

Developing an Audience

EXHIBITIONS,
COMMISSIONS, AND
COMPETITIONS



“The history of modern art is also the history of the progressive loss of art’s audience. Art has increasingly become the concern of the artist and the bafflement of the public.”

- PAUL GAUGUIN

Vitruvian Man

by Babette Bloch, 3' maquette
for 12' sculpture.

Specialty Sculpture, *Steady Commissions*



Babette Bloch in front of her sculpture *Egrets*, in Winter Park, Florida.

Babette Bloch has been sculpting since 1980, and in 1993 she discovered the process of stainless-steel sculpture. Since then, she has been creating limited-edition works that combine traditional materials with modern technology. In this interview, she talks about the business end of her enterprise, including how she obtains and maintains a steady stream of commissions.

by **ALLISON MALAFRONTE**

American Artist: *As an artist working in the unique field of stainless-steel sculpture, do you find that developing relationships with clients and obtaining commissions is easier because you are offering a specialty, or do you face the same challenges all artists do of trying to differentiate yourself in a competitive marketplace?*

BABETTE BLOCH: I have similar challenges, but having a unique specialty is certainly helpful. My materials are modern, while my process entails both



BELOW

HOPE: Female Enslaved African

2006, stainless steel, 8' high. Brookgreen Gardens, Murrells Inlet, South Carolina.

ABOVE

Sunflowers

2011, stainless steel, 74" high. Jacobson collection, Southampton, New York.

the traditional use of drawing and the contemporary use of computer technology with laser and water-jet cutting. My imagery is diverse, so my work appeals to a broad range of sensibilities.

AA: *How do you typically obtain commissions for your sculpture projects?*

BB: I've been sculpting for more than 32 years, and as I've become more well known, projects have come easier and more through word of mouth. My art dealers have also helped me secure commissions. Exhibition curators and dealers are becoming more familiar with my work, and that has helped get projects. I think having major works in well-trafficked locations has been

helpful and given me more visibility, too. Collectors and new clients want to know where the sculptures are, so it's good to have a track record to share. There is the sculpting part of the business, and then there is the marketing part of the business, and both need attention. And yes, if you want to support yourself as an artist, you have to think that way.

AA: *Do you have a specific marketing or promotional strategy? Has that changed at various points in your career?*

BB: I wouldn't call it specific, but there is a definite thrust. I have been slowly and carefully adding to my body of

RIGHT

3-foot stainless-steel scale model for 15-foot *Vitruvian Man* sculpture, dedicated summer 2012, in Shelton, Connecticut.

BELOW

Babette Bloch working on a 3-foot stainless-steel *Vitruvian Man* scale model. RAM welding shop, Naugatuck, Connecticut.

BELOW RIGHT

The Traditions Sanctuary

2004, stainless steel on cherry wood, doors 13' high. Morselife senior campus, West Palm Beach, Florida.



work and to my gallery representation. I have produced several books about my work, with a focus on different themes, such as “reflecting nature” and “reflecting history.” I have used them to reconnect with old clients and introduce my work to potential clients, galleries, and museum representatives. My husband—the sculptor Marc Mellon—and I have opened our studios to various charitable groups and museum tours and developed a personal network of press contacts. I am comfortable with public speaking, so I have given talks to different groups of art enthusiasts about my process. I try to make my clients, potential clients, galleries, colleagues, and friends

aware of projects I am working on through mailings. For the future, I have also been videotaping and documenting every step of the large-scale *Vitruvian Man* project I am currently working on, as well as planning a short informational video on the process.

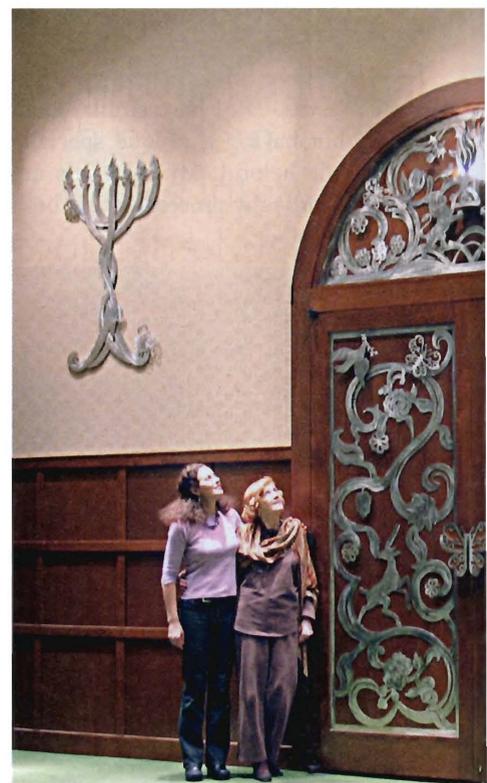
AA: *About how much time are you spending on site-specific commissions versus works that you create for galleries? Is there much time left over for personal projects you want to explore unrelated to commissions?*

BB: Time management is a continual challenge. I've been fortunate to have site-specific projects in process for most of my career. I also need to schedule carefully to continue to add to the limited-edition works sold through my galleries.

The commissions tend to get the bulk of my time, since they are always time sensitive and they are guaranteed money. I enjoy the historical projects because I like the research, learning something new, and bringing my own perspective to create a vision. Some projects take all my available energy, but when they don't I can work on personal ideas for sculptures.

I tend to think about creating works over a lifetime. Being a mother has taught me that life has interruptions and that you have to just take a breath, re-group, and keep moving forward. I try to manage my deadlines by giving myself realistic goals. I maintain discipline but try not to be inflexible.

AA: *What advice would you give someone trying to*



determine pricing plans for the type of work you do?

BB: Price should be a function of quality and project costs, but other factors determine pricing as well. Be reasonable—the pricing should reflect your reputation or lack of it. Do your homework and know your costs. For some reason everything always takes longer than you think. Plan for both the best- and worst-case scenarios and figure out where the time and cost problems might arise. If your material is a commodity and the price could change over the period of fabrication, build a clause into your contract reflecting that. Figure out who is responsible for covering delivery and installation. The contracts or agreements I develop with my husband and my attorney are very specific to cost,



scale, materials, responsibilities, project schedule, approval process, and payment schedule. Some projects, particularly when you are younger, help with your visibility, and that visibility might be more valuable than your profit margin at a particular point in your career. Each successful project completed helps build your résumé.

AA: What advice would you give an artist or sculptor who is looking to secure commissions?

BB: Find your own artistic voice. So much work is derivative; there is a special place in the art world for authentic new voices. Doing commissioned work isn't for everyone. You really have to be able to work with committees or another individual's vision. You have to be able to listen and interpret the client's goals into a concrete visual representation that makes everyone excited. It's an interesting dance. I'm fine with working within parameters and solving the riddles. I enjoy collaborating and working toward a joint vision.

AA: Do you recommend that sculptors get involved in artistic clubs and groups? How has your involvement with these organizations helped support your professional goals?

BB: My affiliations with art clubs and with artists have definitely strengthened all aspects of my career, from the camaraderie of talking shop to the introductions to others in the field. We've chosen a very difficult way to make a living, so friendships that



Male Enslaved African
2006, stainless steel, 9' high. Brookgreen Gardens, Murrells Inlet, South Carolina.

are noncompetitive are important. I want all my friends to have successful careers! I am particularly fulfilled from my involvement with the Artists' Fellowship Inc. [www.artistsfellowship.org], a 150-year-old charitable foundation that helps professional fine artists in times of need. I have co-chaired an arts-programming committee at the National Arts Club for many years, and I've enjoyed the connections and friendships that have resulted. Being part of a community is very important. **W**

Allison Malafronte is the senior editor of American Artist.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Babette Bloch lives in Redding, Connecticut. She divides her time between site-specific commissions and limited-edition works exhibited at galleries. For more information, visit www.babettebloch.com.