

HEIDE MESSING MCDONALD : 25-year retrospective now on display

<Les élégantes,> by Heidi Messing McDonald, is a seven-inch bronze depiction of three women, self-assured and chicly dressed. They are beautiful, sassy, and confident. They march to their own beat even though they walk side-by-side. They comprise a strong, united oneness. They are just one example of sculptor Heidi Messing McDonald's 25-year retrospective, on display now at the North Country Cultural Center for the Arts.

The show, which runs through the first week of June, celebrates McDonald's 25 years as an artist, showcasing her talents in everything from painting to drawing to printing to sculpting. The German-born McDonald began her artistic adventures while living in Quebec, her home now for almost 50 years. In the 1980s, she attended Concordia University in Montreal, where she received a Bachelor of Fine Arts.

The first phase of her career was devoted to painting, engraving, and silkscreen technique, which grew more abstract as her career progressed. It wasn't until the 1990s, when she realized the potential of stone sculpting, that McDonald found her true calling. <Those were phases I had to work through,> she stated, referring to her earlier, more exploratory art forms. However, it is her sculpture – the art form which McDonald practices now – that she finds most rewarding.

<This is what I feel passionate about.> she said, gesturing to her many sculptures on display. <This is where I find myself.>

Her path to sculpture was filled with many twists and turns. Her works are intensely varied, ranging from traditional floral still-lives, to vibrantly painted nudes to intensely postmodern prints. <It's like a totally different person,> she admitted, with a laugh. Each different media is a sampler of form, style, and derivation, running the gamut from incredibly modern to almost historically classical. <I started out traditional, and then I loosened up.> McDonald said. An example of this shift is a lino plate called, <Mirror image.> The pixelated image of a woman seems to jump out at the viewer from several different angles – and, with an almost Salvador-Dali-meets-M.C.-Escher complexity, one must wait patiently to obtain the full, multifaceted effect.

What makes sculpture so appealing to McDonald is its ability to embrace differences in style – even in one piece. <Every stone is so different,> McDonald said, and she fully utilizes and comprehends the complexities of both her materials and her subjects.

McDonald's work focuses primarily on women, and she seems to perfectly understand the female form and its soft, rounded beauty. What is ever more striking is her ability to give her subjects an individuality all their own, despite the fact that most of her sculptures are faceless, and most are of more than one person. But even when two lovers are melded into one or a family stands side by side, there is a massive amount of individuality coursing through all her works. The sweet embraces of a couple and the hand-holding of a parent and child both have the same soft, understated element of affection. Their facelessness is never cold or distant – rather, it makes them softer, subtler, and very human.

Part of the reason McDonald's sculptures have so much to do with women is because her artwork is a reflection of herself.

<I draw upon my own experience, my life,> she said, also referencing paintings of her children that she created earlier in her career. But she is also drawn to the female form for more global reasons. <We have to honor women, especially women nowadays,> she said, citing the accomplishments of modern women, as well as the responsibilities and expectations to which they are subjected.

But don't go looking for overt feminist messages in McDonald's work. There are no Amazon women on display here, no superheroes fighting sexism and shunning the status quo. Her paean is much more subtle: embracing the powerful affection of a mother-child bond, exploring the strength of a group of women interacting together, clearly delineating the simple grace of the female figure. <It is a soft message,> McDonald said.

Although sculpture is what McDonald focuses on now, her other artwork is not to be ignored. The show contains a variety of paintings, ranging from almost-Impressionistic works such as <Winter in the City> to the modern and fiery <Modesty> to the fiercely moving and socially conscious <Jens Munk Inuit> series.

Sylvie Strack, president of the board and executive director of NCCCA, was thrilled when McDonald agreed to put on the retrospective. They met last year at the Triangle of Excellence, the three-city arts event that took place in Plattsburgh, Burlington, and St. Jean-sur-Richelieu, Quebec. Bringing McDonald (who has had exhibits in Germany, Australia and Japan, as well as North America) to NCCCA is a step in the right direction for Strack's aim. <We're trying to establish a first-class museum exhibit space here in Plattsburgh,> she said.

It was during the Triangle of Excellence that McDonald first became acquainted with NCCCA. She soon became a member. <I liked the place here,> she said.

Timing also played a key role in the feasibility of the retrospective. McDonald thought that a solo show in Plattsburgh to celebrate her 25th year in art would be a wonderful opportunity.

<Everything tied in together,> she said. This exhibit marks the first time that McDonald has shown works from every stage of her career.

Many of the items on display are also for sale. And if you can't afford the \$2000 it takes to purchase a bronze sculpture, McDonald also has bookmarks, letter openers, and jewellery for sale, as well as prints and matted posters.

McDonald will also be teaching a three-day sculpting workshop, being held at NCCCA in mid-May. The workshop, which will be taught with soapstone, is intended for beginners.

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