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Two Redding artists: Shaping a creative life

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Thursday, 19 May 2011 10:54



The home of Babette Bloch and Marc Mellon is filled with and reflects abundant creativity — and sculpture. Her medium is laser-cut stainless steel, while his finished representational works are bronze. Since moving to Redding in 1989, their home has expanded along with their success to include his and her studios.

Individually, the sculptors have won numerous commissions and awards, most recently at the National Arts Club in New York, where one of Mr. Mellon's sculptures graces the lobby. At the 112th members exhibition in April, Ms. Bloch won the sculpture award for her 42-inch-high Lotus and Papyrus Vase, while he was honored for his bronze bust of Elie Wiesel. In 2008, Mr. Mellon's design was selected for Barack Obama's inaugural medal.

Speaking of her work, Ms. Bloch said, "This series of vases explores different cultures, unveiling something of each one's aesthetic. It's fun for me to watch people intrigued with the reflective quality of the stainless, and the way I bring dimensionality to the surfaces."

Of his bust of Mr. Wiesel, Mr. Mellon said, "I felt very privileged to be working with this Nobel Peace Prize recipient. His message to the world is that we should always be vigilant and never indifferent to genocide. I've often heard him say that that 'the opposite of love is indifference.' I'm hopeful that this portrait will help project this timeless message."

The two sculptors met at a Long Island bronze foundry in 1984. He was completing a series of sports bronzes for exhibit at the Olympics in Los Angeles that year; she was doing a series of 13 American Beach figures. "It was hard to concentrate once I met her," Mr. Mellon recalled with a laugh. At the time, she "was a traditionally trained bronze sculptor" whose work reflected a touch of whimsy or sense of humor.

As a rule, the sculptors work individually, but in 1993 they accepted a joint commission for a client who wanted a series of sculptures to sit atop a tall room-dividing wall. "They were looking for Marc's imagery and my sensibility," Ms. Bloch said. The client wanted gymnasts, but not in bronze. Inspired by the work of Tom Wesselmann, Ms. Bloch decided to use sheet metal, "taking it off the wall and drawing in space." She was so inspired by the process and pleased with the result that "I never went back to bronze."





In her work, she draws out a design and assembles a paper model, marking it to show the grinding direction that will go into a piece. Working with an industrial precision metal shop, the drawing is scanned and a computer program written to tell the laser how to cut the stainless steel. She then does the grinding, bending, welding and finish work to create the completed sculpture. If the design is one to be sold in galleries, she generally works in fine art editions of nine, as does Mr. Mellon.

Both artists do a lot of commission work, which can come through competitions, being one of several artists asked to submit a proposal or word-of-mouth recommendation. Just this week, for example, Ms. Bloch is one of four finalists invited to present a design for a 9/11 memorial in Westport that will incorporate some pieces of metal from the fallen towers.

Although they work individually, "we talk shop a lot, go through problem solving together," Mr. Mellon said. "It is good to have a colleague whom you respect around to get feedback, to give advice to each other."

When it comes to commissions, "We always learn something from every one," Ms. Bloch said.

Mr. Mellon added, "It's the problem solving we are addicted to... Setting challenges with every project; it is very gratifying to figure out the puzzle, whatever that puzzle happens to be."

For example, Ms. Bloch engages an engineer to help create her large scale works, as with the four monumental sculptures commissioned by Brookgreen Gardens (near Myrtle Beach, S.C.), which needed to withstand hurricane-force winds and were unveiled in 2006. Titled Reflecting History, the nine-foot-high sculptures are set along the quarter-mile Lowcountry Trail at Brookgreen Gardens, founded in 1931 by sculptor Anna Hyatt Huntington and her husband Archer Huntington, who maintained a home in Redding for many years.

Walking around Mr. Mellon's studio, a number of familiar faces, in bust form, come into view, including Presidents George H.W. Bush, Ronald Reagan and Theodore Roosevelt; Pope John Paul, Mohammad Ali, Tony Bennett, Winston Churchill and Albert Einstein. Bronzes of the Bush bust are on view in the National Portrait Gallery at the Smithsonian, CIA headquarters in Langley, Va., and the Bush Library Center at Texas A&M; the bust of Pope John Paul was created for the Vatican and is housed in the Papal Apartments; a replica is on view at Sacred Heart University in Fairfield.

His eight-foot-high bronze of George Eastman was unveiled at University of Rochester (NY) in October 2009. "The university is using it in all of its branding; it has become the definitive image in all the materials and I love seeing the different angles they photograph it from," he said.

Ms. Bloch is currently working on another monumental commission, this one a 14-foot-high work based on a famous work of Leonardo da Vinci's, which will be unveiled in Shelton next year, as well as readying works to be displayed on the street in Lenox, Mass.

She is president of the Artists' Fellowship, Inc, a 152-year-old foundation that aids artists and their families in times of emergency. Both sculptors have been involved with the organization since the mid-1980s.

The couple has two daughters: Julia is graduating from Washington University in St. Louis this year, while Rachel is completing her junior year in high school.

More information about the artists may be found on their Web sites, BabetBloch.com and MellonStudio.com.