

Sculptural Pursuit

Summer 2008

ARTISTIC EXPRESSIONS

Inspiration - Interviews - Artwork - Photography - Poetry



UNDERTOW
Glass
Jean-Pierre Canlis

JEAN-PIERRE CANLIS MAGIC IN GLASS

BECKIE KRAVETZ SCULPTED ARIAS

Contemporary Folk Art **JOHN WHIPPLE**
KIMBERLY WILLCOX

CREATIVE PROCESS **FROM CARVED ROOTS**
TO CYBER SCULPTURE

Summer 2008 Vol.7 No.2



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Assortment of life-size wearable masks made of theatrical casting material called neoprene, a synthetic liquid latex. The masks are painted in acrylic and embellished with mixed media.



Kravetz working in her studio.

Beckie Kravetz: Sculpted Arias & Emotion

The life of sculptor, mask-maker, and operatic make-up artist Beckie Kravetz is filled with emotion, and she infuses that emotion into her sculpture. Her depictions of operatic characters, faces, and masks display the powerful gamut of human feeling captured in an instant of time – in a living face the emotion may be fleeting, but in her work, the pathos remains etched for all time, reaching out and reminding viewers of our human condition.

Kravetz's path to an art career was always intertwined with her love of theater. As a child growing up in Phoenix, she took art classes, doodled, and played with clay, but she also played the cello and followed her passion for acting to college. When she discovered that becoming a professional actor wasn't in her future, she pursued a graduate degree in theater literature and studied dramaturgy, the art of designing the structure of a theatrical work or production, at Yale. "I hated it," she says. "It was so academic."

I've spent so much of my life surrounded by the high emotion in opera that I feel the most pleasure when people get the emotion in my sculpture and respond to it.

Beckie Kravetz

by Marilyn Noble



TURANDOT, Sculpted Aria series
 Polychromed and patinated bronze, 24-karat gold leaf, white gold leaf, mica, jade, freshwater pearls, and semi-precious stones
 23.5" x 11" x 9"
 Front and back view

The advantage to studying at Yale with its large and well-established theater department was that Kravetz could volunteer to work the tech side of the numerous theater productions produced by the department every year. There she found her niche creating props, costumes, and masks. "I loved working with faces; I've always had an anthropomorphic bent," she says. "I loved doing make-up and not only did I get an incredible background in design elements, I got an incredible technical background in different materials." She gave up her graduate program to become a tech theater intern and came out of the program two years later as a theatrical mask maker.

Another assortment of Kravetz masks.





CARMEN

Sculpted Arias series, bronze, 21" x 14" x 12"

Above: Front view

Right: back detail, bronze, bronze rose, and laminated tarot cards.



Persian King mask

Kravetz discovered that opportunities in her area of expertise were limited to the opera world where performers were cast for their voices and not for their looks, so she left the East Coast for a summer at the Santa Fe Opera. "I fell in love with opera that summer," she says. She spent her time working with wigs, make-up, and masks.

When the Santa Fe season ended, Kravetz went to work for the fledgling Los Angeles Opera. "I joined pretty green and I trained on the job, but eventually I became the resident mask maker." She became intrigued by watching the masks she created for the actors come to life on their faces. "It's incredible to see it come to life, but you always have to be aware of the technical aspects – the person wearing it needs to be able to breathe and see," she says. During her time off between shows, she began to explore making non-wearable masks, and soon, the Roark Gallery in Los Angeles wanted to show her work.

Kravetz's other fascination became the "magical point of transformation between the character and the mask, the inner mask" where the face of the actor met her outward creation of the character. In her sculptural masks, she painted and collaged the interior side, giving them an unexpected added dimension that explored the inner persona of the character.

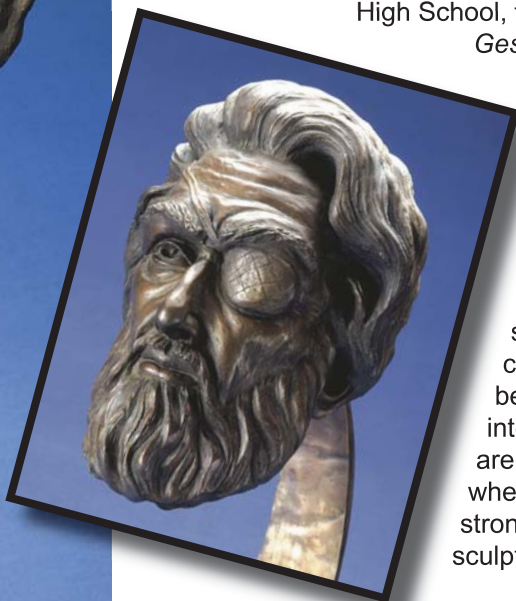


UPON GOING TO SLEEP, detail
bronze, 24" x 9" x 9"
Inspired by the "Four Last Songs" of Richard Strauss

In her opera work, Kravetz realized several limitations. "Rarely can you create a face that looks exactly like you want it, and it takes a collaboration to make the artistry happen," she says. "I asked myself, 'can I take this music I love and translate it with my hands to create the same emotion in people that they feel when they hear the music?'"

In 1998, the management of the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, home of the LA Opera, said yes to a one-person exhibition of her *Sculpted Arias* series, a collection of bronze life-size busts of operatic characters with mixed-media, three-dimensional interiors. The tableaux resemble tiny stage sets and reveal the metaphorical themes of the opera or the driving elements of the character's persona. *CARMEN*, for example, is a brooding depiction of Bizet's tragic, manipulative protagonist in the opera of the same name. The back of the piece shows a relief rendering of her lover, the torreador Escamillo, underneath a set of three Tarot cards – Death, one of the opera's main themes; The Fool, Don Jose, her spurned lover; and, upside down to depict their doomed love, The Lovers, Carmen and Escamillo.

"It took a vast body of technical expertise to realize the designs," Kravetz says, citing not only her work at Yale but also her fine craft studies at Phoenix Central High School, the *Centro Maschere e Strutture Gestuale* in Italy, the *Taller de Madera* in Guatemala, and the *Instituto de Allende* in Mexico for giving her the skills she needed to create her art. While spending so much time with her fingers on living faces gave her a tactile understanding of facial anatomy, it was watching the actors on stage that gave her the ability to capture emotion in her pieces. "To be immersed in those moments of interaction, soliloquy, or aria, which are very condensed and specific, where the emotional response is so strong – that's where the emotion in my sculpture comes from," she says.



WOTAN, *Sculpted Aria* series
bronze with gold leaf, burl wood, and semi-precious stones
21" x 11" x 15"
Front and back view



SIEGMUND, close-up



SIEGLINDE, close-up

SIEGMUND and SIEGLINDE, Sculpted Aria series
Bronze, copper, 24-karat gold leaf, ash wood, and mixed media, 22" x23" x11"

Kravetz uses models only for full-body pieces, preferring instead to create faces from her own imagination. "The faces I'm creating are all made up," she says. "I always have something specific in mind to create the character I want."

As her skill as a make-up artist and mask maker in the opera world grew, so did her sculpture career. Eventually, tired of living in LA, she looked for a small community in the high desert where she could live and work on her sculpture during her off time. Friends recommended that she call a mutual

acquaintance, Alan Wiesman, who lived in Sonoita, Arizona, a small town outside of Tucson. Kravetz laughs that she not only found her high-desert home, but a husband as well. She and Weisman, a journalist and author, married and made their home in Sonoita while she commuted back to LA to work on shows. "We have a complementary way of looking at the world," she says. "I think in images, and he thinks in words."

The stark juxtaposition between her old life and new became obvious one weekend when she worked





SOPHIA, close-up
bronze, 5 feet

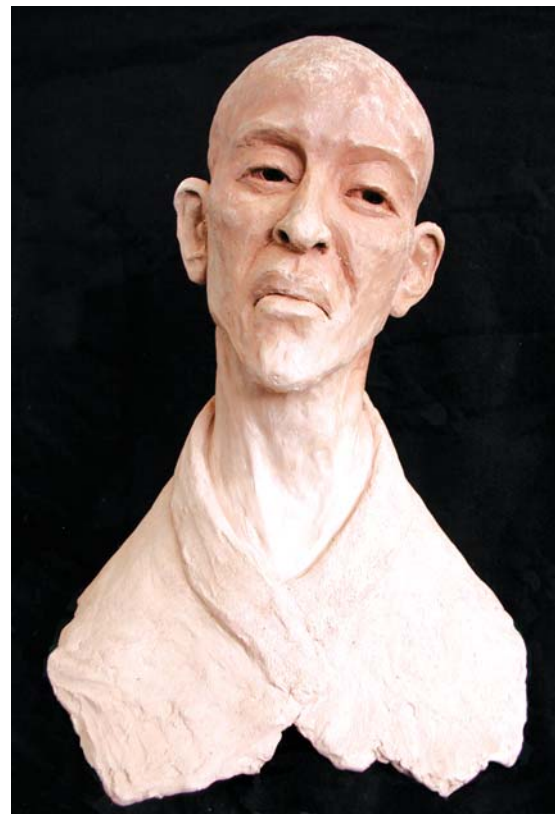
an amazing art and literary history," she says. Robert Frost, William Carlos Williams, and Willem De Kooning, among others, spent time at the colony during the 1930s and 40s. The move will allow her to get involved once again in live theater while she continues to develop and build her sculptural oeuvre.

As Kravetz's life has changed, so has her work. While she still creates masks and opera-themed work, she has moved to a more contemporary aesthetic. *CROWD SCENE*, one of her current works, is a collection of six life-size busts installed on a crescent-shaped platform. All of the faces respond to an unknown, powerful event, one that inspires deep emotion in each one of them. Each individual viewer's history determines what the event might be, and when the piece is installed, the viewers become part of the scene, experiencing their own emotions to an event of their choosing.

on a matinee performance of Franco Zeffirelli's production of *Pagliacci*, an on-stage extravaganza with dozens of performers in wild costumes and make-up, and then flew home to watch the local cowboys perform at a Sonoita rodeo. "It was an interesting life," she says with a touch of understatement.

Kravetz left the opera to devote herself full time to her sculpture. "I really missed the opera," she says. "It was lonely because I was used to working with colleagues. I missed the social interaction and the artistic inspiration." In 2007, Kravetz and Weisman sold their Arizona property and bought the land and buildings formerly known as the Cumington School of the Arts in western Massachusetts, "a place with

A life tragedy inspired another collection that combines full figures and masks. A few years ago, Kravetz gave birth to a stillborn child and felt drowned in oppressive, overwhelming grief. She says, "I would see the same sad face looking at me in the mirror and I got tired of feeling that way. The drudgery of housework is



Top:
A woman figure from the *CROWD SCENE*
in stoneware, 18" x 14"

Above:
HOLY MAN
stoneware, 16" x 13"

THE VALKYRIES from Wagner's "Die Walkire"
Bronze relief, 36" x 12" x 12"

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Kravetz's studio in Cummington, Massachusetts shows a work-in-progress in the foreground that is inspired by her recent trip to China, a Crowd Scene head, and *ALL WRUNG OUT* in the background.



what grief started to feel like to me.” She created a life-size female nude with a sad, weary look on her face. The white ceramic figure is vulnerable and naked as she stands under a clothesline next to a laundry basket full of masks, each with the same tortured countenance. She wrings out the masks one by one and hangs them on the line so that she can wear them over and over. “It felt healing to be able to put my emotions into my work,” Kravetz says, but she also experienced an unexpected response to the piece, titled *ALL WRUNG OUT*. “Lots of people felt the anguish, but others looked at it and started to laugh at the thought of masks being washed and worn again and again. It gave me great joy to know it created an emotion in them, even though it wasn’t what I intended.”



To further explore the metaphor of masks as the emotions we wear, Kravetz is working on more pieces in the series, some of which will be life size, while others will be half size to make installations more practical. “It’s a fun way to bring the two sides of my work together,” she says.

Their new home in Massachusetts is comprised of eleven acres of field and forest with plenty of room for a sculpture garden. A dedicated gardener, Kravetz is excited about living with the seasons and developing a large garden, something she was unable to do in the arid desert Southwest. “I’m a person who feels strongly about the natural world. I wonder how the new landscape will influence my work,” she says. “I ask myself what part my feeling about nature plays in my art.”

Kravetz plans to balance her mask making with her bronze operatic works and commissions. She’ll also experiment further with her figures and masks concept and with new materials. One thing won’t change, however. “The focus on capturing the emotional moment is the essential aspect of my work.”

To see more of Beckie Kravetz’s sculpture and masks, visit her web site at www.operaart.com. ✨

ALL WRUNG OUT
ceramic and mixed media; the figure is 38" x 27" x 12" [A](#)