



CLOE POISSON / THE HARTFORD COURANT

BABETTE BLOCH of Redding is filing and sanding the face of a stainless steel sculpture to be displayed at Brookgreen Gardens, a National Historic Landmark on the South Carolina coast. She is working at LABCO WELDING Inc., a Middletown company that helps her with the pieces, which are about 9 feet high and 2,000 pounds.

SCULPTOR PORTRAYS PLANTATION LIFE

Redding Woman Researched 1840s Slaves, Landowners

By **DANIELA ALTIMARI**
COURANT STAFF WRITER

In a cavernous building deep in a Middletown industrial park, master welder Phil Hunt had just completed work on a 9-foot, 2,000-pound figure that was about to be trucked to an outdoor sculpture garden in South Carolina.

It was one of four massive sculptures created by Redding artist Babette Bloch. Taken together, the pieces tell the story of a plantation owner and the enslaved Africans who worked for him in South Carolina's Low Country.

Laser-cut stainless sculptures are Bloch's trademark, but she couldn't create them alone. For this commission, and many others, she relies on the craftsmen and state-of-the-art equipment at LABCO WELDING Inc., a Middletown company more accustomed to making pneumatic tanks, metal chassis and tools for slaughterhouses.

Bloch has collaborated with Hunt on a number of pieces.

"The welding is such an important component of my

work," she said. "Phil is a very fine welder. I really appreciate how careful he is."

Hunt, who has worked in the trade for more than 30 years, deflected the praise. "She gives me too much credit," he said.

Bloch, 50, used to work in bronze. In 1993, she switched to stainless steel, a change that would have been impossible before the emergence of highly precise laser cutters. "My work is very detailed," she said.

Bloch is the mother of two school-age daughters and is married to a fellow sculptor, Marc Mellon. Her creations can be seen in numerous galleries and private collections across the nation.

Two of Bloch's works in progress recently stood on platforms in the far corners of the LABCO factory. Despite their towering size and the strength of the material they are made of, they appear graceful, almost delicate. One depicts a female slave with a bandana around her head. Her dress, woven from bands of steel, seems to swirl around her. The statue of the plantation owner

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SCULPTOR BABETTE BLOCH

has a satiny finish that looks almost iridescent under the hard glare of factory lights.

Bloch spent six months researching 1840s plantation life on the South Carolina coast. She learned that most Low Country farms grew rice, not cotton. She learned that most of the area's slaves came from the West African region known today as Sierra Leone and the Ivory Coast.

Because her sculptures depict people from the 1840s, no photographs of them exist. So Bloch read up on the life of Joshua John Ward, who was the largest landowner in South Carolina at the time and the model for her plantation owner. She even tracked down a scholar who wrote a dissertation on African head wraps to create a historically accurate image of a female slave.

Bloch's sculptures will become part of the landscape of Brookgreen Gardens, a National Historic Landmark on the Carolina coast. The property was once home to four rice plantations. Later, it was purchased by Archer and Anna Huntington, coincidentally also from Redding. Archer Huntington, who died in 1955, was the son of Harwinton-born railroad magnate Collis P. Huntington, builder of the Southern Pacific Railroad.

Captivated by the parcel's stunning oceanfront views, the couple had planned to use it for their summer residence. But in 1931, they decided to create a non-

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profit nature preserve and outdoor art gallery. The 9,100-acre property now includes a formal sculpture garden, a wildlife preserve and zoo and an educational center.

Bloch's sculptures are part of a \$500,000 project that also includes an elevated boardwalk, interpretive panels and four archeological sites, said Helen Benso, vice president for marketing at Brookgreen. They will be dedicated on April 22.

Bloch was selected because she was one of the few sculptors who worked with laser-cut steel, which was the look Brookgreen's trustees wanted. Besides, Benso said, "she's really good."

Bloch applauded Brookgreen for commissioning a project that confronts a difficult past.

"I didn't hold any judgment when I made these sculptures," Bloch said. "I tried to represent the position each person had in the system and to allow their stories to be told."

"But I hope that the project will honor the Africans who came to America and celebrate the culture that came out of this brutal system."