

WOMEN TO watch

SCULPTING POWER

Here's an artistic spin on our place in the past. "You've got to put a part of yourself back into history," says sculptor Rebecca Childers Caleel, who studies the carved lines of ancient pottery shards and mysterious masks of the Iroquois False Face Society, to discover forms and attributes she then merges with her own style. "You've got to feel what they felt—out of that comes your creativity."

While her work celebrates the past, it comes alive with her playful touches. Rebecca aims to preserve classical rules of beauty while composing her own artistic statement—an updated version of human history. "The last thing I want to do is demean any part of our culture. I want viewers to find some humor, along with religious, spiritual and cultural meaning."

After studying sculpting for almost two decades, she recently decided to exhibit her work. "I wanted to perfect whichever direction I chose. Now I'm ready."

Her learning years not only honed her sculpting techniques, but also supplied many fascinating experiences. Four years of study with the former state sculptor of Egypt, Mustafa Naguib, emphasized the importance of dissecting the human body, then rebuilding it muscle by muscle around the correct metal frame. Through courses in France and Italy, she worked with renowned masters and studied ancient art work.

Her learning process continues. Art history books are strewn

throughout her Westmont studio. Many relate to ancient Egypt, where Rebecca found the inspiration for her latest creation—a four by four foot bas-relief of Queen Hatchepsut, Egypt's sole female pharaoh. The sculpture depicts Hatchepsut—and modern women's—life-long conflict by juxtaposing beauty with power, a feminine sense for graceful details with the male addiction to magnitude. Next to Rebecca's petite stature, the piece seems overwhelming. "There's power in the bigger form. It's definitely a creative statement. There's a lot more knowledge in bigger forms."

Large-scale dimensions and historical substance create a solid base for Rebecca's whimsical designs and sensual forms. Her bronze pot series "Body Pots, Body Parts," currently on display at the Time & Life Building, incorporates exaggerated body parts in unexpected locations. Lips appear around the eye ball. A breast substitutes for an eye.

Rebecca's art departs from the ordinary, the reality. But the lengthy creative process requires a disciplined, structured life. She spends at least six hours a day in her studio. "You cannot create while socializing. It doesn't bother me to be alone. I don't feel like I'm missing anything." From inception to the polished piece, the sculptor spends about nine months to think, build a frame, lay on the clay, worry, carve, clean up, commute to the foundry in Oregon, Illinois, then correct the sculpture before final casting and experiment with different patinas. And she often runs out of patience. "When I get in the middle [of the process] I immediately get an idea for another piece and want to hurry and get this done."

Rebecca is determined to cumulate a large body of work to pursue further exhibitions. Commercial success may expand Rebecca's resources, but it counts little toward personal gratification. As her pieces grow in size, Rebecca wants to keep growing as an artist "because I haven't gotten there yet. I intend to go much further." ■

Elke Oberg

Rebecca Caleel's exhibit at the Time & Life Building, 541 North Fairbanks, continues through the end of April. Call the studio at 630.887.1919 for more information.



Rebecca Childers Caleel
Photo by Mike Johnson