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SERENA BATES:

Finding Home

by Nicolas Fox, ASMA

Most artists will tell you they knew they were interested in art at a young age. Most will also express a certain abject mystification at how they got to where they are now. I don't know if it's the solvent or glaze fumes or a certain fey attitude particular to artists, but it can be difficult to get a straight answer. Which is why it was so refreshing to engage with Serena Bates for a few hours. Serena's passion for her work is astonishing. She is a relentless powerhouse of an artist.

Serena was born in Quonset, Rhode Island. Her father was in the Navy, and it wasn't long after her birth that her father was transferred to Naples, Italy. His post only lasted a few years, and by the time Serena went to first grade, her father had relocated the family to Virginia, where he went into the construction business.

Serena's interest in art began early. At eight or nine years old, she would draw the world around her constantly. Tragedy struck the family when her father died at the age of 39. Serena's mother moved her and her two sisters back to Rhode Island. It was not an easy time for the family. With three children to care for, her widowed mother made ends meet, demonstrating a fierce resolve to give the girls everything they needed. Serena's interest in art drew her to painting. Through high school, she focused on drawing and pastel, knowing that art was her future.

Serena was accepted by Brown University at the end of high school. But even with financial aid, the real costs were such that she couldn't ask her family to sacrifice everything. Upon leaving high school, she attended a local business college so she

the work was one of the greatest perks. She was able to closely study works by artists like Kent Ullberg, Tom Hoyne, Don Demers and Victor Mays. And it wasn't just artists she encountered. She fondly remembers Mystic benefactors. When Serena was

helping caterers carry in some reception hors d'oeuvres, the heavy exterior door slammed shut on the large tray. The puffs went all over the floor. A kindly gentleman nearby saw her dismay, gathered the snacks and rearranged them on the platter. "Nobody needs to know," he said, popping one in his mouth. The gentleman was Rudolph J. Schaefer III, founder of the Maritime Gallery at Mystic and president of the Mystic Seaport Museum. Serena studied painting with Dean Keller at Lyme Academy and took classes at the Rhode Island School of Design while working at Mystic. Keller knew she would

be successful as an artist, because she always said 'when' she would be able to do things, not 'if.' She worked in charcoal, pastel, oil and acrylic paint, but then she discovered clay.

"I took a sculpting class and I loved it. But I said you've got to be crazy to do this. It is so much work

could start contributing to the family as soon as possible.

She was just finishing up her business studies when she saw an ad in the paper. A nearby museum gallery needed support staff. Serena presented herself to Peter Sorlien, who hired her on the spot. Just a few months later, a young gallerist named Russell Jinishian took over from Sorlien.

Her work in the gallery exposed her to art and artists again, and she dedicated herself to studying their work and their careers. The quality of



All works by Serena Bates:

OPPOSITE: *An Otter Time an Otter Place*, Cast Stone, 28H x 30L x 14W

ABOVE: Serena stone carving at Fowler shack, dunes of the Cape.





All works by Serena Bates:

ABOVE: *Denizen of the Deep*, Rose Alabaster, 12H x 10W x 22L

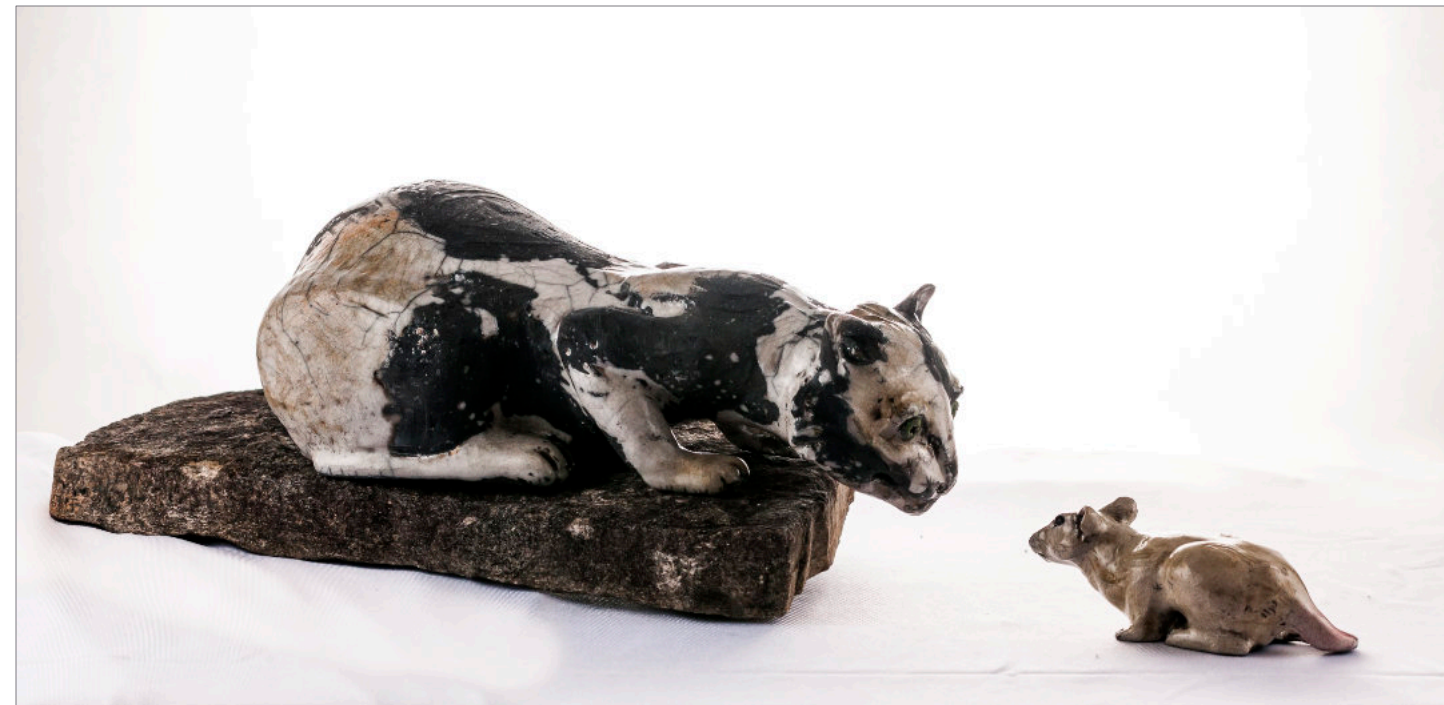
BELOW: *The World is Your Oyster*, Ceramic and Glass, 4H x 4W x 6L

and so expensive. So, I went back to painting."

Serena had gotten married early on in her time at Mystic, and shortly thereafter, her husband was in a terrible car crash, breaking his neck. Unable to work and requiring care at home, her husband had little patience for Serena's fledgling artistic career.

After ten years at Mystic, Serena left to take a part-time job at the Mystic Aquarium. It was a wonderful experience that gave her a vast amount of close-up study of marine fauna. Two-and-a-half years later, in 1996, she gave birth to her son.

The memory of the sculpting class drove her to sign up to work in a Pawtucket foundry. She spent two shifts a week at Kane Sculpting, learning how to design and forge bronze works. Her interest expanded to encompass clay, bronze and stone.



She and her still-convalescing husband bought a retail business with an abutting house that would allow her to work in the store and be "at home" with her six year old son. But Serena never gave up on her vision.

After her first submission to the Courtyard Gallery in Mystic, Serena was told that they only accepted "award-winning" artists. So she set out to win some awards. It was a demanding path, requiring late nights and early mornings. "Fortunately I'm a very organized person since I'm trying to keep up with things. I'm a drill sergeant with my time. I get up every morning and I set my schedule and I make sure I get everything done."

"When you find a material that you can work with tirelessly for hours and think minutes have passed, and your excitement still bubbles over when you leave the studio for the day, you have found home."

All works by Serena Bates:

ABOVE: *The Game of Cat and Mouse*, Ceramic raku fired, 8H x 5W x 18L

RIGHT: *Zen Zen*, Bronze, 18H x 10W x 14D





Three years ago, Serena wanted to take a workshop with the world renowned Phillipe Faraut. She was told there was no more room, but she persisted. Ultimately, she was welcomed into the workshop, where her work was noticed by Faraut. By the end of it, he was so captivated by the evident life in her sculptures, he asked her to join an elite group for a two week workshop in Italy. There, she felt she'd truly achieved her goal, being recognized by her peers for outstanding work.

Serena likes to keep things fresh as she begins a work. She does not take measurements, instead relying on her eye and sense of observation to interpret a subject. She also explores new routes to creation. A recent, pit-fired work broke from the heat. Instead of abandoning it, she recalled a technique that chased gold into cracks, and used that to make "Survivor" which looks like a harbor seal scared from being caught in a fishing



net. He went on to win the Environmental Statement Award for the international organization Artists for Conservation..

Today, Serena is producing work and winning prestigious awards as never before, including the Barbara Newington Award for Traditional Sculpture from the American Artists Professional League for Miss Independence, the Philip Isenberg Memorial Award at the Salmagundi Club's 2020 Annual Member's Exhibition for Paradise Lost, and the prestigious Excellence in Sculpture -Elected Artist Status for Amun Ra in the Allied Artists

All works by Serena Bates:

OPPOSITE ABOVE: *Survivor*, Ceramic Barrel, Fired ,12H x 9W x 24L

OPPOSITE BELOW: *Amun Ra*, Ceramic Weathered Bronze Glaze, 12H x 14W x 16D

ABOVE: *Gang's All Here*, Ceramic Raku fired, 6H x 10W x 4D

BELOW: *Stellar Expectations*, Cold cast bronze, 4'H x 5'W x 5'D





of America 107th Annual, while at the same time continuing to help her ex-husband with the business and caring daily for her mother, who gave so much to help her girls succeed.

Serena feels that one of the elements that breathes life into her work is a “wabi-sabi” effect, a Japanese term that literally means the beauty found in imperfection or the “imperfectly perfect.” It is this, perhaps, that has allowed her to thrive with so many obstacles in the way of her goals. Her grit and determination should serve as an inspiration to all of us.

All works by Serena Bates:

OPPOSITE ABOVE: *Leviathan*, Cold cast bronze, 12H x 10W x 22L

LEFT: *Miss Independence*, Ceramic, 14H x 12W x 9D

ABOVE: *Up Dog*, Bronze, 10H x 10W x 12D

RIGHT: *Continuum*, Rose Alabaster, 14H x 10W x 16D