



◀ “Release, Receive,” cast bronze on powder-coated aluminum, 56.5"x25"x25".  
 Leslie Fry in her sculpture garden at her Winooski home. ▼



PORTRAIT: GORDON MILLER; LINDSAY RAYMONDJACK

# sculpted

## Women fly in Leslie Fry's wonderland

Oh, climb up if you can, if she offers you the chance. Take hold of the rickety wooden ladder—watch your head now—and peer into the rafters of Leslie Fry's old barn in Winooski where whimsical sculptures hum with life.

Spindly forms, part-human and part-flower, a lounging sphinx, sculpted casts of faces and feet, hands cupped over a sunken chest, a tower with sculpted cabbage-leaf doors and peanut-shell walls. Bask in the wonderful weirdness. Let a smile escape. Bend your head to the side as your mind questions form—human, animal, vegetable—and the mutable boundaries of nature.

Fry, a Stowe-born sculptor whose rich career spans decades and across the globe, invites imagination to run wild, arch its back like a cat, and stretch in strange directions.

“A lot of things that I think are witty or somewhat humorous other people find creepy,” Fry said, smiling. “I’m not afraid of the dark side.”

In some ways, it's easy to describe her art as whimsical. However her sculptures are not quaint nor fickle; they flirt with whimsy, with humor and the fantastical, while striking a critical balance between thoughtful composition and themes such as connection, nature and the constructed world, metamorphosis, fragments, and wholeness.

"Apex," detail, ceramic, wood, 52.5"x16"x15". "Alice 2," hemp, plaster, steel, glue, illustrated pages from "Through the Looking Glass" from the original book read to the artist by her father throughout childhood, 50"x22"x6". Leg sculptures, detail, "Totter," cast resin, paint, steel, wood, 78"x15"x26". ▼



LINDSAY RAYMONDJACK



### Familiar figures

Many of the same faces and figures appear in her work repeatedly, often female or intersex, sometimes melded with real or imaginary animals or growing out of architecture.

"Ancient art and architecture have always inspired me. World religions and philosophies, Jungian thought, the connection of all things ecological and mythological are all part of the influences that have formed my art," according to Fry.

Next to her barn and art studio at her home is a semi-public sculpture garden she's cultivated since the

1990s, featuring some of the creatures, sculpted hands and faces, and other figures from her collection.

Two double-headed sphinxes, their faces tilted to the sky, guard the entrance, leading visitors to approach "Nestbuilder," a lofty bronze sculpture of a curved column seemingly composed of hands, leaves, bricks, windows, saws, hammers, and nails. A female creature is perched at the top—or is she part of the tall nest she's created? The curvature of her found treasures feels almost precarious, yet the statue is firmly balanced. New details unveil themselves at every angle, looking close up into the woman's face or gazing at her from afar. >>



◀ Cuffed series, in bronze, home studio.

Leg sculptures, studio view with the artist, "Family Tree," "Totter," and "Kick." Inset: "Sybil," detail, ceramic, wood, steel. 84"x28"x28". ▼



"For me in sculpture, if it's big and you see it from a distance, you see just the shape first," Fry said, noting this is where she starts with every sculpture to ensure that it's effective not just on close inspection or from a certain angle. In this way, her art becomes an experience in multiple layers, even as she places her sculptures in different settings, studio versus garden, semi-hidden among plants or at the center of an open space.

Nurturing a public art resource like this is important to Fry, who offers tours by appointment and welcomes visitors whenever she hosts open studios. Before buying her home in 1991, her work was geared mostly for indoor and gallery spaces but since becoming a homeowner and creating her own outdoor gallery of sorts, her approach has shifted to outside and more public permanent art, she said. Other iterations of her



public artwork can be found across the U.S. and as far as South Korea.

Closer to home, 20 cast-concrete sphinx-like sculptures can be found in Pomerleau Neighborhood Park in South Burlington, a circular "oasis located in the midst of a commercial area with heavy traffic," according to Fry. "The design solution wed sculpture and space to form a sanctuary combining landscaping, sitting areas, a bus stop shelter, and guardian sphinx figures. Vines

are growing on the columns, and the atmosphere, trees, and plantings change each season."

More than one of her friends and fellow artists noted they see Fry herself in her transmogrified women.

One of those friends, Jacob Albee, also assisted her on the Pomerleau Park commission in 1999.

"I like how she shows up in her work. That's true for a lot of artists but in her case it doesn't feel self indulgent at all. It feels very personally expressive—they're traits in her personality, her aspirations, or fears," said Albee, a jeweler in Burlington, who first met Fry in 1995 as a freshman art student in one of her classes at the University of Vermont.

They "clicked right away," he recalled, and stayed friends after he graduated; they worked together on some projects and she mentored him in other ways, even letting him live above her studio after college when he was getting on his feet.

"It was magical and very, very helpful to me. I have always had a tremendous amount of respect for her and her work," Albee said.

As a mentor, he described Fry as someone who always invested in herself and her vision and encouraged him to do the same. "That has definitely stuck with me and affected my career greatly. She taught me that if you make some-

thing you love, someone will love it too. She's artistically and technically unafraid," Albee said.

### Local inspirations

At just 15 years old, Fry created her first bird woman. She carved the figure out of soapstone—a medium she's learned is not her favorite—and the figure now lives on a shelf in her barn.

"That's the thing about my work is that I would say the themes and the imagery haven't changed extremely," Fry said. "When I was an undergraduate at UVM, I studied a lot of psychology and the idea of a collective unconscious and also that we're all part male, part female, part animal, part y'know—those things still influence me today."

Fry received a Bachelor of Art degree from the University of Vermont in 1975 before she went on to study at the Central School of Art and Design in London, then to earn her master's degree at Bard College.

Janie Cohen, an artist and the former director of the University of Vermont's Fleming Museum, has felt lucky as a curator to see the evolution of Fry's work >>

“Building Stories,” plaster sculpture casts with bronze sculpture, “NestBuilder,” variable dimensions, Kent Museum, Calais, Vermont. “Arise,” cast bronze, “Exposed!” outdoor sculpture exhibit, The Current, Stowe, 82 x24 x16, and detail, inset. The artist’s sculpture garden at her home and studio. Pomerleau Neighborhood Park, South Burlington, 10x60x60 feet, circular park with 20 cast-concrete, sphinx-like sculptures, 1999. ▼



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: LESLIE FRY; “ARISE,” AND INSET: PAUL ROGERS; FRY; BURK UZZLE



since they first met in the early '90s. Cohen had just moved to Vermont at the time and Fry became her first friend in town, she recalled.

“Leslie has taken some side routes over the years but thematically, her art always relates to some clear themes that have been at the forefront, interweaving of figures, mythology, architecture, etcetera,” Cohen said. “Her work is such a great combination of intellectual research and whimsy and her perception of the world around her. You can always recognize a Leslie Fry.”

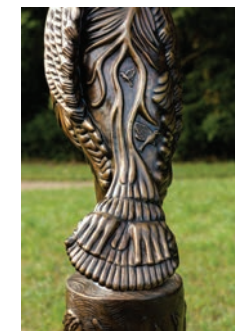
Like the themes that have enthralled her for decades, Fry has always been attracted to sculpture as a medium, experimenting with that and many different forms of art throughout her life.

“I think one of the reasons that I’m a sculptor is growing up at the foot of Mt. Mansfield and seeing that profile every night. Mountains are so sculptural, and not just mountains, but everything when covered with a thick blanket of snow is like a big sculpture,” said Fry, who was raised in Stowe.

She noted the same sentiment in a speech when she was awarded the Governor’s Award for Excellence in the Arts in 2023, one in a long list of awards and honors that stretches over 40 years.

Fry recalled a childhood spent “getting lost in a good way” in her wooded backyard, making art and being sur-

rounded by stories, as her mother was an English professor at what was then Johnson State College. Her father would read to her



“Alice in Wonderland” and “Through the Looking Glass” over and over again, always the same two books (though she never got sick of them), and upon her mother’s death about 12 years ago, Fry found herself inside her childhood home surrounded by perhaps 3,000 books.

In homage, Fry selected titles with embossed covers to create molds, found pages of significant stories, including “Through the Looking Glass,” and sculpted more books filled with leaves instead of pages to create an installation titled “Archeology Through the Looking Glass” that was showcased at the McIninch Art Gallery at Southern New Hampshire University.

▼ Leslie Fry in her studio. Cuffed figures, acrylic or oil on resin.



GORDON MILLER; INSET: LINDSAY RAYMOND/JACK

### Motifs

Fry has always been drawn to the human form: In the 1970s she was casting body parts and setting them up in surreal ways; in the 90s her figures were often androgynous, taking inspiration from stylized medieval art that focused on spirit rather than gendered form; and in more recent years she’s felt particularly fascinated with shoes.

Hands, a long-time motif in her work, are a large focus of her recent bronze foray, in which she plays with touch and gesture, balance and openness.

“Release/Receive,” a bronze cast of two hands connected as if at the wrists, one facing up, the other palm down, evokes both the act of letting go and accepting something new.

Meanwhile, small hands ice the tips of wings on a bronze bird woman, dubbed “Arise.” Flowers bloom from her eyes and pepper her locks, among which are nestled tiny faces. Perched atop a column of more flying bird-women, sporting some fantastic stylized boots, she looks hopefully to the sky.

While much of her work can be striking in its size and shape, the smaller scale of the bronze hands creates a quieter, almost delicate feel. Slightly open or closed, each feels caught mid-gesture, perhaps asking to be caressed, perhaps to be released.

There is both a vulnerability and strength to the hands, similar to Fry herself. Being an artist requires the guts to put yourself, what you love, what inspires, and what scares you, on display—yet Fry is not asking for anyone’s validation. This is what she loves, full stop. Take her as she is, flying in the most marvelous shoes, to wherever the wind brings her next. ■



*Some of Fry’s 2-D art can be viewed at the Furchgott Sourdiffe Gallery in Shelburne, and she will show her work in a group show at The Phoenix art gallery in Waterbury opening on Aug. 2. To walk amongst the creatures in her sculpture garden, and for news about her summer open studio, reach out at [lesliefry.com](http://lesliefry.com).*