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Creative Living

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Gospel singer makes her way to opera stage

By Mary Jane Doerr
special writer

Leona Mitchell always wanted to be an ambassador. In high school in Enid, Okla., the famous opera star liked languages and was at the top of her class scholastically.

"Music was just something that I did for fun," said Mitchell in a recent interview at the St. Regis Hotel in Detroit.

She is in town to sing the role of Leonora in the Michigan Opera Theatre production "Il Trovatore," opening Saturday evening at Masonic Temple.

Mitchel was dressed in a casual black-and-white pant suit. There's an aura of elegance about her that transcends her easy-going manner and suggests that she is at the pinnacle of her career.

Since her debut at 25 at the Metropolitan Opera as Micaela in "Carmen" with Placido Domingo, she has sung at nearly every major opera company in the world, appeared often on national "Live from the Met" broadcasts and made numerous recordings.

She starred with Luciano Pavarotti in his movie singing a scene from "Turandot." She is one of the elite group of opera stars who are in demand as recitalists.

RECONCILING HER religious past as a gospel singer with her life as a professional opera singer hasn't always been easy.

"The hardest thing I had to learn was to be a stage personality," said Mitchell. "I was just too giving. But, you know, I think I have kept my true sense of being. I think the greatest compliment anyone can pay to me is to say that I am just the same as I was 20 years ago. Coming from a religious background, I know that all of this is just temporary."

As one of 14 children, daughter of a Pentecostal minister and a registered nurse, Mitchell learned early in life to give of herself.

"I can remember singing when I was five in front of an audience of thousands of people," said Mitchell. Her family's singing group, the Musical Mitchells, included all the children who sang and played instruments at the revival meetings.

"One time when I was little and had not learned to sing on pitch yet, my brother said that I would never make a singer," she said. "I remember telling him that I would too make a singer and I would show him."

Determination and perserverance, coupled with an extraordinary gift that she considers God-given, has made Mitchell the heir apparent to the legacy created by Leontyne Price's retirement.

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opera star

SHE CREDITS her early training with helping her to become accustomed to singing in front of large audiences. Later she won a scholarship to Oklahoma City University where her voice teacher entered her in so many competitions while she was in college, she hardly had time to study. By graduation time, she had won 30 competitions.

"The training I received from all of that was what prepared me for my Met debut. I had no rehearsal and only saw the set from the side of the stage as they told me what to do. No one told me that if you sing badly at the Met the first time, you never sing there again."

Mitchell is technically classified as a lyric-spinto soprano, which means she handles dramatic repertoire, but retains a sweet-natured quality that makes her Aida and Leonora sympathetic to audiences.

For this "Il Trovatore" she is following Joan Sutherland's custom of adding the third soprano aria in Act IV "Tu vedrai che amore in terra" after the famous "Miserere" scene. The addition lengthens the scene to 25 minutes of the most challenging singing in opera.

Mitchell has sung with all of the leads in this MOT production before — James Dietsch (Count di Luna) in MOT's 1984 "Aida;" Livia Budai (Azucena) in Brussels; and Lando Bartolini (Manrico) in Paris recently. She even wore her costumes recently in Winnipeg.

Mitchell's manager/husband Elmer Bush III is a former school teacher from Los Angeles. He and their 3½-year-old son Elmer IV, are her constant companions who travel with her to Europe, Australia and all over North America.

"I think that is what I am now, an ambassador. My husband and I represent America everywhere we go."

"Il Trovatore" opens at 8 p.m. Saturday at Masonic Temple Auditorium of Detroit and continues at 8 p.m. Wednesday, May 4, and Saturday, May 7. For ticket information, call 874-SING.

The terra cotta platter, 23 by 3 inches, is by Susanne Stephenson. "Twisted earthscape #10" (at right), low-fire clay, 31½ by 31½ by 18 inches, is by John Stephenson.

Artistry in clay

Stephensons probe, push medium

By Manon Meiggaard
special writer

Clay artists John and Susanne Stephenson have a great deal in common. Not only do they share a 27-year marriage and a daughter, they also share a profession and a studio.

He is professor of art at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, and she holds the same position at Eastern Michigan University, Ypsilanti. They both received their master's degrees in fine arts from the Cranbrook Academy of Art and both share recognition for particular philosophies and creative working processes in this year's "Sustained Visions" exhibit at the Detroit Focus Gallery.

Said Focus director Gere Baskin, who curated the show: "This is really an approximately 10-year retrospective of two artists whose intimate professional and personal lives are reflected in their parallel creative activities. As I looked at the bodies of work I could see that the two are clearly connected and yet diverge into distinct individual expressions."

Commensurate features of both artistic genres appear to be twisting or sensuous forms, impressive use of color — whether subtle, as in John's work, or bold, as in Susanne's — and daring attitudes in the manipulation of clay.

Divergences are the abstract sculptural quality of John's work, often with mixed media, and Susanne's adherence to the functional form as a basis and transformation into art.

JOHN STEPHENSON believes that an artist's work should reflect the time he or she lives in. One of his earlier, heavy wall reliefs is "Ecological Jig No. 7" from a series composed of jigsaw puzzle images in brown clay and aluminum. The interlocking pieces of clay and metal represent the earth and man's technological intrusion.

In another wall sculpture "Table Partners," created in 1979, a feeling of lightness and space is introduced by fragile strips of whitish clay fastened to aluminum grids (table legs) with extruding baling wire. "I'm intrigued first with an abstract concept," he said, "and then exploring it into forms that might take many different directions."

By the early 1980s John Stephenson began a series of three-dimensional small standing sculptures entitled "earth augers," "twisted earthscapes" and "oracles." In order to support these spiraling or twisting forms during firing he incorporated internal metal armatures into the process. Once the clay hardened, the metal rods were pulled out. A fine example is "Twisted Earthscape No. 4" with its graceful spiral form and three-edged lip.

One of the most outstanding and sensuous works is "Blade No. 3," 1987, a 43 inches tall, slender and curving, vertical linear form. Painted in delicate pinks and blues over black, this was inspired by leaf forms from a trip to the Peruvian jungle.

He is anything but repetitive. In another work that marries clay with metal externally, he entraps a gouged clay sphere within a cage of iron rods. "This," he said, "could represent an object in space, an extraterrestrial object, a molecule or an atom." But he calls it "Cell."

AT THE TIME Susanne Stephenson attended Cranbrook she was convinced that the container, vessel or plate forms were her metier and that these should be combined with vibrant color.

Her earliest pieces in the show are from 1977 to 1983, when she was using porcelain for her vases, covered and lidded dishes and jars with their chunky, expressionistic handles, wide rims, and matte and glazed finishes.

She said she actually likes people to use her soup tureens, cookie jars and cheese dishes. "Although," she added with a laugh, "the tureens are not really meant for Campbell's soup."

The large "mountain vases" were created in 1985 when she was experimenting with terra cotta. These resemble mountain peaks with torn, jagged openings and thick layers of brilliant color, with lower areas left in the natural red clay tone.

She discovered that the lower firing temperature for terra cotta allowed her to use stronger colors and that clay slips were more effective in holding the brushstroke's impression than paint. These could be applied with her fingers or a spatula and the colors could be almost sculpted onto her forms. The process enabled her to paint in three-dimension with clay.

SHE PLAYS WITH balance, throwing tall and slender cone-shaped terra cotta vases on to extruding, curved, curled, gloriously outrageous feet that suggest Art Nouveau. The 26-by-12½-by-9 inch "Caribbean Beach Vase" in pure turquois, peach and vivid pink tones with cloven-hoofed feet is a splendid example of the thrust, vigor and painterly qualities of the vases and the huge, colorful landscape wall platters. There is also a strong, organic, nature presence in her work.

John Stephenson, with his cerebral explorations, and Susanne Stephenson, with her dynamic approach, mold clay to its limit with consummate skill and tireless experimentation.

Their work is included in collections of the Detroit Institute of Arts and the Cranbrook Academy of Art Museum as well as other prestigious institutions.

The exhibit is accompanied by two particularly well designed catalogs (his and hers) by Judith A. Moldenhauer, with comprehensive, invitingly readable essays by Dolores S. Slowinski and photographs by Dirk Bakker.

"Sustained Visions" will continue through May 20 at Detroit Focus Gallery. Gallery hours are noon to 6 p.m., Wednesday-Saturday, 734 Beaubien, Detroit.

A vivid look back into Japan of yesteryear

By Corinne Abatt
staff writer

In the world of art, few combinations of design, technique, aesthetics and documentation can surpass that of 18th and 19th century Japanese printmakers.

The exhibit, "Matters of the Moon," at Park West Gallery of Southfield through May 12 reminds us once again of the wonders of this art form. These works of art, called ukiyo-e, present a vivid, picture of a way of life. They are so carefully detailed that it as close as you can get to actually being part of Japanese life during those two centuries.

The triptychs (three related prints in one frame), particularly, invite the viewer's participation in the action taking place. It's easy to vicariously enjoy the magic of the moment in Chikanobu's "Catching Fireflies at Dusk," "Poem Cards on the Plum Trees," Kunisada's "Celebration Under the Maple Tree," Hiroshige II and Kunisada's "Prince Genji at Court in Winter" and Kuniaki's "Looking at the Moon with Prince Genji."

Certainly the use of pattern and design and placement of figures influenced many Western artists and should continue to do so. "Courtesan Reading a Love Letter" c 1810 by Eizan and many of the portraits of actors against design-filled backgrounds bring Henri Matisse to mind, for instance.

CLAUDE MONET'S collection of Japanese blue and white prints is still in his home in Giverny in France.

The triptych, "Sunrise at the Second House of Namba" by Kunisada (1786-1858), sets the mood with beauty and delicacy of line and vibrant color against an idyllic setting.

Each print is a learning experience in the culture as well as the art. In the triptych, "Ikebana Flower Arranging," the viewer can become absorbed in the event taking place, then concentrate on the architecture, the clothing, the flower and plant arrangements, the landscape in the background, the relationships of the figures and the wonders of the actual printmaking process in each.

The stories in many of the single prints are equally absorbing. "Theater Street in Edo," c 1858 by Hiroshige, is wonderful, as a work of art as well as a documentation of the look and feel of the crowd on the street. "Two Girls Watching the Sunset" c 1862 by Hiroshige II is a gentle, poignant work as are "Women Sewing" and "Women Working with Fabrics."

In contrast, the triptych, Kunisada's "Three Men with Tatoos," is a study in machoism, right down to the last check in the blue, red and gray background. "Sumo Wrestler" by Kunisada II with biceps bulging higher than his head only goes to prove that Wrestlemania wasn't born yesterday, but, the economy of line is beautiful.

Staff photos by Jerry Zolynsky

THE FINAL PRINT was a cooperative effort. The artist made the drawing and it was pasted on a block of hardwood. Then the woodblock cutter went to work making one block for each color. The printer rubbed natural vegetable and mineral dyes on the blocks and then transferred the work onto the prized mulberry paper. The publisher's job was to carry out distributed to shops and street vendors.

Many of the prints in the exhibit are from the collection of Doreen Kolb of New Hampshire. They vary in price from hundreds to thousands of dollars.

"The Great Plain, Suzuki, Fukogawa" by Hiroshige (1797-1858) presents an interesting and unusual bird's eye view, done in a time when man's flight was just a dream.

Gallery hours are 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday-Wednesday, until 9 p.m. Thursday and Friday and 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Saturday and Sunday, 29469 Northwestern, Southfield.