

ELIZABETH MEREI

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For Hungarian-born sculptor Elizabeth Merai, it's Canada's multiculturalism that sets its artists apart. "Everybody comes from somewhere else and as we come together, we all bring our pasts with us," she says.

This certainly describes Merai's own experience. At age 21, she moved to Toronto from Szombathely, Hungary's oldest city and once part of the Roman Empire. The city's influence on Merai's work is unmistakable. "I grew up around these old Roman ruins and stones and that always remained with me," she explains. "Whatever I do reminds me of those old stones and my walks with my father and discovering the past."

As a child in Hungary, Merai showed an aptitude for art but didn't pursue it professionally until she came to Canada. "I didn't speak English so I went to school to take ESL classes," she says. "I discovered they also had all kinds of art classes - drawing, ceramics, whatever you were interested in - so I got into it that way." Here she met Hungarian sculptor Attila Keszei who became a mentor. "He was basically my only teacher. I took portraiture classes with him and that's how it all started."

Merei's first commissioned works of art were portraits but her primary passion was carving. "It was the most exciting thing to take a piece of stone in my hand, look at it and imagine what it could become and what I could do with it," she describes. "Sculpting is an unconscious way of handling the material in your hand and, as the native carvers say, the spirit of the stone speaks to you."

With no formal art training, Merai initially struggled to establish herself as an artist. However, her work eventually caught the eye of a photographer and she was invited to exhibit her work in Yorkville (1984). In the meantime, she continued to work as an esthetician and occasionally as a model. She had grown up in a well-known family of estheticians

and working in this field was second nature to her. In 1999 Merai was awarded Best Make Up Artist in Toronto by NOW Magazine.

"It's wonderful if you can immediately start as a full-time artist but for many it's impossible. You find another profession to support yourself but the art is always there." Over the years, Merai built a name for herself in the art community and has been exhibiting her work for more than 25 years.

To date, Merai's work has been featured in nearly seventy exhibits, including many solo shows. "It's exciting to show together with other artists because everyone has such a different style," she says. "It helps get your name around and people get to know your work."

But she admits exhibiting can also be stressful. "I understand why people are perfectionists. Before a show, I want everything perfect. I want the sculptures to look their best and the only time I'm relaxed is once the show is set up, well lit and perfect." Next spring, Merai will launch an exhibit which will travel to cities throughout Austria and Hungary.

When she's not exhibiting, Merai is busy creating in her home studio in Toronto. "I like to carve into the stone directly with a hammer and chisel," she says of the physical process. "The only electrical tool I use is an air hammer, which helps to drive the chisel. Next I use a file, and then comes the slow process of sanding and polishing. That's when you get your final piece." Merai finds her inspirations in many places. "Often, you hear artists say that life inspires them. I can be sitting on the subway and look at someone's face and start thinking about where she comes from," she says. Sometimes, the stone itself serves as a source of inspiration. "With some pieces, you look at the stone and immediately in your mind there is a finished piece and then you just try to recreate it as you imagined. Other times, I have something in mind and then I look for stones that will work for my idea."



Merei's favourite pieces are the ones that were inspired by stories, history and books. For example, she created Everest after reading Jon Krakauer's "Into Thin Air" about the famous ill-fated Mount Everest expedition of 1996. Another sculpture, Flame, she made out of red Persian travertine, inspired by the Calgary Olympics in 1988.

While her inspiration comes from a variety of places, many of her works share common attributes, such as a tension between smooth and rough surfaces and a remarkable ability to capture complex human emotion. Much of her work also centres on the feminine form. "Many of my sculptures are female but I do have some powerful male images as well," she says. Overall, Merai describes her work as passionate, so it's not surprising that many of her collectors experience an emotional connection to the pieces they select; the art speaks to them and when a work is sold, Merai gets a special thrill from seeing her art displayed in the buyer's home.

Merei also enjoys hearing others' interpretations of her work. "I have an idea when I create a piece and somebody else will look at it and see something totally different and that's wonderful," she says, with

sculpture below left: FLAME, bottom left: EVEREST



one exception. "For years, I had a problem with beauty. Every time somebody saw an exhibit and said 'this is so beautiful,' I always felt bad that it wasn't serious enough. I was worried they might think 'she's a make-up artist, she's into beauty and aesthetics and doesn't have the strength that I was looking for.' That was a problem for me."

Over the years, however, Merai has become more comfortable with the term. "Beauty is relevant," she believes. Her own definition of beauty has also shifted over time. "In my pieces and in general, I find beauty in imperfection. If something is perfect it takes away a little bit of character and doesn't hold your interest." Perhaps this is why Merai's sculptures, with their dramatic tension, melding of smooth, finished surfaces and rough, uncut stone, are so captivating to look at.

Elizabeth Merai is represented by Galerie Lamoureux Ritzenhoff in Montréal.

To see more of her work, please visit:
www.elizabethmerai.com

