

ARTS & LEISURE

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BABETTE BLOCH:

Reflecting history at Brookgreen Gardens

by FRAN SIKORSKI

Redding sculptor Babette Bloch has created four 2,000-pound stainless steel sculptures depicting South Carolina's rice culture that are on display on property once owned by another Redding sculptor, Anna Hyatt Huntington.

The location is Brookgreen Gardens in South Carolina, which was created by Archer and Anna Hyatt Huntington to showcase the figurative work of American sculptors in a natural environment. It now also showcases the cultural and natural history of the area.

Ms. Bloch's nine-foot sculptures are the final phase of a quarter-mile Lowcountry Trail project, installed on land once cultivated by enslaved Africans. The sculpture project, dedicated in April, was initiated in 1998 by Robin Salmon, Brookgreen's

curator of sculptures, who had seen photos of Ms. Bloch's installations, *Pioneers*, at a historic site in Michigan.

"The sculptures are portals of times gone by, mirrors to our souls, and I believe these sculptures will evoke a range of emotions from pride of place to mourning," said Ms. Bloch during a recent interview at her Redding studio.

"They are echoes of the lives that lived on this historic site. When the sun is behind the figures, they will read as silhouettes, and when the sun dances over the surfaces, the figures are a shimmering silver imbued and filled with the hues of the surrounding landscape," she said.

The Lowcountry Trail includes panoramic views of the original rice fields and the overseer's complex on one of South Carolina's most successful plantations. The artwork depicts the story of the plantation owner, Joshua John Ward, as well as his overseer and the enslaved Africans who once lived and worked on the land in the mid-1800s. The figures complement archaeological sites along the Lowcountry Trail, and artifacts displayed in the Lowcountry Center, and will help expand Brookgreen's education programs that teach the history of the Lowcountry.

Ms. Bloch devoted many months of research to the project, studying paintings, drawings, etchings, clothing, and reading detailed accounts of the history of South Carolina in the 1800s. To meet the drawing challenge for the Brookgreen laser-cut figures, she designed and constructed the clothing that would have been worn at the time and hired Sacred Heart University students as models in the initial stages of drawing. She also enlisted the help of her husband, sculptor Marc Mellon, to model the plantation overseer's outfit.

Once the stainless steel is laser cut, the artist said, she shapes,



Award-winning Redding artist Babette Bloch has created four 2,000-pound stainless steel sculptures on the history of rice culture for Brookgreen Gardens in South Carolina. Named by its founders and designers, former Redding residents Archer Huntington and his wife, sculptress Anna Hyatt Huntington, Brookgreen Gardens opened in 1931 and now contains more than 1200 works spanning the entire period of American sculpture from the early 1800s to the present.

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welds and textures the surface of the metal by grinding, sandblasting or painting her sculptures.

"It took many long days and nights of planning and executing the sculptures for Brookgreen Gardens," she said. "It all started in Redding where Archer and Anna Hyatt Huntington once lived, and I am privileged to be a connection to their estate in South Carolina."

A pioneer in laser-cut stainless steel sculpture, Ms. Bloch began her career in bronze in 1980. After she discovered the laser-cut stainless steel medium in 1993 she never went back to bronze. The artist divides her time between site-specific, one-of-a-kind commissions and limited edition works exhibited at fine art galleries.

An active member of The National Arts Club, the artist has been awarded the NAC's President's Medal. She currently serves as volunteer president of The Artists Fellowship Inc. founded in 1859, an organization that assists professional fine artists during times of emergency.

Ms. Bloch met Mr. Mellon in 1984 at the Bronx Foundry in Farmingdale, N.Y., and they were married three years later. They have "his and her" studios in Redding, and two very artistic daughters: Rachel, 12, and Julia, 16.

Marc Mellon has executed busts of former President George H.W. Bush, Pope John

Paul II, and President Lee Teng-Hui of Taiwan. He also created the NBA Most Valuable Player trophy.

Brookgreen Gardens, located on U.S. Highway 17 between Myrtle Beach and Pawleys Island in Georgetown County, is open daily from 9:30 to 5

and open evenings during special events; closed Mondays in December only and on Christmas Day. For more information, call 843-235-6000 or 800-849-1931 or visit www.brookgreen.org.



Sculptor Babette Bloch in her Redding studio, with drawings for her monumental sculptures now in place at Brookgreen Gardens in South Carolina.

