

Jorjana Holden: An Appreciation

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This series of “snapshots” is culled from a number of interviews that took place during the summer and fall of 1997. I had always meant to finish it but life intervened. Recently I saw Holden again and she reminded me that she is nearing ninety. In April 2006 the Sacramento Metropolitan Arts Commission presented Holden with a Lifetime Achievement Award. What follows is my attempt to capture just a bit of her personality and art.

“I got my notion of what a woman should be in the Twenties and Thirties: A wife, a mother, a support for my husband’s career. There was something vaguely disgraceful about a woman with a career, at least according to my mother. I had a pair of aunts who were doctors. One of them, Aunt Cora, hung up her shingle in Tennessee and the townsfolk tore it down. The message to me was: God help you if you wanted to be a doctor! Then Aunt Cora’s daughters taught classes at the Cleveland Museum, and they painted murals in public places. I got this idea that I wanted to be an artist...”

For years, “while her family grew up,” she worked in a small converted porch with plastic walls and a corrugated plastic roof. By the late Nineties, when I interviewed Holden for the piece that follows, her studio seemed airy and light, if not spacious. “This used to be a bedroom,” she said. She and her artist husband Robert Else had each financed the building of separate studios with money earned from the sale of their art. “Bob built his first...”

As we talked over several subsequent weeks, the conversation often traveled back forty, fifty, even sixty years to the inception for a piece that came decades later.

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Holden attended Bennington College in Vermont, on a scholarship provided by a family friend. After graduating in 1938 she became an apprentice teacher, working for \$30 a month. Just before the war, she inherited a sum of money (“two thousand dollars, which was a LOT back then!”) She put the money into the bank, marched down to Macy’s and bought a bright red cape, then registered for classes at Columbia, pursuing an MA in Art Education. Robert Else was also studying there; they met and married later that same year.

Self Portrait, 1941

A small dark figure trudges along a path , dwarfed by steep walls and menacing factories; two silos belch thick coils of black smoke; the fumes seem palpable, the plodding figure engulfed by the urban industrial complex.

(Holden showed this lithograph for the first time forty-six years later; it sold on the spot.)

After she married there was a long hiatus. She gave birth to her two children, Jon and Susan, each of whom have gone on to become accomplished artists in their own fields. During the early Fifties she started to produce art once again. "I started as a woodcarver. You could always leave it... You could work on the kitchen table, or the kitchen floor..." Her first piece was called "Figure in Walnut" Using the inverted trunk of a walnut tree she fashioned a woman reaching for the sky. She sold it for \$250. About this time Holden took a job as a mechanic's helper at McClellan Air Force Base. "I learned to solder and read electrical blueprints, but mostly I cleaned electrical equipment for others to use. It was like housework."

She continued to work slowly, producing only one or two pieces a year. Eventually she enrolled in the Masters program at CSU Sacramento, earning her MA. in Art in 1964. Her thesis project explored the same theme in three different mediums. The series began with "Offering," a kind of pieta made of magnacite, and ended with "Child Looking up," finished during the Cuban Missile Crisis. The child's features look dragged down, the facial muscles stretched to the limits by the pull of gravity; the eyes are black holes. "It was the first bronze I ever did," says Holden.

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While Holden fixed coffee I scrutinized the assortment of books crowded onto her shelves: Seguy's *Decorative Butterflies and Insects in Full Color*; Jung's *Man and His Symbols*, James Lord's *Giacometti*. There was also Anne Morrow Lindbergh's last volume of letters, *Locked Rooms and Open Doors*, the new *Our Bodies Ourselves*, and *Working It Out: 23 Women Writers, Artists, Scientists and Scholars Talk about their Lives and their Work* ("My daughter gave it to me—she knew I was trying to work things out.") I inspected her work area, her table and the printer's cabinet she used to store her tools. Each drawer bore an intriguing label: Chisels. Rasps. Saber Blades. Clamps, Drill. Hacksaw blades. Soldering irons. Hammers. When she returned with the steaming mugs we began to talk about the wood sculpture called "Transplant" she completed in 1973.

"I carved the piece after the first heart transplant by Dr. DeBakey. What resonated was that a black man's heart had been transplanted into a white man in South Africa during Apartheid." The bust of the young man has a hole in its chest and a hand grenade suspended where the heart should be. "The backdrop for this piece was also Vietnam and Civil Rights. My son was working in the South with the Civil Rights Movement then. Someone telephoned us—an anonymous caller—to say that our son had been killed. Those were terrible minutes until we verified he was in fact still alive." Transplant is echoed by a later work, "Soldier," a womb-like shrine of rough and polished wood hollowed at the core. A fetus hangs inside it. "I think the question I was asking is: Are the unborn doomed to fight in perpetual wars?"

Next Holden showed me another self-portrait, a mixed media construction from 1979 called "The Box". It's a poignant piece. Inside a small wooden box with a glass lid a woman's face and hands swim toward the surface. Lift the lid and she reaches out of the box, but only so far. "I found the box at a garage sale. It's for a chronometer, what they used on shipboard to figure out where they were." We looked at a second figure, made

the following year, “Swimmer”. “‘Swimmer’ was an important piece for me; she was the first woman I made who was not just floating along, but was actually moving by her own power in what seems like a real direction. –I felt in those days that I was drifting like flotsam.”

We drifted down a long hallway, past a maze of athletic bronze people paused in surreal dream scenes and mundane tasks with a twist, past the shimmer of Bob Else’s many paintings, past rows of family photographs, to a bronze called “The Clock.” A woman is stepping through the glass door of the clock. It is impossible to decide whether she is stepping out or stepping in. She moves tentatively, one hand outstretched, feeling her way into the cave-like space—a small Einsteinian universe where the pendulum is frozen and everything seems to exist in an eternal present.

“When I first opened the glass door to the clock’s inner chamber I had a sudden sense of connection with all the women in my family who had repeated this same motion every night, opening and closing the little glass door to wind the clock. I realized they were probably quite alone at that moment— still awake while the rest of the house slept—perhaps one of the few moments they were ever alone...”

“All my work is about time.” The back of Holden’s clock is a smoky mirror.

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Many of Holden’s women seem to explore some cell of aloneness, even as they make things tick; even as they polish the wood and oil the gears that make the world go around—a moment of solitude when they can possess themselves, free from expectations and observation. And there is the irony of art: so captured, the private moment is public, forever exposed to The Observer.

The Blanket

A sturdily built woman shakes out a blanket: warmth, protection, comfort. She is nude and alone. She has no need for clothing or guises. The look on her face contains deep, private rooms. She is at work in an outer world but at rest in her solitude.

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“*Variorum et mutabile semper femina*, my uncle would say to us at dinner, while we young girls sat around chatting—*A weak and changeable thing is woman*—mentally dismissing us when he was tired of our girl-talk.” Sixty years later she sculpted “Mirror Mask.”

A woman smiles into a mirror; a benign reflection smiles back, but the viewer sees a different scene, one hidden from the woman: A gargoyle, a face contorted by a horrific scream of rage or pain (or both) bulges from the mirror’s reverse side, an inner face the viewer sees first. “She doesn’t even know she’s screaming...”

“A lot of people think my work is too literal, too traditional—not enigmatic enough.” (Her comment was hard for me to fathom—her work seems to exist in an enigmatic dream universe; a surreal terrain where everything looks familiar, until you notice the street signs are written backwards and the doorknobs have little claws.)

An early piece called, tongue-in-cheek, “4 1/2 Feet of Richard Smiths” is a totem of tax forms, a spiral of redundant bureaucratic paperwork. “My daughter was working for the Franchise Tax Board and she came home one day and said, ‘I had 4 1/2 feet of Richard Smiths today!’” The piece launched a plethora of spindled paper columns Holden calls “totems.” She migrated from tax forms to computer cards, impaling them all on tall spindles, topping them with ostrich eggs from the zoo. (The totems look like cardstock Truitts.) From paper towers she moved to plastic milk cartons. “I was working with the garbage of our culture. I didn’t finish my first ‘real bronze’ until I was sixty-three.”

That first real bronze, completed in 1981 is a fleshy angel with powerful thighs and big pendulous breasts. She crouches down, whether in fear or awe, it is hard to tell. Her wings are made of cabbage leaves. “I was thinking about what my father once said to me, that you don’t have to go back very far before you get one thousand ancestors. Then I heard an artist say, ‘You can’t do angels anymore; they’re passé.’ I always thought that no subject was ever passé. These thoughts went into the sculpture too.”

“Angel with Cabbage Leaf Wings” has gone through eleven editions. Gloria Steinem bought one. (Steinem also owns ‘The Waitress.’) “I think (hopefully) she’s going to fly—take off!”

Our talk wound down but we took two last detours: In the garden we inspected a small bronze called “The Marker,” a cracked egg on a pillar with two webbed hands rising from inside. “The hands are quarter sections of an early thirties washing machine. I got it from the Mendocino dump. It has the shape of a Coptic cross. I made this to bring closure to a stillbirth.” Back inside again we looked up a photograph of “Woman With Child on Her Hip.” The mother’s and the child’s hands do not touch. “An uncompleted gesture lends movement, and a certain kind of tension.”

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I began to feel a sense of awe at the scope of Holden’s lifework, its exuberance and yet unassuming nature:

Musician:

A woman is playing a flute. Her knees spread under her flowing skirt.

“The flute is a rod from a child’s doll high chair. The sculpture is made of coat hangers and liquid solder buttered on after. “My biggest influence—is Gothic architecture. I used to feel that I should have been a Gothic choir stall carver.”

Our conversation circled back to her girlhood, then to the present again, to a bronze called “The Circle.” A woman reaches toward her reflection in a series of mirrors joined in a semicircle; the reflections seem to hold hands. “I had the most incredible feeling that my father was standing right behind me while I was making this piece. I could hear him saying what he always said to me:

“You’re really four people
You’re who you think you are
You’re what others think you are
You’re what you think others think you are
You’re what God knows you are”

In “Wherever You Go There You Are” (1996) a woman is on her knees, scrubbing. She has polished a little shiny patch into the linoleum; her reflection stares up from it. (Holden took the title from the book of Zen meditations by John Kabat-Zinn.) At eighty Holden was still probing whatever might be hidden beneath the quotidian.

I noticed a big dry sycamore leaf she had propped on a redwood block, as if it was already a sculpture. When I commented on it, she explained that she was planning several gigantic leaf sculptures. “Just imagine a whole show of enormous bronze leaves!”

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On the last day Holden sent me home with the loan of “Angle of Repose,” a piece to live with and think about. “I read Stegner’s novel and just loved it. I heard the title first, then looked it up—it’s the angle where an object comes to rest.” The fleshy middle-aged woman reclines, arms cradling her head, legs splayed lazily. She looks *at ease*. I brought her home, settled her in a sunny window.

I looked often at her and thought of my life, of the lives of women, of Holden’s long and continuously productive one. She had given me this gift to contemplate—fruit of long experiment and failure, of commitment and hard work. I remember now her parting words to me those many years ago as I hefted the sculpture into the passenger seat of my Honda:

“She looks satisfied, and a little secretive.”