

Babette Bloch's Balancing Act

by Peggy Kinstler

For many artists, commissions are confining, but for sculptor Babette Bloch, they “stretch” her imagination and energize her artistic expression. It’s hard to see where Babette, a realistic sculptor, will go with this recent commission for a high school lobby... “They gave me the ideas and feelings they want the piece to embody: intelligence, passion, and a sense of what happens to us once we have the intellectual tools for life.

“I want to work [this piece] metaphorically using the gestalt of figures and how they relate to each other. This is really a fun challenge for me,” she says pointing to a long row of books in her studio that represent the research materials for this and two other current commissions. While Babette’s sculpture is based in realism, her medium is far from classic. She works in laser-cut stainless steel, designing, shaping, grinding this extremely hard, dense, flat, industrial-age material into shapes that satisfy her imagination. This is not work for

the feeble.

Nor is her lifestyle. Babette and her husband, sculptor Marc Mellon,

each have studios, one at either end of their Connecticut home, where they are also raising two young daughters. Babette is active in her children’s lives and activities as well as in art organizations in New York City. “How does she fit everything into her days?” I ask. “I have an eight-hour day, sleep six,” she answers. “I love what I do. I love my children, I can’t neglect the kids. I just try to look at the big picture. It’s not easy being a woman artist and raising children.”

Having studios at home means their children are very much a part of their everyday lives, but, “It’s difficult to find psychic space at home when anyone’s around,” she says. “For the real creative work, when I have to come up with the idea for a commission or the next piece, I really need quiet. The ideas come from very deep places. I like it when Marc goes to the foundry and the kids are gone. That’s when I do my creative thinking... when I can start letting it cook...”

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When I walk into Babette’s kitchen this bright January morning, I’m struck by what turns out to be one of her newest pieces. In the bay window behind the sink, sunlight shimmering off its swirling surfaces, is a steel vase of lilies about three feet tall.

“I love the flowers and I like the way



the light hits them. I'm allergic to so many things, like flowers and cats, and it's my way of bringing life into our home." A cat adorns another vase in the dining room.

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She was working on a vase based on ancient Egyptian culture when September 11 happened... she had to abandon it for a while. "For a few weeks after September 11, I was having a very hard time working and thought maybe I could work through it. I decided to do a piece in homage to America." This morning, four months later, the artist proof of that edition, a three-foot arrangement with Lady Liberty in the vase and American Beauty roses as the flowers, is in the studio, along with the beginnings of a six-foot, eight-inch edition of the same design. [See ad on page 2] "The images were just so difficult; Marc lost his cousin, a volunteer fireman, in the World Trade Center, and we were dealing so much with death and destruction that I turned it around for myself and tried to work from the positive side."

Earlier in her career she says, "I experimented with comedy and tragedy and finally realized that I preferred to communicate through beauty and humor rather than through negativity." She tells of an exhibit of some early work where she watched people spend more time viewing and relating to her humorous, positive pieces than to her more angst-filled ones. She realized that, for her, this was a more effective means of communication. She also admits that between then and now she's become less angry, more positive, and happier. "I spend two to three months on a piece, so I want the karma that I bring into the studio to feel good. I think that's why there's also whimsy in my work."

Looking around the studio, there is indeed a lot of whimsy, and lyricism too... like the bumblebees and butterflies that twirl around an axis... two gymnasts that float near the ceiling... a fish swimming up through waves hanging over the window and the abstract piece that evolved from it. "I start from realism, but I've done a lot of abstract work. 'The Wave' is



Above: Steelglyph

Opposite page: The Pioneers

Below: Babette Bloch with Cut Flowers



Babette Bloch

totally abstract; it came from the piece over the window. I liked the form of the water and wanted to do something with that shape.”

Grounding all this, however, is the seriousness of an artist with scholarly leanings, whose research can take her deep into the history, ideas, and imagery of other cultures, and who has put in her time studying classical sculpture and acquiring the practical skills she uses today.

Babette grew up in New Jersey and went to art school at the University of Wisconsin, where she met sculptor Deborah Butterfield who encouraged her to transfer to the University of California, Davis, where she would find teachers who shared her artistic leanings -- teachers like Wayne Thiebaud, Manuel Neri, and Bob Arneson. “In 1977 I came back to New York, got a job, and in 1979, got a studio working in clay and eventually casting in bronze. I was a realist sculptor with a whimsical edge and that wasn’t exactly in favor, but I just kept doing what I liked to do.”

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*Handstand
Bees and Flowers*



Then in 1993 she had a commission that brought her to the laser-cut steel process and not only did she love doing it, it stimulated her imagination, that place where art is born.

There have been two phases of Babette’s laser-cut work so far: on the wall and free standing. “I think of myself as a sculptor, not a painter. First I was doing these sculptures on the wall, which is a drawing problem. Getting them off the wall was a big thing.” The on-the-wall pieces are like black and white pictures that feel pretty two-dimensional -- the black parts are painted steel and the white areas are the parts that are cut away, so what we see is the wall and whatever shadows are created by the steel. A puzzle-like problem is that all the black pieces must connect somehow or they’ll fall out of the piece and off the wall.

Babette chuckled when she talked about the one collaborative project she and Marc have had. The clients wanted to combine his gymnastic figures with her whimsical approach. “Marc kept coming into my studio and telling me that such and such a muscle wasn’t right, and I’d say, ‘But I need it for structure.’” The end result was a pair of double-cut, life-sized gymnasts -- like two sandwiches with air for the filling -- that were to hang free-form from the ceiling. “I liked the idea of drawing in space.”

This was the beginning of getting pieces off the wall.

“Now I’ve taken it to another place where I have to think like both a two-dimensional and three-dimensional artist. My concerns are more complicated than if I were working two-dimensionally: there’s line, plane, 360 degrees, light.” Even though some of the pieces are flat, like the gymnasts, they are seen in the round.

An example of Babette’s gutsy, confident approach to

her work was her response to a 1996 commission to honor Michigan's farmers. "The Pioneers" is a nine-foot farm couple standing in the fields. "I didn't know how I was going to do them," she admits. "I told the client, 'Yes, sure I can do it.' Then I collaborated with a top structural engineer. He would explain the structural needs and I would work on aesthetic solutions.

"The commission was to honor the farmers and the local community has become very protective of the sculpture because it *does* honor them, not mock them as they had feared a stainless steel sculpture in the field might. They have built a park around them and have planted 5,000 tulips and crocuses. When the sun rises behind them they look like ghosts coming out of the corn fields and when the sun sets on them, there are pinks and oranges. It's become a special site, with people coming every day to watch the sun set on them. The landscape behind 'The Pioneers' fills the gaps made by the interior cut-outs and a wonderful connection and interaction is created between the land and the couple."

Seeing how the changing light affects "The Pioneers" has challenged Babette's imagination. One might say she is now using the flat steel surface itself as a canvas, the grinder as a brush, and light as her color palette, creating form and texture that move as the ambient light changes.

In her American Beauty vase, for example, the roses are ground to a high sheen with swirling shallow ridges that mimic the shape of the petals, while the base is ground to enhance the feeling of roundness. "That's one of the things I love about what I'm doing. There's an element of surprise after the pieces are made because the way the light hits them really affects how they look."

There are other surprises that happen during this laser-cut process. Once Babette has her concept, she begins drawing. "I keep drawing and drawing and drawing my ideas over and over -- black on white." It pleases Babette that this process not only utilizes her sculpting background, but also some of the other skills she acquired along the way. "I did a lot of paste-ups and mechanicals for advertising, to make money, and all the skills were drawing skills and those are the skills I need today -- I don't draw on the computer, but by hand. Bringing my skills from the '70s together with where I am artistically today and figuring out how to use them is fun for me."

Once final, the drawings are scanned into a CAD program that directs the laser cutting of the forms from five-by-ten foot sheets of eighth-inch stainless steel. "In order to scan the drawings," she explains, "they have to be perfect -- smooth lines, no skips of the pen.

The metal shop is next. "I have

a good idea of how it is going to look, but there is so much magic that happens there..." This is where the pieces are formed, bent, and welded -- Babette does most of this herself. Next is the grinding phase, in which

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she smooths the dangerously sharp edges and finally grinds the surfaces to achieve her textures. "I have to be very cautious when I work. No, I don't wear gloves because I feel I have a better grip [on the five-pound grinder], but I wear a mask, eye protection, my hair is back, no clothing is loose. You have to be respectful of power equipment. Yesterday, I ground for three hours and my arms are so sore. An hour a day is about all I should do.

"As you can see, I'm totally involved, and I want each piece in an edition to express the freshness and joy of the first one. That is why I keep my editions small." Most of her editions are nine with two artist proofs.

Moving back and forth between these physical phases of creating current pieces to the imaginative phases of new commissions is a balancing act. Just inside her front door is a bronze she did when she was thirty. It's a lanky woman in jeans and t-shirt, arms out, one holding a heart and house representing love and home, the other holding a sculpture representing work." She is standing on one toe, with a spring for a neck and is called "Maintaining That Balance." "I'm still balancing," Babette laughs and rotates the pedestal. Δ

Artwork courtesy of the artist: Redding, CT 06896

