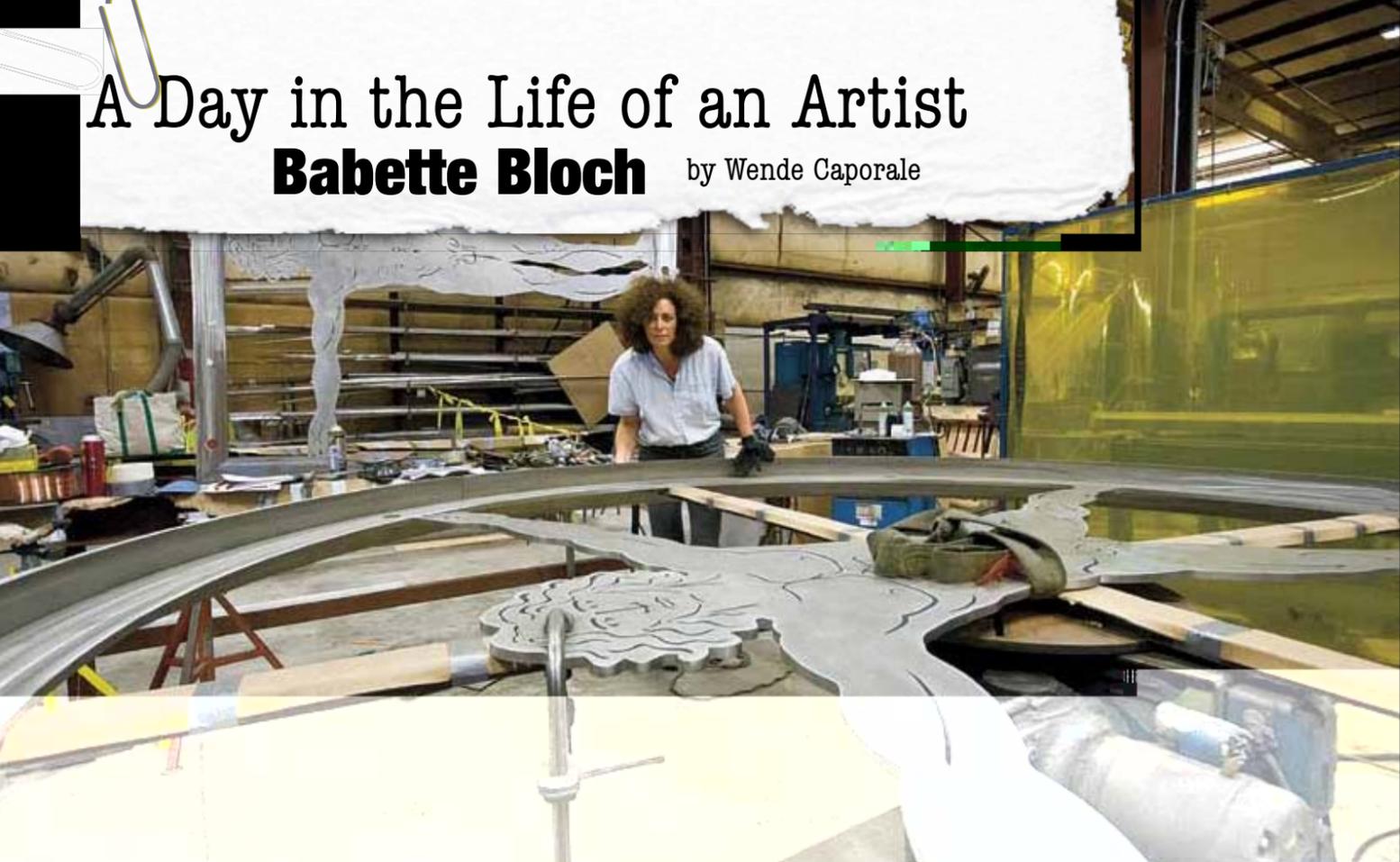


A Day in the Life of an Artist

Babette Bloch by Wende Caporale



**Vitruvian Man,
Enterprise Corporate Park,
Shelton, CT**

**Stainless steel.
16 feet high. 2012.**

Bloch's monumental sculpture translates one of the world's most famous drawings – Leonardo da Vinci's Renaissance masterpiece, *Vitruvian Man* – into a 21st century work of art. The original drawing was a wedding of science and art, as is the 16 foot sculpture: Bloch collaborated with fabricators to devise new strategies for cutting through stainless steel to illustrate facial features and musculature. Held aloft on four narrow pillars ascending from a granite base.

Photography by Richard Lerner and James Nicoloro



Babette Bloch working on *Vitruvian Man* sculpture at RAM Specialty Fabrications

In August, a monumental interpretation of Leonardo da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man* by sculptor Babette Bloch was unveiled at "Enterprise Corporate Park" in Connecticut. Bloch was chosen for her unique, visionary approach of using laser-cut and water-jet cutting of stainless steel to create her work. In addition to designing large-scale site-specific works, the nationally renowned artist has also developed small-scale, limited edition stainless steel sculptures. Her work is represented in the Orlando Museum of Art, Florida, Brookgreen Gardens, Murrells Inlet, SC, B'nai B'rith Klutznick National Jewish Museum, Washington, D.C. and the Maryland Institute of Art, Baltimore as well as many other public and private collections in the United States and in Europe.

Having seen and admired the artist's award-winning work at exhibitions in New York City, I wanted to learn more about her process as well as gain some insight into how she structured her days.

We met recently at Bloch's studio in Connecticut the day after the *Vitruvian Man* sculpture was installed on location.

A student pursuing an art career a generation ago would find it difficult to find training in anything other than abstract expressionism. Initially intrigued by the modern movement, Bloch also recognized her interest in a classical approach to art. Consequently this led her to move from the East Coast to University of California at Davis to study with Pop artist Wayne Thiebaud and Robert Arneson as well as the sculptor Manuel Neri. Bloch found her voice in sculpture by experimenting with clay, plaster and bronze while honing her individual sensibilities. Initially Bloch created figurative yet whimsical painted bronzes for a series she titled "Voyeur". From there, Bloch became interested in using found objects, in this case costume jewelry, to develop a series called "Fantasy", non-objective sculptures in which she incorporated rich patinas. This foray towards working with various media and pushing them into graceful,

elegant sculptures made her aware of her unconventional approach to using materials, an important evolutionary milestone for the artist.

By 1993, Bloch's curiosity led her from the casting process to fabricating with sheet metal using laser-cut technology. She began to work with stainless steel incorporating her figurative imagery into this new unexplored medium. She is now recognized as a pioneer in the use of laser-cut stainless steel. Bloch explains the trajectory of her latest project which took six years from concept to completion. A real estate developer chose Bloch to create a three dimensional version of Leonardo da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man* to be placed in front of his "Renaissance Building" in his corporate office park. Vitruvius was a Roman architect who was interested in the relationship of human beings to architecture. The da Vinci's depiction of the man within the square and circle combined his interest in proportion and symmetry in the human figure and its relationship to the universe as well as art and science. Bloch has always



Babette adding a sense of scale to her sculpture

been intrigued with "melding classical imagery to contemporary form". The idea of using engineering and technology to recreate this concept was particularly appropriate to the subject. It presented a total challenge for the artist and the fabricators to build something "that has never been built"; a 5,000-pound, 16 foot high sculpture that captures the eternal brilliance of da Vinci's inventive genius. Bloch envisioned this as an opportunity to incorporate her skills along with her aesthetic and artistic sensibilities.

We enter the bright, spaciouly pleasant studio where she works in her home. The opposite end of the house includes another studio that is used by her husband, sculptor Marc Mellon. Lyrical stainless steel sculptures cover every wall with

some suspended from the ceiling; there are figures, trees, flowers and fish in a numerous configurations exhibiting various textures. Having no experience working with stainless steel, I ask Bloch to discuss her working process. She explains how her initial sketch or concept begins on paper. In her *Reflecting Nature* series she drew the images of flowers and vases on paper using only line, cut them out individually and assembled them while bending and twisting into a 3-dimensional study or maquette. On the desk in her studio, Bloch shows me the various drawings and illustrates how this is done. She is sensitive to the “fluidity of line – elegance” which is evident in her work and remarks how she has

benefited greatly from the counsel and friendship of artist Will Barnet. The next step involves taking the intricately refined line drawings and scanning them onto the computer. Later the precision metal shop will use these files along with a computer-driven laser beam or water-jet to precisely cut the sheet metal into the desired forms in the size the artist requests. Bloch has assembled over four hundred computer files of her drawings that she often combines in a myriad of ways. Nonetheless, she maintains a book with notes about how every piece is assembled in order to recreate the sculptures in each edition. She directs me to her downstairs workshop where she grinds and manipulates the many individual pieces of cut stainless images of leaves and flowers, fish, abstract arabesque shapes and figures. Later in the precision machine shop these will be assembled and welded together to create the edition of nine and two artists’ proofs of each of her smaller-scale sculptures. Because each one is done singularly, there are variances within the editions; for instance the finish is done by hand and takes many hours resulting in a specific texture to give the illusion of depth and dimension. The parts can be large and unwieldy

so the artist must consider how the sculpture will be shipped. Against the walls are several scraps of rectangular sheets from which the images were cut yielding a fascinating negative skeleton of metal. Eventually the artist plans to incorporate these into sculpture or more utilitarian objects like the original table she constructed and has on display in her studio.

Bloch explains how she spends a good deal of her time at the precision metal shop working with her cut-out steel patterned shapes where she begins actualizing her sculptures during the fabrication process. Beginning with the small-scale paper maquette as her guide, Bloch assembles the components necessary and arranges them in preparation for welding. She considers this the “magic time” when her paper designs are actualized into metal by bending, manipulating and welding the parts into a whole construction. She has a concept of how they will go together but there are often delightful surprises. Bloch shows me an example of the sculpture “*Sunflowers*”. There are nine parts to the sculpture; the front and back of the vase and seven flowers and leaves. When she assembled the enlarged components in the shop,

Bloch realized she had to add the additional element of a laser-cut leaf to add structural strength to the six-foot sculpture. She explains how it is sometimes difficult to translate from a small maquette to the full size sculpture without adjusting the design and sometimes it is necessary to “construct as you go along”.

Bloch begins most days with an early morning walk. For the last several months, she spent between two and five hours working with the welders and fabricators at the precision metal shop. She acknowledges that numerous decisions had to be made during the process of creating *Vitruvian Man*. Even though the entire plan of construction was well engineered by a

certified structural engineer there were still many technical decisions that needed to be made on the spot. This particular sculpture, for instance, required over 400 hours of grinding to create the unique surface the artist envisioned. At the same time a sculpture of this scale requires the structural integrity to withstand the elements of nature. Bloch knows that concerns about warping and torqueing of the stainless steel when heated are something to be considered but are not insurmountable. Bloch works with talented craftsmen who normally make precision machine parts but are unaccustomed to working with an artist. Bloch loves working with technology which she feels enables her to create a lightness and delicacy with stainless steel. Her fabricators are intrigued by her ability to create beautiful art using this material.

Bloch divides her time between research related to her projects, marketing and proposals in the library/office and working in the studio and the machine shop. Currently she is preparing a brochure for the dedication of the *Vitruvian Man* on August 29 in addition to a description of the project to send to tenants in the office park where many other sculptures are displayed. In addition, Bloch is working on several proposals and explains the process and how it unfolds. She has been asked to create a sculpture for the roof of a museum. The principals from the museum came to discuss the project with Bloch at her studio and later she visited and photographed the site. She must now come up with a concept and work out the design on paper. Simultaneously, she will discuss her ideas with an engineer and fabricator and determine the materials needed to estimate the price of the project.

Two catalogs about her series *Reflecting History* and *Reflecting Nature* show examples of two directions Bloch’s work has taken. The *Reflecting History* series began with a commission from a Chicago businessman who wanted to honor his great grandparents. Bloch created two nine-foot high stainless steel figures called *The Pioneers* which she represented in three-quarter profile that were installed on the historic Hudson Centennial farm.

The sculptures stand as if looking at their land and contemplating the futures of generations that will follow. They have become a much beloved local landmark. Years later Bloch shared the images of *The Pioneers* with the Curator for Sculpture at Brookgreen Gardens in South Carolina. They discussed a similar direction to represent life on an antebellum rice plantation that reflected the environment; the park is comprised of three former rice plantations. Set on the grounds of the nation’s oldest sculpture park, Bloch’s *Lowcountry Trail Sculptures* join hundreds of works by American artists of the 20th and 21st centuries. Bloch developed four nine-foot high figures representing 19th century life; a male and female enslaved African, a plantation owner and an overseer. *Reflecting Nature* is a compendium of Bloch’s editions of florals and wildlife. These works are available in galleries in the United States and in Europe.

On the wall in the workshop is a beautiful painted stainless image of the countryside in Brittany, France. Bloch explains that she was awarded a Fellowship years ago and spent several months creating a steel sculpture based on her drawings in an attempt to represent planes. The image reminds me of a wood carving in its beautiful handling of line and negative shapes conveying a layered rolling landscape. The artist has developed a unique way to represent nature, portraits, figures and abstract images with piercing sheet metal to express detail. As her work has evolved she has moved away from painted steel and prefers the reflective quality of the stainless which emits light while the pierced effect of the steel adds transparency and the cast shadows create a lacy pattern. Bloch delights in the experience of seeing her sculpture outdoors in various settings where different lighting and changes that occur and are reflected on the sculpture.

Bloch is still basking in the afterglow of the brilliant success of *Vitruvian Man*. The sculpture is an edition of five with the first having found a home in Connecticut. Now that the design is complete, Bloch confides that her dream is to have other editions of her representation of da Vinci’s



Tulipula, 68"

Renaissance masterpiece sited in Europe, Asia and on the campus of one of America’s great universities. Taking on a new site-specific project is something Bloch finds particularly exciting. Problem solving and facing questions regarding materials or engineering are challenges she embraces. Bloch feels strongly that “ideas should not be bound by what you know”; she finds the process maddening, daunting but ultimately exhilarating and rewarding.

Sunflowers 74



Wende Caporale is a highly successful artist whose portraits are always in great demand. Her biography and list of awards and accomplishments runs to many pages. As you’ll read in this ongoing series, Wende’s pro-active approach to work and life make her the ideal columnist for the subject every artist has to face on a daily basis.
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Babette Bloch working on her Female Enslaved African sculpture

