



Pursuing a passion

Artist profile: Serena Kovalosky

by Anita Sandler, Special to The Journal
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Serena Kovalosky's creative journey started at the age of five in Whitehall, N.Y., when drawing ignited a passion that would follow her all of her life.

Having grown up in a rural community, she wasn't exposed to what she called "real art" until a class trip to the Hyde Museum in Glens Falls where she had an epiphany. She remembers standing in the middle of the gallery, staring open-mouthed at all the paintings by the great masters that surrounded her and thinking, "This feels like home". (This "feeling like home" became a reality when just this year she had one of her sculptures accepted in the Hyde Collection.)

In the late 1970's she found herself searching for a "cultural community" which she couldn't find in rural Washington County at the time. She took a "real job" for 18 years in the travel industry in a corporate office in Boston, then in Montreal. Becoming a working artist wasn't part of her plan, but there was always a voice, a connection to the arts that followed her, a voice that re-emerged one day, reminding her of the feeling she had that day at the Hyde Museum. That memory changed her life. It was time to pursue her passion.

She began by quitting her job, moved into an artist's loft in Montreal, in a building where she was surrounded and supported by a community of professional artists. They became her teachers and her mentors, helping her along her creative path. When she was eventually "forced out" because of urban expansion, she thought she would move to the Canadian countryside but her Adirondack roots called her home. She found, in her absence, a new community of artists and writers with whom she could network. She found the need for stimulation and artistic vision was necessary to her creative life and inspired her to organize a group she called Creative Warriors to help feed the creative fires and several years ago she started the Open Studios of Washington County. Serena found herself back home, working on manifesting her creative dream.

From her first steps onto her creative path in Montreal, she was drawn to sculpture. After seeing an exhibit of lacquered and finely carved gourd pottery from Olinia, Mexico she became enchanted with the gourd...their shapes, their textures, their organic nature and, on a deeper level, she was touched by something primal and spiritual inherent in the material. At first she listened to her friends and fellow artists telling her that to be a "serious" artist one must work with more "noble" materials: bronze, clay, stone. So she tried them all, studied the sculptural form, became for "intellectual" in her choice of subject matter, until she finally realized who she was. And that was a gourd artist. She told herself that gourds were her medium. That what couldn't create great work without resonance...and gourds were what she resonated with.

"If you're going to be a gourd artist, then be the best gourd artist you can be," she said. "But do it your way."

And doing it her way is exactly what she has done. Serena's work can take your breath away. Her sculptures can transport you to a primal place, a place of spirit, a connection with nature. With beautiful splashes of gilding, a technique she learned in London, England she has honed her technical skills to communicate her artistic vision. Working with the natural form but pushing the boundaries, she cuts and cares and reconstructs, embracing the organic and the "wonkyness" of the gourd. She has embraced her craft, reinventing a relationship with a material one wouldn't even imagine would move and flow and do the things she can do with the "humble" gourd.

Her first creations were vessels and pottery, simple and yet timeless.

It is this timeless quality that makes great art speak and last. She understands her material intimately and is able to take the natural quality inherent in each piece and pull, reinvent, embellish and, yes, honor, the individuality of each piece. The evolution of her work is inspiring.



The decision to work large is typical of Serena's ability to let go and listen to her inner creative voice.

Common sense should have told her to keep her work small and sellable in the troubled economy and shifting art market, but Serena decided that, rather than guess where the art market was going, she would just create, "what needed to be created." So while many artists are creating smaller pieces, she's creating larger pieces that she can sell reasonably for this size. Serena says "It's about letting go – of fears about the economy and about the future of art in a technological world, and simply embracing the fact that, as a creative person, no matter what, I'll survive."

The new work she has created for the February Exhibit at the Southern Vermont Art Center is a series of large gourd sculptures she calls "Gourd Spirits Dancing." Serena has collaborated on five of the new pieces with blacksmith Elisa Myer of Belcher Hollow Forge in Hebron, N.Y., adding wrought iron work into her sculptures. Elisa is familiar with working large, having created scenic structures for Broadway, the Houston Ballet and the Chicago Lyric Opera. The creative process for each piece starts with a partially finished gourd sculpture and discussion on what the emotions and intent of the piece should be, then giving Elisa creative freedom. The result of the collaborations are sculptures that push the limits of both mediums. They are exciting, alive, and "unlike anything out there."

Serena has boundless energy and enthusiasm for her art, for the creative process, for sharing her inspiration. She is constantly reinventing herself and can be as enthusiastic and stimulated by the challenges of marketing and making art, something most artists do not enjoy.

Her current creative adventure includes sharing her research for a book on cultural tourism in rural America. She has embraced social networking and uses it skillfully. You can follow her travels on the road and on Facebook and Twitter as the ARTFUL VAGABOND and her website is beautifully designed with all her latest happenings and accomplishments. With her fearless embrace for change and her unwavering pursuit of passion, Serena Kovalosky invites you to share in her creative journey.

Serena's work can be seen in Gallery VI at the Southern Vermont Art Center from Feb. 12 to March 15.