

Artist Profile Deborah Masters

by Genia Gould

Deborah Masters is just 5'2" and her sculptures are twice her size. A visit to her studio was like a visit to Easter Island in the South Pacific where giant stone heads have been found by archeologists on the slope of a volcano. For instance, one of her sculptures, an over-sized mask or face, is made of concrete and weighs 2,000 lbs., and is suspended by a thick

rope running through the eyes. Masters owns an essential tool called a chin fall, a winch system found in steel or lumber yards to lift heavy loads. She got it from a nearby factory that used to make parts for the Brooklyn Bridge.

"Can we sit down?" she asked me as she was catching her breath. She had just carried a sculpture called *Circle* (1988) (seven figures) made of Hydrocal (a very hard kind of plaster) burlap and steel rods up three flights of stairs and across a long hallway because the elevator in the factory building where she lives was broken. The piece was just in a show at the Whitney Museum of art at Philip Morris. A show that included famous sculptors George Segal, Marisol and John Ahearn.

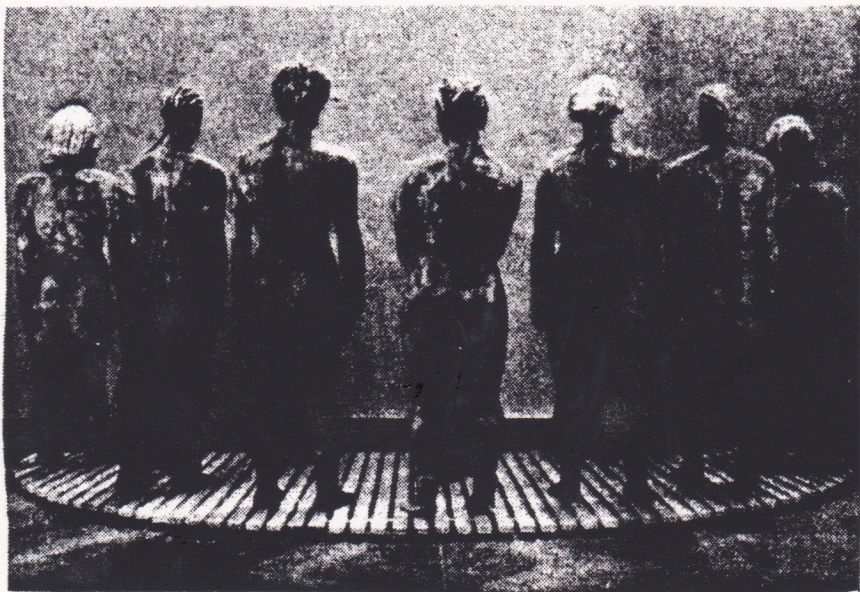
Powerful Bodies

From the sunny kitchen area of her loft I could see the other end of the studio where the figures of women with powerful bodies, strong backs and large sturdy feet were standing. They were all facing away and I wondered what they were doing. "They're women looking down from a roof where a child fell and died," Masters told me. "it happened in the neighborhood here and it's about how the mother and these other women were so great and how they were able to deal with the tragedy."

Masters works are reminiscent of ancient Egyptian art and primitive African art. They are large, ominous, and imbued with immediate and real life issues. The images are very powerful events and situations like birth, babies, love, divorce, death of a loved one, or death of a beloved pet translate into her works.



Deborah Masters with one of her sculptures in her loft studio.



"Circle" by Deborah Masters, 1988. 7' x 16' x 8'. Hydrocal, Graphite, and Wood.

Masters has lived in her neighborhood for 12 years, an area known as DUMBO (Down Under The Manhattan Bridge). It is one end of stretch of artist communities that runs along the East River from Queens through Brooklyn. Working closely with a few Williamsburg artists for several

years, Masters helped get a critical loft law passed in Albany, for which all of Brooklyn benefits. She's very involved in community life but she claims she's not a political artist. "Even though sculptures are mostly of women, it's not a feminist statement, it's just that I'm creating

Genia Gould

Courtesy of Leslie Flam (386-9055)

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sculptures that are about my experience so they're mostly of women," said Masters.

Playing With Scale

Surfaces in Masters works are intricate and an integral part of what she does. Using metal objects and blocks of wood

she imprints lines and textures onto the clay from which a plaster molde is later made. "I like to create a kind of geographical map on the surface of my sculptures so that when you come close to them, they change into a different landscape, something earth-like," explained Masters. She plays with size and scale.

A recurring dream of Master's seems to encapsulate what she's doing. Masters grew up in Harrisburg, PA. near the Susquehanna River, a river that is about a mile wide. Her father built bridges across it. He would occasionally take her to the site where he was working and take her on a ride in a cherry picker on a barge. In the dream, it is early in the morning. "My father awakes me at an unusually early hour. It is still darkout. Everything is black, the steel and grey stone bridge and islands, that are perceptible only by their lines that rise up. The river is silver. There is the faintest pink in the sky on the horizon. It's very beautiful. My father and I are on the cherry picker on a barge on the river and it is way up in the air. My father is inspecting each individual weld on the bridge with a small mirror. That's what I'm doing too. I'm intimately involved with details on the surface of my works like my father with his bridge. And the lines I see in the darkness are about my drawings. I draw and draw and draw before I do a sculpture."

Master's gallery is LedisFlamm at 108 North 6th Street in Williamsburg. LedisFlamm is the first commercial gallery in Brooklyn. Masters will have a show there in January 1990. Recently, Masters had a piece exhibited at the Sculpture Center in Manhattan. She will be in a show at Snug Harbor in Staten Island on June 7.