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MARC MELLON & BABETTE BLOCH

SCULPTING THEIR OWN WAYS

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Widely known on the New York art scene, Marc Mellon (b. 1951) and Babette Bloch (b. 1956) are a married couple who represent two distinct, yet equally compelling, aspects of representational sculpture today.

Both were living in New York City in 1984, when they met at a Long Island foundry. Married four years later, they soon bought a house in Redding, Connecticut, where they have raised their two daughters and created art in his-and-hers studios. Wisely, Mellon never relinquished his bachelor pad, a small studio in the tower above Manhattan's National Arts Club; now the couple uses it for small projects and as a base for their New York activities, notably the lively educational programs Bloch has helped organize at the club for more than 20 years.

HUMANITY IN BRONZE

Mellon has made his name creating an array of portrait busts, reliefs, medallions, commemorative statues, and figure sculptures depicting dance, sport, and family life. Raised in Brooklyn, he headed to the University of Rochester to prepare for a career in medicine, but ultimately earned a B.F.A. from Brooklyn College after studying not only history and philosophy, but also drawing with Philip Pearlstein. Upon graduation, he promptly enrolled in the Brooklyn Museum School's full-time, two-year program in sculpture, then spent



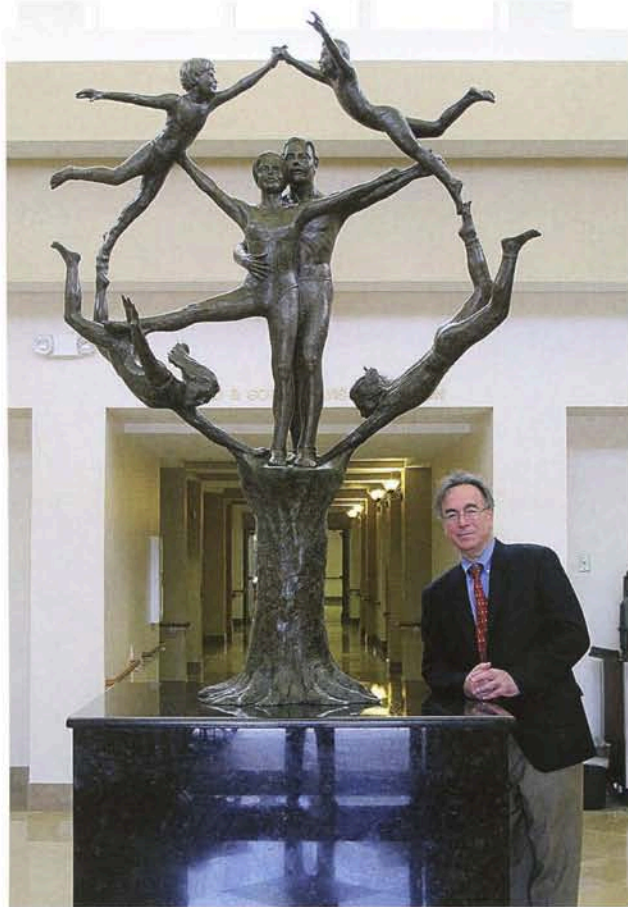
two more years absorbing the best New York could offer a young sculptor: private study with Seiji Saito, Robert Beverly Hale's lectures on anatomy at the Art Students League, and workshops with Gaetano Cecere at the National Academy of Design and Bruno Lucchesi at the New School.

This training put Mellon firmly on the path to classical tradition and traditional processes: today he moves in the venerable world of clay, plaster, wax, and bronze, interacting regularly with the Tri-State region's leading mold makers and bronze casters. In the spirit of Augustus Saint-Gaudens and Daniel Chester French (whose Massachusetts country estate he came to know well as sculptor-in-residence three years ago), Mellon makes sculpture that is truly humanist, figures that — while recording an actual likeness — “also evoke an inner life and uplift the spirit.” He explains, “I'm interested in how we find meaning and fulfillment in this world.”

Mellon has earned most attention in the realm of portraiture, having sculpted the busts of dozens of leaders in many fields. Among the politicians represented are Barack Obama, Joseph Biden, George H.W. Bush, Ronald Reagan, Theodore Roosevelt, Winston Churchill, and Taiwan's first democratically elected president, Lee Teng-Hui. From the world of science, ethics, and religion have come Albert Einstein, Elie Wiesel, and Pope John Paul II, and from business and philanthropy George Eastman, Herb Kohler, and Kenneth E. Behring. Among the creative personalities who have sat for Mellon are Tony Bennett, Will Barnett, Everett Raymond Kinstler, and Tom Wolfe, while his sports subjects have included Muhammad Ali, Tom Seaver, and Boomer Esiason. “This,” Mellon concedes, “has been, and continues to be, a humbling and fascinating journey.”

Although Mellon's busts are expressive, the power of gesture is even more palpably activated in his full-figure work, including commissions made for institutions like South Carolina's Ander-





son University, where the Stringer-Rainey Fountain (2007) features five figures, including a male violinist and a female dancer. *Generations* is a 7 1/2-foot-high composition that presents six figures in a veritable circle of life; one in its edition of five now graces the MorseLife Senior Campus in West Palm Beach, Florida.

For his own pleasure, Mellon has also developed the *Modern Muse* series, which “celebrates the strength and independence I admire in contemporary women.” These individual figures exude a dignified sensuality that is further elaborated in Mellon’s many treatments of dancers, primarily women. His long-standing interest in this theme will be highlighted soon, when the Thomas J. Walsh Art Gallery at Connecticut’s Fairfield University presents an exhibition that compares and contrasts his sculptures alongside dance images created by two other major

talents — painter Jane Sutherland and photographer Philip Trager. On view September 18, 2015 through January 15, 2016, this show will be complemented by a program of contemporary dance performances offered in the auditorium of the Regina A. Quick Center for the Arts, where the Walsh Gallery is located.

Ranging in scale from tabletop to life-size, and in date from 1982 through today, Mellon’s soon-to-be-exhibited sculptures will demonstrate why he — like his forerunners Degas and Rodin — is drawn to dance: for its expressive, evocative, and occasionally erotic potential. It is telling that among the first subjects Mellon sculpted (in the late 1970s) were gymnasts and yoga practitioners, and also that he produced numerous commissions for the 1984 Olympic Games, which led later to commissioned bronzes capturing energy in ice skating, basketball, football, baseball, and ice hockey. “I have always loved



Marc Mellon works with Cassandra Trenary (American Ballet Theatre Corps de Ballet) on an early stage of *Cassandra Rising*, February 2015; photo: Richard Lerner

the metaphors between sport and all of life’s pursuits,” Mellon says. “I’ve particularly focused on the *beauty* of sport, while trying to project the human qualities that make for quality and achievement.” Among his earliest dance works were ones bearing the titles *Graham Contraction* (a movement introduced by the choreographer Martha Graham) and *Horton Balance Technique*, popularized by Lester Horton. Like the recent *Pas de Deux* series, these explore the grace with which dancers carry themselves, and seen all together, they offer fascinating juxtapositions between motion and repose.

It says much that Mellon’s light-filled studio (measuring 30 x 40 feet, with a cathedral ceiling cresting at 22 feet) was designed with a sprung floor and a bank of 8-foot-high mirrors. These features make posing much easier for his models, whom he recruits from such centers of excellence as

(TOP LEFT) MARC MELLON, *Generations* [edition of 5], 1998, bronze, 7 ft., 6 in. high (on a 40 in.-high base), MorseLife Senior Campus, West Palm Beach, Florida ■ (TOP RIGHT) MARC MELLON, *Rain* [edition of 9], 2000, bronze, 27 in. high



American Ballet Theatre and the Hartt School of Dance. When he designed this studio nine years ago, Mellon included a wall of north-light windows with adjustable shades, as well as 14-foot-high beams equipped with individually controlled rows of directional lights.

STEELY DETERMINATION

Meanwhile, in a spacious studio elsewhere in their Redding house, Babette Bloch can be found manipulating sheets of heavy-gauge stainless steel, ingeniously transforming a dense and heavy material into something seemingly lightweight and fluid. Collaborating with a precision metal shop that normally handles industrial projects, Bloch cuts and punctures steel so that it reflects and interacts with the colors and shapes of its environment.

Raised in New Jersey, she enrolled at the University of Wisconsin, where she met the renowned sculptor of horses in metal Deborah Butterfield, who saw her potential and encouraged her to transfer to the University of California at Davis. There Bloch studied with the painter Wayne

Thiebaud and the sculptors Robert Arneson and Manuel Neri. After returning to New York, she focused on applying color to her bronze and clay sculptures, and also worked with found objects. Everything changed in 1993, however, when a client asked Bloch and Mellon to create a project together; the result was a pair of life-sized gymnasts made of sheet metal, who seemed to somersault off the wall. "I immediately liked the idea of drawing in space," Bloch recalls, and although she has never abandoned wall-mounted sculpture, she has turned increasingly to free-standing pieces. Her recent work brings together her long-standing interests in storytelling and Pop (which Thiebaud had encouraged) while also referencing the historical art forms of stencil and silhouette, traditionally mastered by women. Yet there is nothing dainty about Bloch's art; these are imposing pieces of steel on a monumental scale previously associated with male artists like Mark di Suvero and Richard Serra.

Prioritizing the "fluidity of line," Bloch first makes a highly finished drawing, which she then scans into a computer-aided design program that

scales it up to the much larger size she ultimately envisions. She brings this drawing, along with a small paper maquette, to the precision metal shop, where technicians use computer-driven lasers or water jets to cut the steel per her computerized drawing. Bloch then hoists a heavy power grinder to burnish the surface. This machine is essentially her paintbrush, allowing her to manipulate the flow and direction of subtle marks that create flickering effects and enhance the illusion of depth on a flat form. Because she must hand-grind all nine of the pieces in each limited edition, no two are exactly the same, as we would expect from a painter making a series of nine canvases. Once this phase is complete, she works with a team to mold and shape the sheets: some remain relatively flat, like silhouettes, while others are rolled, manipulated, and welded into three-dimensional forms. Bloch then paints some pieces, not all, with a water-based enamel. When necessary, she also consults with structural engineers to evaluate and amend her designs to meet requirements for safety in high winds and to ensure their long-term stability.

(THIS PAGE) BABETTE BLOCH, *Female Enslaved African*, 2006, stainless steel, 8 ft. high, Brookgreen Gardens Lowcountry Trail, South Carolina



Babette Bloch works on *Vitruvian Man* at the metal fabricating shop

BABETTE BLOCH, Egrets
[edition of 9], 2007, stainless steel,
93 x 60 in., private collection,
Mahopac, New York

This is particularly true for public commissions, which Bloch relishes because she loves “the problem-solving involved in creating works for specific sites.” A recent highlight is her 16-foot *Vitruvian Man*, based on Leonardo’s famous drawing of a man within a square within a circle with his limbs extended. Also larger than life are the silhouetted figures from her *Reflecting History* series: a pioneer couple surveying a field in southwest Michigan, and a plantation owner, overseer, and two enslaved Africans standing on the former South Carolina rice plantation that is now Brookgreen Gardens (see page 67).

Today Bloch is best known for her *Reflecting Nature* series, which encompasses a wide array of floral and wildlife subjects. These range in size from tabletop to monumental, from wall-mounted to free-standing. Just for example, her *Sunflowers* vase is formed of nine parts: the front and back of the vase, plus seven flowers and leaves, all welded together to stand upright. Bloch’s favorite animal subjects are birds, though fish, bees, butterflies, and dogs have also been captured. She occasionally accepts commissions for mobiles, architectural features, and liturgical pieces.

On view now through July 18 at the Manhattan gallery of Portraits, Inc. are six of her sculptures and five monoprints. Meanwhile, in Bridgeport, Connecticut, Housatonic Community College is exhibiting her 9 x 20-foot wall of *Magna Magnolias* through December 4. Moreover, five of her large outdoor sculptures, collectively titled *Steel Garden*, will appear at Indiana’s Fort Wayne Museum of Art from July 11 through November 1. This last project was arranged by Harmon-Meek Gallery (Naples, FL), where Bloch will have a solo show in February 2016.

CRITICS AND ALLIES

As you might expect, the Mellon-Bloch household is a busy place. Endowed with sharp eyes and ready wits, the couple work in completely different manners, yet remain each other’s keenest advocates. “When it comes to critiquing each other’s work,” Mellon admits, “the real trick is knowing when to offer advice and when to keep your mouth shut.” Clearly this approach is working, as the sculptures emerging from their studios are superb and earning ever more attention.

Information: Marc Mellon is represented by Cavalier Galleries (New York City, Nantucket, and Greenwich, CT) and Harmon-Meek Gallery (Naples, FL). Babette Bloch is also represented by Harmon-Meek, and by Baker Sponder Gallery (Boca Raton, FL), Portraits, Inc. (New York City), and Wit Gallery (Lenox, MA).

Peter Trippi is editor-in-chief of Fine Art Connoisseur.



HELPING OTHER ARTISTS

Both Marc Mellon and Babette Bloch have warm places in their hearts for the Artists' Fellowship, Inc. (AF); indeed, each has previously served as its president for multi-year terms. Launched in 1859, AF is a charitable foundation that assists professional fine artists and their families in times of emergency, disability, or bereavement. Grants are awarded to struggling parties without any expectation of repayment, and an applicant need not be a member to seek or receive assistance. For details, please visit artistsfellowship.org.

BABETTE BLOCH, *Magna Magnolias*, 2014, stainless steel, 9 x 20 ft., on view through December 4 at Housatonic Community College, Bridgeport, Connecticut

BABETTE BLOCH, *Steel Magnolia II* [edition of 9], 2014, stainless steel, 111 x 96 in., on view at Fort Wayne Museum of Art July 11-November 1

