

ART: Frozen in space

Molten metal sculpture exhibit engages imagination

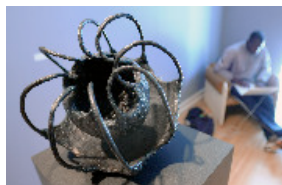
Lancaster New Era

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By SUSAN JURGELSKI, Staff Writer



As clouds gathered and rain scattered and pelted the ocean, Martha Walker was stirred by the moment.

The 55-year-old New York City sculptor thought she might be able to conceptualize the images in steel.

But what started as a rain-induced inspiration quickly turned more somber.

As she welded and shaped molten metal, she embraced a more political view, and an atomic mushroom cloud rose, volcano-like from the center of her piece.

"The End Justifies The Means, Justifies The End," standing almost 10-feet high, is the centerpiece of "Expanding Universe," an 11-sculpture exhibit by Walker which opened this week in the Dana Gallery of The Phillips Museum of Art located in the Steinman College Center at Franklin & Marshall College in Lancaster.

In the title of her centerpiece sculpture, Walker points to

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Sculptor Martha Walker often celebrates nature themes in works like "Seedling." Says the artist: "I ha...(more)

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the circular justification or rationalization of war.

"I have a long history as a child of anti-nuclear influence," says Walker, whose father was a nuclear physicist.

In the exhibit, some of her pieces — with names like "Survivor No. 1" and "Survivor No. 2" — seem to be melting, and are a fitting complement to the mushroom-cloud image.

"They are almost like remnants of destruction," says Claire Giblin, museum curator-college collections at The Phillips Museum of Art.

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Other pieces like "Seedling," which measures no more than 12 inches in any direction, appear to celebrate nature — particularly marine life and microorganisms.

"I describe her exhibit as intensely crafted and organic," Giblin says. "It's engaging, enticing.

"It's also incredibly labor-intensive."

Walker creates her sculptures through what is known as a "puddling" process.

"I melt and drip metal (from steel rods) as if it were wax," she says. "When you look at my work, it appears frozen in space."

Pieces in the exhibit took up to two years to complete.

Walker's resume is lengthy, and her work has appeared in numerous galleries and museums, on the online news channel NY1, in the windows of Saks Fifth Avenue and even on the set of the television series "Gossip Girl." Currently, her pieces are on display at the Anne Frank Center USA in New York City, the Boca Beach Resort Hotel in Florida and the Kouros Sculpture Center in Connecticut.

"Working the way I do is like three-dimensional drawing," she says. "Using a torch and welding — with metal and sparks — the process itself is incredibly beautiful."

Martha Walker was born in Missouri, but she has lived all over the world.

Her father helped invent the nuclear medicine imaging technique, positron emission tomography (PET), which produces a three-dimensional image or picture of functional processes in the body.

He moved his family to Europe at the time of the Cuban missile crisis because he wanted to be in a more neutral place to pursue his work.

"He didn't agree with military policies here," she says.

Growing up, Walker spent a lot of time in the lab with her father.

"I believe that has a lot to do with my images," she says. "Not just the nuclear images, but the microbiologic aspect that comes from looking under the microscope."

Walker graduated with a fine arts degree from Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, N.Y., in 1975. Although she started out

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specializing in drawing, she found herself drawn to sculpture and the welding process.

"Direct metal welding really was something that I immediately had a connection with."

But after she graduated, she put sculpture on hold.

"To really pursue it and survive, you need a fireproof studio," she says. "It's not like drawing or painting. I really didn't want to take a commercial turn with the artwork."

She went on to work in sales and raise a family — her children are now 24 and 15 — and in 1999 she began to pursue sculpture seriously again.

She created a welding studio, and in 2001, she graduated with a master's degree in art education from Pratt.

New York City arts reviewer/essayist and gallery owner Jeffrey Hoffeld says Walker's work strikes a balance between sensuous pleasures of a work and its capacity to evoke disturbing feelings.

Walker believes that much of her sculpture evolves from subconscious imagery.

"I don't plan stuff out in advance," she says. "Usually if you do that, it sort of crimps creativity. I try to let things grow and let the inspiration come to me. If you don't allow yourself that possibility, you're sort of stuck."

Her mushroom-cloud sculpture is a perfect example, she says.

It started as rain and then evolved into a political statement.

"I see my sculptures as a community or family. They work well together or on their own. They are pieces of me, a place in time, and also an expression of my deepest emotions and what is most important to me."

WHAT A STEEL

WHAT:

"Expanding Universe," an 11-piece steel sculpture exhibit by New York artist Martha Walker

WHEN: Continuing through Sunday, March 29. A reception will be held 4:30 to 6 p.m. Friday, March 6, including an "Artist Talk."

WHERE: Dana Gallery of The Phillips Museum located in the Steinman College Center at Franklin and Marshall College in Lancaster.

DETAILS: Visit www.marthawalker.net or www.fandm.edu/phillipsmuseum.xml.

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