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Sculptures Take Look Behind The Mask

When you pop in a favorite CD or cassette tape and listen to the music and lyrics, can you picture in your mind the people described in the songs?

Artist Beckie Kravetz of Sonoita can, and her depictions of characters from classic operas range from vivid face masks worn on stage to fine art sculptures exhibited at the Los Angeles Opera.

"I've always loved the theater," she says, "and I love the opera. It's a great passion of mine.

"I listen to the music, study the libretto and go on instinct" to create pieces that include Erda, a goddess in Wagner's "The Ring Cycle," the Queen of the Night from Mozart's "The Magic Flute," and many others.

This 40-year-old artist, who began making masks in 1985 when she was a student at the Yale School of Drama, recalls being fascinated by faces since she was a youngster, whether in art class or just doodling with

paper and pencil.

Masks a passion

After growing up in Phoenix, she studied acting at Williams College in Massachusetts, then went on to the drama school at Yale. But instead of acting she

as a mask maker with the Santa Fe Opera and returned there in 1990 to train as a wig maker and makeup artist with Judy Disbrow of San Francisco-based Theatrical Hairgoods.

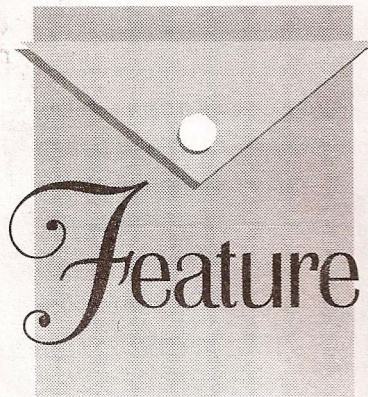
"In opera, people are chosen for their voice ... so a 50-year-old can play an 18-year-old. The transformations required are very extreme," she explains, recalling when she had to create 24 bald caps for the chorus members of a Houston production of "Aida."

After a month in Houston, Kravetz joined the LA Opera in late 1987 for its second season. The following fall she started training with LA Opera wig master Rick Geyer and worked her way up to become assistant wig master.

She experimented with making masks out of a starched canvas called buckram. This fine mesh material makes talking, breathing and seeing easier for performers, plus the material holds a shape well.

Amazing mask maker

"She's an amazing mask



by Karen Walenga

served an internship in prop making, which included mask making, and "realized masks were my passion."

In 1987 she spent the summer



A variety of theatrical masks adorn a wall in the Sonoita studio of mask maker Beckie Kravetz.

maker," Geyer says, pointing out that Kravetz not only takes into account the individual performer who will wear a mask, but produces a piece that fits in seamlessly with a character's costume and personality.

Most masks, especially those that cover the full face, are made not for the featured performers in an opera but for the extras, "the ghosts or the dancers," Kravetz points out. And it's a time-consuming, six-day-a-week job for nine and a half months a year.

In 1993, Kravetz held a solo exhibition featuring her masks and began thinking about mask making in a more sculptural way.

"The amazing thing about masks, when the role is well played, when the actors know what they're doing, ... the masks come to life," she says.

By the mid-1990s, Kravetz wanted to explore how masks transform the actors, and actors transform the masks. She was also ready to move away from Los Angeles and spend more time on her sculptural art work.

Home in Sonoita

Her search for a small, rural town in the high desert brought her back in touch with an acquaintance, journalist Alan Weisman who had settled in Sonoita. Kravetz fell in love not only with Sonoita but with Weisman, too, and the couple married.

For Kravetz, the change meant flying back and forth between Arizona and Los Angeles beginning in August every year, when preparations for the opera season begin, and continuing with shows through February or March.

Cutting back on that schedule has allowed her to focus more on her sculptural masks by listening to opera music and creating her ideal vision of the characters.

The results show where the transformation of actor and mask occurs, Kravetz says.



In her studio in Sonoita, artist Beckie Kravetz works on Erda, a goddess figure. This terra cotta piece is a model for a bronze Kravetz plans as part of her upcoming show based on Wagner's "The Ring Cycle."

Photos by Mario Aguilar

"The inside became a whole sculpted tableau that is very three dimensional," she explains.

For example, her mechanical doll from "The Tales of Hoffmann" has a music box mechanism on the inside of the mask that plays songs from the opera.

On the inside of her Don Giovanni mask, female figures pass by the main character as if on a conveyor belt, and stairs lead down from a stage to a fiery pit below.

Queen of the Night

Another Kravetz creation depicts the Queen of the Night on one side, and on the other

Sarastro, an Egyptian high priest from Mozart's "The Magic Flute."

The bronze face of the queen has a silver nitrate patina, a bronze headpiece that is painted and includes 22-karat gold leaf and mother of pearl moons, as well as a silver moon and the night sky in cloisonné enamel. The stone is hematite.

"These are not intended to be worn, but to illuminate the character," Kravetz explains. She was able to use a variety of materials, including gold leaf, silver and gem stones, and use a mix of craft skills.


The LA Opera also was excited about her work and, in September

1998, her "Sculpted Arias" exhibition opened there in the Grand Hall Founders Circle Level and ran through Nov. 17 of that year. It featured her portrait masks of opera characters in bronze, terra cotta and mixed media.

"It surprised me: the depth she explored, and how she captured the essence of the characters so beautifully and used a new medium for her—bronze," Geyer recalls. "These totally three-dimensional pieces are meant to be seen from all sides. I was very impressed."

Preparing for next show

That exhibition was well received, and Kravetz now is



working on pieces for her next show, which will feature Wagner's "The Ring Cycle." It will include not only portrait masks but figures and groupings, such as three Rhine maidens cavorting in a river bottom as part of a bronze fountain.

Last spring, Kravetz reduced her work schedule with the LA Opera but also is active with the Ziggurat Theatre Co. in Los Angeles. She and fellow mask maker, writer and director Bob Beuth of Los Angeles also started an on-line company, theater-masks.com, that offers masks for college and university theater departments, opera companies, private parties and more.

She also enjoys teaching and last year presented a mask-making workshop at the Patagonia Creative Arts Association.

A current project involves Tucson's Casa Paloma, a shelter for single, homeless women. Kravetz has a startup grant and is working to raise more funding for a public sculpture in the Casa Paloma community garden, located in the Barrio Anita neighborhood.

This bronze work will depict two women stitching a quilt made of mosaic tiles created by Casa Paloma residents and others who use the shelter's services, plus neighborhood residents, Kravetz explains.

"Becky is an artist in the true sense of the word," says Beuth, her business partner. "She's really wonderful.

"Her work has really progressed ... and she's branched out," he says, calling her "one of the premier mask makers in the country."

Santa Cruz Valley Sun Editor Karen Walenga also wrote about the Great Arizona Puppet Theater in this issue.