Carving Out a Career

Leslie Fry’s art connects nature, humanity, fantasy, and architecture.

Mention the word sculptor and possibly the somewhat traditional image that comes to mind is of someone standing amidst a pile of rubble, chipping vigorously away at a large, implacable stone with a mallet and chisel. That definition certainly doesn’t fit Leslie Fry, since she is an artist who works in a variety of mediums, she seldom stands still, and she is hardly ever at work on anything one might consider traditional. Following our first meeting, on the day I tried to catch up with her for a follow-up interview, she was on the go. “I just found out that I’ve been accepted for an international sculpture festival in Seoul, South Korea,” she bubbled enthusiastically in an e-mail to me, “which means I have to leave at the end of this month. Needless to say, I’ve got a lot to do between now and then!” Part of the life of an artist, I learned, is in getting commissions like these. With every one comes a challenge. With this one, Leslie said, “I have to create a large-scale outdoor sculpture in a permanent material, in a country where I can’t even read the alphabet…and have 30 days to create it once I’m there.”

I had tried to catch up with Leslie before, but at the time she was teaching an intensive drawing course at UVM (with only one weekday off) as well as working in her studio daily, and in her spare time getting ready for the showing of her works in the 2011 Made in Winooski pop-up art galleries. When inspiration strikes, Leslie is quick to get to work and translate the idea into three-dimensional form. Speaking of the Korean project, she continued, “I will be making a 10-foot-long ‘head’ in concrete titled MountainHead. My main inspiration comes from growing up in Stowe and looking at the profile of Mt. Mansfield every day (and skiing on its Chin and the Nosedive trails). I feel that mountains are sculpture, and the fact I’ll be working in a mountain valley in South Korea adds to good feeling about this new sculpture.”

My interest in Leslie’s work was initially piqued by news of an unusual project she had taken on, and I had gone to meet her on the job site. “It’s nice to be able to use traditional methods, although my sculpture isn’t traditional!” exclaimed Leslie. At that particular moment back in May 2011, she again wasn’t doing anything a conventional sculptor would. Leslie and I were standing on contractors’ scaffolding, high above the sidewalk in downtown Springfield, Vermont. We were inches away from the bricks of the second storey of an old building that had been gutted by fire and was now shuddering with the tremors of heavy power equipment and beams and rafters being juggled around inside—the sounds of renovation being done in earnest. Leslie was re-creating in concrete, with hand tools and artistic talent, the Art Deco
façade of the Springfield movie theater where *The Simpsons Movie* had made its world premier in 2007.

The stone façade, badly damaged and missing significant pieces of its once-elegant artwork, had been bricked over many years ago in the course of modernizing the theater and only discovered in the fire’s aftermath when workers pulled materials away to assess the extent of structural damage. “I was commissioned to re-create the sculptures,” Leslie explained, adding that her work was one part of the 3.5 million dollar theater restoration, “a joint effort of Housing Vermont and the Springfield Housing Authority.” On the scaffolding with us that day was Tim McEntee, a masonry contractor working on the project. I asked him how many surprises the venerable, 1800s building had provided him with: “It’s been crazy,” he said with a wan smile. “It seems like every time you uncover something, you have to come up with another solution to a new problem!”

Tasked by project manager Alan Barr, well known in the architectural restoration field, Leslie had only two fuzzy, 1950s black-and-white photos of the original building to work from in replicating the façade’s large, horizontal overhead frieze. It was a new problem, but not insurmountable. “We first made a rubber mold of what was left of the original,” Leslie said, “although a lot of it was chipped beyond recognition.” Then, back in her Winooski studio, she made a plaster positive from the mold. Working by eye, she added details in the plaster, including a large theater player’s mask. “Then,” she went on, “we made a mold of that. That was tricky, because the finished casting, once made in concrete, had to be an exact fit into the building.” Once it was completed, the ever-resourceful Tim McEntee oversaw its final placement over the theater entrance, just above the two vertical Art Deco panels before which Leslie and I were standing.

“This is my first project doing a restoration,” commented Leslie, gradually shaping a special concrete mixture into the figure of an owl in one of the two panels flanking the theater entrance. “Liz Pritchett, an architectural historian, came up with the idea of owls to replace the missing elements here. So, I came up with a few different sketches, which I’m working directly from; the challenge is to make each owl the same. One of my biggest inspirations is old buildings…and their anthropomorphic aspects…gargoyles, for example.” Indeed, anthropomorphism, or attributes of human characteristics to objects or animals, shows in many of Leslie’s works of art.

Leslie has worked in many mediums: paper, fabric, rubber, cast paper, video, plaster, concrete, and bronze. But when she bought a house in Winooski that had a large yard and a garden in 1991, it was really the beginning of her work in large sculpture. “I transformed the yard into a huge green room and it did change my work,” she recalls. “I was making translucent fabric sculptures that were getting me into good shows in New York and Europe, but because I love architectural details, I started making things for my yard and house. It totally changed my work: I wanted to make things for outside. Big, claw feet for footings of the deck, instead of bare sono-tube columns—gargoyles for the edges of the house!”

Born in Montreal, Quebec, Leslie grew up in Stowe, Vermont, attended Central School of Arts and Design in London, England, and graduated from UVM in Burlington, Vermont, with a bachelor of art degree. “As soon as I graduated from college, I had a solo show at Galerie Suzele Carle in Montreal, titled Bodywork. “And if you have a show,” she observed, “it’s the beginning of your career as an artist.” She later
earned her MFA at Milton Avery Graduate School of the Arts at Bard College, and then came “my first big public commission, Pomerleau Park in South Burlington. It was completed in 1999.” This work, commissioned by Burlington City Arts with Ernie Pomerleau and sponsored by the Antonio and Rita Pomerleau Foundation, consists of sculptures of 20 sphinxes on columns and on a low, encircling wall, in a pocket-size park created near the junction of Shelburne Road and interstate connector 189. The park still serves as a bus stop, a park, and entrance-way to a shopping center but has become a Burlington landmark in the years since its completion and a Leslie Fry hallmark.

“I have to say I think Pomerleau Park is still my most significant project,” Leslie reflected. “It synthesizes the best aspects of sculpture: It engages people with all their senses. You can sit with one of the figures [on the wall] and even put your arms around it. The taller ones encircle and protect the smaller ones, so there’s drama, longing, and vines growing up around the columns. The park is always changing with the seasons, and it can be drive-by experience as well as an intimate one inside the circle. It’s not digital, photographic, or reducible to two-dimensions in any way.”

When I asked Leslie what a typical day was like for her, she answered, “I don’t have one! Some artists, no matter what…get their several hours of studio time in. I do it intensively, rather than here and there. So, no lunch meetings for me; there’s no time to clean up. I’m usually all concrete and dust. I try to save up all my promotion, my submissions for public arts grants, and so on to do at night. I don’t want to waste daylight doing it. I need natural light to see what I’m making.”

Leslie’s work isn’t limited to Vermont; she is also well known in Florida, where, for example, her sculpture (made of plaster and pinecones) Pining can be seen along a nature trail in Boca Ciega Millennium Park in Seminole. The statue is of a woman whose figure, part pinecone, is embracing a tree. Another work, Quercus Emancipation, a large rendition of a human head, seems to have had a classic Greek influence in its design. Cast in bronze and titled Colossal AcornHead, it is scheduled to be installed outdoors at Tufts University. After one year, the sculpture will be moved to deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum in Lincoln, Massachusetts, for a two-year display. I asked Leslie if some of her work is inspired by mythology. “Yes,” she answered. “Myths, literature, those are things I really appreciated about attending UVM and that I really got into studying.

Obviously, I’m not an abstract artist!” Leslie remarks. “One of the few times my art coincided with what was hip in the art world was in the early ’90s. I was using clothing as a metaphor for the body when that was a new form of gaining distance from realism. That’s when I was making translucent fabric sculptures that got me into very good exhibitions in cities like New York, Paris, and Hamburg. But you must realize: you can’t make your art what’s hip at the moment.”

Hip at the moment of its world premier, The Simpsons Movie has faded into the annals of Springfield history, as has the July 2011 grand re-opening of the theater. Leslie’s sculpture (unless it is Pining, made of natural materials in order to impart its own significant message by slowly decomposing) endures. It is tangible, much like the Art Deco theater façade, and to some degree, embraceable, like the sphinxes in Pomerleau Park. And, in a world where it seems, as Leslie observes, “Everything gets more and more abstract and becomes just pixels on little screens. Life would be so much simpler if I weren’t into sculpture, but its power is that it’s three dimensional, as we are!”