

THE ART DEPARTMENT





A Couple of Sculptors

Continuing A Pre-Historic Tradition in Fairfield County

by Susan Farewell

Step inside the Redding home of Marc Mellon and Babette Bloch and you'll think you're in a fairly standard center-hall Colonial on a quiet country road. That first impression flees, however, before you even remove your jacket.

With every step you take, you're greeted by the couples' works of art. Immediately besides the door, you'll spot one of Babette's early bronzes, a mother portrayed trying to balance home, heart and career. Her neck is a coil, like a jack-in-the-box, representing how much a woman's head must spin. On shelves and surfaces throughout the room stand Marc's sinewy bronze figures in various pilates and yoga poses. No sooner does your eye settle on one piece, it is quickly diverted to another, including several notice-me stainless steel pieces by Babette adorning the walls and tabletops. Through the window on the deck, you see a six-foot-high vase stuffed with flowers, made of stainless steel.

Before you know it, you are drawn into Babette's studio where you suddenly feel as if you've been transported to a downtown Manhattan loft. On the walls, vibrantly painted leafy trees made of stainless steel compete for your attention with smaller scaled models and maquettes of her work scattered about the space. Large computer-generated drawings show the artist's work in progress. There are books that she uses for research everywhere, showing everything from early Mycenaean pottery to a bible translated into Gullah.

Just feet away, you enter yet another world, that of Marc's bronzes. Cramming every possible spot in his studio is a bust of someone famous—former President George H.W. Bush, Pope John Paul II, President Lee Teng-hui of Taiwan. Among them are victorious athletes frozen in various triumphant moments. If some of them look familiar it's because you've seen them before. The NBA's Most Valued Player trophy that's held aloft

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by a smiling athlete ever year and pictured on every network and thousands of newspaper sports pages was created by Mellon. The portrait bronze of former President Bush is in the permanent collection of the Smithsonian Institute's National Portrait Gallery. The artist's bust of President Lee is in the collection of Taiwan's Chi Mei Museum.

Mellon and Bloch met back in 1984, at the Bronze Foundry in Farmingdale, New York and were married three years later. Today, in addition to raising their two young daughters (now ages 12 and 16), they both are extremely dedicated to their art. Bloch, who worked in bronze for several years before switching to the new medium of stainless steel in 1993, is considered a pioneer in laser-cut stainless steel sculpture.

Her work involves creating pieces specifically for private homes, businesses and non-profit organizations as well as museum exhibitions. Often, her pieces offer an ideal solution to spaces that are either oddly shaped or oversized. She frequently hears "I've been looking forever for this space and nothing was right." She prides herself on being able to look at an area and come up with a concept that will "activate the space." Indeed, Bloch takes spaces that are otherwise dormant and turns them into exciting experiences. Many of her pieces are whimsical and bring great delight to owners and viewers.

She also does family portraits in stainless steel and has created a four-foot-high dog in the medium called "Laser-Cut Mutt" which—she says, quite satisfied, "You don't have to feed or walk."

Her work is permanently placed in several temples, museums and sculpture gardens around the country. Right now, she is working on four nine-foot-high sculptures for a quarter-mile-long historic trail in the Brookgreen Gardens in South Carolina. Founded in 1931, this was America's first public sculpture garden and is located on a 9,000-acre former rice plantation. Her pieces visually tell the story of the plantation owner, John Joshua Ward and the enslaved Africans that once lived and worked on this vast expanse of land.

She is also in the process of finishing up a series of seven-foot high stainless steel flower vases, each representing a different country and time of history in the world (Chinese, Greek, Pre-Columbian, Egyptian). It is a cultural show through flora and is being exhibited at the Paul Mellon Arts Center (no relation to Marc Mellon) at Choate Rosemary Hall in the fall.

In addition to being sensationally creative, Babette's work is highly physical. She starts by developing her ideas on paper, creating black and white drawings which are then scanned into a computer and blown up. "The intrinsic challenge is that every line has to connect and every line has to create sculpture," she explains. She then makes models (out of paper) and maquettes (smaller versions made in stainless steel) in order to work out the problems in a smaller scale. From there, she has her medal shop laser-cut sheets of stainless steel to her specifications. Then—here's where the hard physical labor comes in—she must manipulate the shape by welding, twisting and rolling and create textures on the surface of the metal by grinding, sandblasting and—in some cases—painting her sculptures.

Mellon's bronze work, on the other hand, is more traditional. He is one of the country's foremost representational sculptors, well known for his portrait busts, commemorative statues and other works in the worlds of dance, sport and family life. At any given time, he has at least forty different projects in the works. How does he keep track? "Deadlines."

His work has been displayed in corporate, private and public collections around the world. In addition to the aforementioned former presidents and pope, among those who have been honored with Mellon bronzes are athletes Michael



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Jordan, Mickey Mantle, Arthur Ashe, Roger Clemens and Chris Evert; dance world legends Agnes de Mille and Ms. Cynthia Greogry; and business leaders Armand Hammer, Steve Wynn and Ted Turner. He is the sculptor of The Maurice Podoloff Trophy, awarded annually to the NBA MVP, the WNBA MVP Trophy, the Dave Rimington Trophy (The College Football Center of the Year), the Arena Football League Ironman Trophy, The Bobby Clarke Award and numerous other athletic sculptures.

Along with his very steady work that honors achievement for high-profile individuals, Mellon finds great satisfaction in creating personal dancer pieces. These are wonderful for the home, depicting women in various yoga or pilates poses, dancing, stretching or meditating. "I'm inspired by strong women," he explains. "Women who can take care of themselves."

While the couples' work is dramatically different from one another, hers being more contemporary, his more traditional, the two feel there is a common denominator. "We both do work that elicits joy and wonder," says Babette. Her final work always is vibrant and alive and makes people happy to look at. Mellon agrees. "My sculptures are meant to move and uplift the spirit."

The two are active members of The National Arts Club in New York and actively involved with The Artists' Fellowship, Inc., an organization that assists professional fine artists during times of emergency.

As for working together, "We often consult with each other on ideas," explains Mellon. "But when it comes to critiquing each other's work, there's a real trick is knowing when to offer advise and when to keep your mouth shut." Nevertheless, "There is a benefit from having someone with a good eye. In a sense, we elevate each other's work." Locally, you can see some of the couple's pieces at Cavalier Galleries in Greenwich. They also are on display in Cavalier's Madison Avenue and Nantucket galleries. ■

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