprehensive and rigorous sculpture program in the United States, it will become the greatest single destination for the historical and contemporary study of the medium that there is. Chandler, one imagines, would heartily approve of this new status.

As the sculpture community prepares for Fisher's full-time program at the Lyme Academy of Fine Arts—hired in October 2022, he began teaching a weekly Figure Sculpture class as part of Lyme Academy's Continuing Education program in January 2023 and will launch his multi-year, full-time, intensive figurative sculpture program in the fall—it is best to let him have the last word. His pedagogic philosophy provides a glimpse into what will be offered and suggests the seamlessness that Fisher has always seen between the past, present, and future of his craft. It is a fitting sensibility to bring to Old Lyme, where history and innovation continue hand-in-hand. And it is a fitting outlook for someone who can surely be designated the new “Hercules of bronze.” ●



The entrance to the sculpture hall and studios at Lyme Academy. Photo by Kayla Lilli