

Sculptor Fran Bouwman on her technique, inspiration, and Goddess in the garden



Forest Muse.

Eden REVISITED

WORDS BY MELANIE CHAMBERS

Fran Bouwman is installing her latest sculpture at the Level Gallery in Collingwood. The towering wooden piece shows a woman naked from the chest up; she's balancing one arm in a stack of books while the other shoots up in the air – in triumph – holding a snake.

The books represent “patriarchal literature and everything negative written about women,” says Fran, whose search for a

soulful and intense female figure in literature left her frustrated. The woman's face is turning towards the snake from the Garden of Eden, as if to say, “let's start over.” This sculpture is called *Eden Revisited*.

Fran describes this as a breakthrough piece; it's pivotal for many reasons – one, because it encapsulates her thoughts on strong female figures, but it also marks a turning point for the

37-year-old self-taught sculptor who came from Holland with her family when she was three.

At a time when women are multitasking masters – family life, careers, marriage – Fran doesn't subscribe to the modern day woman's mantra “women can have it all.” Fran doesn't want it all, and that includes children. “There's so little time, I don't want to spread myself thin. I want to be focused.



Colin Field photo.



Namaste.



Awakening.

I think to be considered a legitimate artist you need that single-mindedness."

Each piece inevitably turns into an expression of whatever she's experiencing at the time; looking at her art over the years, you can see the evolution of a confident woman and artist emerging. *Eden Revisited* stands in stark contrast to her favourite piece she sculpted seven years ago – a frightening self-portrait.

The emaciated woman's hands are behind her back in a sheepish childish way – a nod to Fran's conventional Dutch upbringing; her knees are turned inward and her ribs are exposed. On the back of her torso are two ominous mouths screaming. "It stunned me when this piece came out," recalls Fran.

"It's only after creating a piece that I can start to interpret it; symbolically it exposed the inside of me." The mouth represents her insecure voice asking: "Am I good enough? Should I be an artist?" It was these insecurities literally eating away at her. Years later, *Eden Revisited* seems to be a healthier version, a more robust expression – even if it isn't a self-portrait.

The way she tells the story of becoming an artist seems like

divine intervention. Studying at the University of Toronto years ago, she felt restless and out of place; she switched majors a few times – anthropology, archeology, philosophy, religious studies. But when a stranger became her mentor and predicted she would work with her hands for a living, she listened wholeheartedly.

From there she joined a sculpting class; she was an amateur among pros, but her ability was evident.

"I felt kind of giddy then. Like I had rediscovered something that I had lost a long time ago. Maybe I should have felt more surprised at my ability, but I wasn't. From that moment on, it was non-stop."

For over 13 years she's been working mostly in butternut wood; it's inexpensive and easy to cut. When she starts cutting with her chainsaw, she needs complete silence. "It's very scary to start a piece – if you screw up the initial cuts, you're done – you might as well toss the log. You're sweating, your heart is racing. You have to be incredibly focused." After those cuts are out of the way, then sanding takes the majority of her time until it's silky smooth.

Her sculptures of nymphs,

fairies, memorials to people, faces, children and more are spread from Holland to Quebec, from the States to Southern Georgian Bay. Some of her favourites are in gardens; "I love visualizing it being there."

She was commissioned to carve a piece for a woman she admired, which is aptly named *Goddess*; the slender figure with a circle at her head and stomach stands naturally among the wild flowers and trees. "It was a sculpture that looked like it had always been there after we installed it. I love when that happens."

It doesn't always happen; "my soul comes alive in my studio – but not always, sometimes it's total drudgery and I hate it but overall it's just letting something larger than yourself come through you. I don't think a lot of people have that – it's a luxury. Don't get me wrong, I work my ass off, but not many people have that option. And, I haven't even come close to expressing in sculpture what I want. I know I have yet to reach my creative peak. So that's all very exciting."

To view Fran Bouwman's on-line sculpture gallery, see franbouwman.com



Bear Man.