

# VIE DES ARTS    English

## DEBORAH MASTERS

### An American, In New York

By Paquerette Villeneuve

**IN NEW YORK, A GIGANTIC FRESCOS IN RELIEF OF 80 METERS IN LENGTH AND 3 METERS IN HEIGHT WILL WELCOME NEWCOMERS TO THE LAND OF AMERICA, UPON THEIR ARRIVAL AT J. F. KENNEDY. THIS MONUMENTAL WORK IS SIGNED BY DEBORAH MASTERS. IT REQUIRED THREE YEARS OF WORK.**

There are many projects up in the air at the moment. Projects destined for the thousands of sky users that will all be heightened with an artistic veil. In Montreal, the Dorval airport is investing 500 millions dollars to expand. In Toronto, the Lester B. Pearson airport is restructuring the present terminals into one single central unit. In the two cases however, for these installations that will only become functional in 2004, the art shutter is still to be determined.

Our neighbors of the South are almost ready. In May 2001, travelers landing from all of the corners of the world, into J.F.Kennedy (in New York) will see, upon arrival, above the control counters, in the immigration hall of the new terminal, 28 powerful reliefs of Deborah Masters, where in congruence with the stain glass of cathedrals, beauty is combined with the functional narrative.

“I have drawn these images from my daily experiences with a city so much more varied, more complex and more sensitive to the cultural diversities, than we could imagine. A fantastic city, where, the artist declares, each newcomer can find a place.” The proof? It is defined here, in a sequence of 80 meters in length and more than 3 meters in height, the icons of The Big Apple: *Wall Street, Times Square* neighboring *The Chinese Fish Market* and the exotic displays of *Botanica*, frequented by a clientele of all costumes and colors...

Selected by the jury, the whole harmonizes perfectly with the intention of an architecture that has ruptured with the tradition of betting all on the departure halls, in order to concentrate on the arriving travelers. *Walking New York* will offer a happy diversion to the natural anxiety of entering and settling into an unknown country.

*-Does a vision, as original as yours, instigate controversy?*

“There were some delicate moments with the Committee, but the promoters, notably, the Dutch associates of the Schipol airport in Amsterdam, always supported me because they wanted something *real*. And not anything politically correct!”

#### THE GENESIS OF A GREAT ADVENTURE

The 28 reliefs, of 2.40 m by 3 m, were carried out thanks to a \$250, 000 dollar subsidy and demanded from the artist and her two assistants, three years of labor. A generous subsidy, that required careful budgeting, because with this amount, the artist promised to produce the works, supply the materials, pay her assistants, pay studio and storing fees, and provide for herself.

“Three years in which above all, I would have lived and known (oh what a luxury!) the incredible experience of creation.

*-How do you become informed about this kind of project?*

“Wendy Feuer, the consultant chosen by the promoters, was familiar with my sculptures, particularly with my 7 meter reliefs for the Coney Island Bridge. Thinking that it pertained to my area of concentration, especially since the JFK project was intended to comprise figurative reliefs, she informed me of the opportunity. The idea to conceive a work destined for the dimensions of a football field gave me wings!” recalls a still excited Deborah Masters.

“I like making large sculptures, but who can afford these types of works today? The galleries, and not only mine, having closed one after another, imposes the necessity of finding resources elsewhere. That is what public art offers me.” To this day, between California, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, Connecticut and the New York region, she has realized a dozen projects.

We are in her studio, on the sixth floor of an old warehouse in Brooklyn. Remains of her early work, two timeless petrified figures, can be recognized in the dimness. Around us crosses, alter pieces, family pictures including one of her Greek father who died when she was a little girl, jewelry: a real nest for the imagination. Nearby, in a large naked space, a few mounted reliefs, some already painted, await, under their plastic tarpaulins, to acquire a perfect solidity. As we speak, my hostess (she invited me to stay with her for two days) standing, continues to apply color onto the weary but happy face of one of the *Garment Workers*.

## **THE DEVELOPMENT**

*-How did you invent your subject?*

“Firstly, because I needed to represent Manhattan, Queens, Brooklyn, The Bronx and Staten Island, I took photographs everywhere: 50 rolls of film in two days. It had to be intense, like the tourist who wants to get everything in one go. I also consulted the list of airlines that use the terminal. By knowing the passengers’ origins, I could better imagine where they would probably go to find a small piece of familiar territory. When the photographs arrived, I had a quick look at them, and almost unconsciously, I wrote the titles for the thirty works I envisioned. I had already fixed their number in my head.”

“I did my drawings in Italy, in my little house in Canonica, protected from the daily chaos. I needed silence, and a certain detachment, to get to the heart of my subjects. When they were finished, I spread them out to see their global effect. I then had to arrange them considering space, thickness, the degree of intensity in color, and according to their structures, horizontals, verticals, transversals, standing or seated figures, in order for the action to bounce from one to another. To provide the viewer with a directing line, so that the reliefs could be properly perceived, in their total height.” Once the drawings were accepted on July 15<sup>th</sup> 1998, Masters set herself to work.

## **THE EXECUTION**

*-Where does the importance you give to relief, an art-form somewhat neglected today, come from?*

“First of all from the large sculptures, strikingly filled with spirituality, that I saw as a child when I spent vacations in Mexico with my grandfather who was searching for oil, a product as precious and coveted as gold. Later, I studied Byzantine Art at Bryn Mawr College, with a marvelous professor, Dale Kinney.”

After graduating from this reputed feminine institution, she is particularly interested by the art of the Middle Ages, and goes to Italy to see the works of her favorite painters: “Giotto, and his angels filled with so much sadness! Duccio, who expresses suffering so much more innocently and purely than the artists of the Renaissance!” She also lingers by the reliefs of Brunelleschi, Ghiberti, Donatello, the Pisano brothers, “almost cartoon-like with the multitude of figures in the composition, who alternate with an almost musical rhythm, the action-filled flat planes.” She discovers an Orvieto, “lots of little reliefs at great height, that we see very well.”

As to the meaning of the structure, indispensable to those who create reliefs of 10 cm in width and 130kg in weight, individually, "it developed with my engineer father, who brought me with him when he constructed bridges."

*-And what about technique?*

"After depositing a good layer of clay in a frame bolted to a wall, I project a slide of the drawing on the whole surface, and I trace the contours. Then, the frame placed on the floor, I spread out the latex, destined, once dry and cleaned, to become the mold in which I cast the portion of the final relief. Once this material, which is fiberglass, has hardened, I rework it, hollowing or building up the width, to arrive at the definite image, that I then only need to paint. For this step, a novelty in my case, I was inspired by Giotto, and Diego Riviera, for the earth tones - and for the luminosity, Matisse."

*The Passer-bys will they see you somewhere?*

"Yes. I made *Dinner in the Sculptor's Studio* to include myself in my work. We can see my sculptures, my religious things, the paintings of my friend Hollis, with whom I exhibited at Saint-Pierre in Montreal, and Geoff, my husband."

Her 28 reliefs will not be lonely. Exiting the plane, the long hallways that the passengers go through will be "activated" by art work. First by *Travelogues*, a cascade of images of suitcases projected on screens by video cameras, followed by a wall of curtains that, although developed in a hard surface, seems to wave in the wind.

"This integration of the arts in a space that upholds an international vocation represents one of the most important private investments that the New York metropolitan area has seen in a long time, and we are thrilled with the result", underlines the general director of development, David Sigman.

### **In a Near Sky: Toronto and Montreal**

*What should we await for the Dorval and Lester B. Pearson airports?*

In Toronto, where the construction budget is more than 4 billion dollars, the process should be finished." We have specified six different locations in the airport to animate with works", explains Sam Dewairy, coordinate director. Last April, GTA (Greater Toronto Airports Authority) announced in the American and Canadian press, the opening of a competition destined to all the Canadian artists interested. "We received 350 submissions, among which the jury made a first selection. From the selected projects, our final choices will emerge little by little. The jury comprised two associates of the project (The architect Moshe Safdie and a representative from Skidmore & Merrill), the critic Jane Purdue, the consultant Elsa Cameron, our advisor Irene Hawrylyshin, and myself" precises M. Dewairy who adds: "It was very important for us to integrate the Canadian artists in the project." A collaboration is scheduled with the museums for the organization of temporary exhibitions in other spaces.

In Dorval, the first part of the expansion construction will be finished in 2004. At ADM (Aéroports de Montréal), we are working presently to establish the artistic shutter. "We expect to call on the organizations that represent the arts to illustrate our general theme, that of the Montreal identity." explains Renee Cardinal, the responsible for the public relations of ADM. "Gradually, the artists will be able to follow the evolution of this project on our website: [www@admt.com](http://www@admt.com)".