

Julia LEVITINA, sculptor

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR AXELLE GALERIE

When did you first know you would be an artist? When did you first start sculpting?

I always knew I would be an artist. I was an artist before I was born. My earliest memory of myself is standing up in my crib scribbling on my parents' prized wallpaper with permanent markers. As soon as I was tall enough to reach the face of our non-lacquered heirloom vintage "Odessa" piano, I carved into it with a kitchen knife. I was family's source of embarrassment and entertainment at lengthy Russian Orthodox Easter services, as I stood there, open-mouthed, gaping at the frescoes or sculpting beeswax candle given to me to hold, wax dripping all over the place. Like most kids I grew up with in Soviet pre-computer, pre-smartphone and largely pre-television, Ukraine, I played in mud, hung off tree limbs, made things out of whatever was under hand, "helped" my dad "fix" anything that needed repair and doodled non-stop. I didn't really think it necessary to decide on the kind of artist I would be but when I first touched red water clay as a teenager in my first year of college, I knew I was a sculptor.

You see your pieces from start to finish. Can you walk us through your artistic process, psychologically and physically?

To be a sculptor is to be a craftsman. I am a craftsman as much as I am a fine artist. I do everything myself, from start to finish: I mix my own clay in large turkey roasters and let it cook for three days. I make metal armatures to support my clay sculptures. I mold my finished pieces in flexible rubber with rigid plaster backing and cast hollow waxes into molds I produce. I coat my waxes in heat-resistant ceramic to be evacuated at 1800 F/982 C in centuries' old "cire perdue" or "lost wax" process. I pour bronze at 2150 F/1177 C into newly emptied ceramic shells at a small art foundry I helped build. I break ceramic off using air hammer and chisels. I then cut, grind, refine, weld and finish raw metal. I use chemicals and heat to change color of raw bronze to one that suits a particular piece in a process called patination. I fashion wood or marble bases for my finished sculptures. I drill, tap and countersink in order for the sculpture to be mounted properly. I build my own pedestals.

It is a lengthy, physical and sweaty process that is also extremely satisfying because the result it yields is so personal. There is a certain kind of magic in watching something that was not there before, something that is but few bags of clay powder, oil, petroleum jelly and wax bubbling away in a turkey roaster at its inception, slowly come to life and become a story that tells itself in a form of a bronze sculpture in someone's living room, in someone's garden, on someone's kitchen table, completely independent from its

creator.

Where do you work? What is your studio like?

My studio reflects industrial element of my craft and is a concrete-floored, high-ceilinged unit in an industrial park located about twenty minutes south of Philadelphia. It has no heating or air-conditioning except in small office space intended for working with live models. It gets pretty cold there in winter months and very hot in summer. Sculptors' studios tend to have a reputation of not being for the faint of heart. The studio is well equipped with heavy-duty air compressor, welder and assorted pneumatic, electric and hand tools; saws, sanders and drill press. I do everything but the physical bronze pour in my studio space.

How would you describe your style of work? Would you characterize it as specific genre? What do you aspire to as a sculptor?

I am a contemporary sculptor reflecting on contemporary themes. I sculpt figures and animals in terra cotta and bronze. I work figuratively. I'm not interested in having answers to every question or, worse yet, having the same answer to every question. My art is always evolving. It is always becoming. I am continuously exploring and questioning as I create. I wouldn't characterize my work as belonging to a specific genre because it would be limiting. I think limitations are unnecessary and unhelpful when it comes to art, especially self-imposed limitations. What's important is that my sculpture does its job of communicating ideas, of illuminating a certain kind of truth and of contributing to the world in honest and meaningful ways. I don't believe Michelangelo's *David* is an iconic piece because it happens to be a classically proportioned, anatomically perfect pillar of figurative genre that marks the height of Italian Renaissance. I think it is iconic because its creator dug so deep within himself that he succeeded in quite literally imbuing marble with his very own life force. *David* transcends social, historical and cultural constraints of his place and time to capture something that is universal to us all: the strife and the triumph of human condition. That, to me, is what characterizes truly great art. Great art is what I aspire to in my sculpture.

Who/what inspires you artistically? What artists do you admire?

I am a great admirer of Russian XIXth century Itinerant painters (I. Repin, I. Kramskoy, I. Levitan, among others); Russian sculptors I. Trubetskoi and A. Golubkina, roughly of the same period; XXth century European sculptors A. Rodin, G. Manzu, G. Vigeland, I. Mestrovic; colleagues, contemporaries and friends, painter G. Wartofsky, sculptor G. Weisman and singer-songwriter J. Ritter. My art is often informed and inspired by works of Greek philosopher Aristotle, the French romancier Alexandre Dumas and XXth century poets of Russian 'Silver Age,' M. Tsvetaeva, E. Esenin and A. Akhmatova.

What themes would you say your work deals with?

Artist's gift is two-fold: seeing extraordinary in the ordinary and communicating that sense of wonder by way of art. I am inspired, challenged, moved to my deepest core by the beauty present in ordinary existence. I strive to convey the awe I experience through my sculptures. Recurring themes in my work are a kind of a quest for wisdom, a nod to the disappearing old world, an attempt to resuscitate beauty. I try to capture everyday moments that are at once transient and transcendent, that may easily go unnoticed but that turn out to have universal significance when perceived. In today's world, that so often places pragmatism over heart and values destination more than journey, it has never been more important to seek ways to return to a richer, deeper human experience. Art brings us nearer by offering a single most direct form of communication: from one human being to another. It is the highest form of hope.

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