

Creative Living

Marie McGee editor/591-2300

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Artist-visionary unites beauty, form, function

By C.L. Rugenstein
staff writer

BEING AN ARTIST is a philosophy, a way of looking at life rather than a conscious act. "A painting or a piece of sculpture is a by-product, the end result of that reality," said Michele Oka Doner explaining the philosophy behind her 25-year career.

Doner, whose career got its commercial start in Michigan, was in Rochester recently for the opening of her latest exhibition — "Michele Oka Doner at Mid-Career," at Oakland University's Meadow Brook Gallery through May 20.

Doner's public works are found in such diverse places as the entrance to the Hayden Planetarium at the American Museum of Natural History in New York, the sidewalk at the Children's Museum of Manhattan and the 156-year-old Franklin Cemetery in Franklin, not far from where the Doners used to live.

Three new works, textured bronze benches designed to be utilitarian as well as thought provoking, will soon grace the grounds of the University of Michigan's main campus, between the natural sciences and chemistry buildings.

"The benches are circular because I don't think people like to sit lined-up," Doner said.

THE LARGEST is 10 feet in diameter, the smallest, less than seven feet in diameter, is yet to be determined. They're part of U-M urban planner Fred Mayer's attempts to make the campus more esthetically pleasing.

Despite a prolific career, Doner didn't start formally expressing her inward art until she was accepted in the art school at U-M. High school art classes struck her as being "frinky-dink" — in high school they didn't have a well-developed art department.

Before then, her medium was nature itself; bits of shell, fossils, bone, whatever nature provided along the stretch of ocean near her Miami Beach home.

"It was rich," she said, "the only part

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— Michele Oak Doner

of the country that's subtropical."

Her family background is also rich. One grandfather came from a long line of religious scribes.

"But he was the rebellious son," Doner said with a smile, "and went to an art academy in Odessa (Russia)," later painting wall murals in convents.

She also lived with great art reproduction canvases of works like Rembrandt's "Noble Slave," and one unique Cezanne.

It was a seascape of Odessa, painted in the bottom of a heart-shaped, wooden fruit basket about 10-12 inches across.

"I loved that painting," she said. "I could look in and see the sea and smell the ocean breeze."

HER EARLIEST MEDIUM was sand, which she sculpted with her hands and decorated with bits of shell.

Though she didn't have formal training prior to college, Doner said she worked with her hands and exercised herself visually every day by arranging flowers, or setting the table in different, interesting ways.

She rejects the luxury of artistic isolation — the artist removing himself from the mainstream of common experience to create in solitude.

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enough mammoths for winter, will it rain enough to grow crops?"

"The focus with the situation of dying cities and tremendous social changes is the (return to the idea of the) artist as visionary, the visual expression of the tribe."

Doner is currently working on six public projects in six different cities. She won several commissions through national competitions.

The Herald Square project combines both her Michigan and New York City backgrounds (where she and husband Frederick Doner moved in 1981). The 200-foot long wall titled "Radiant Site," will utilize 11,000 gold luster Pewabic Pottery tiles from Michigan in the Herald Square subway station.

Another project may give the venerable city of Venice, Italy, a new lease on life.

Doner is working with a new technology as a medium — electromagnetic deposition.

"IT'S AN EVOLUTIONARY TECHNOLOGY which will allow us to grow barrier reefs where needed" in the same way pearl farmers now grow cultured pearls she said. "I have five small sculptures growing in (Venice's) north lagoon."

The process uses a carbon anode and cathode — "the cathode is the sculpture in water. It's hooked up to a small car battery, and the accretion builds up" — like the oyster farmer's pearl.

The project was funded by the Samuel Kress Foundation, which seeks to preserve the world's cultural monuments.

It sounds like something from science fiction, but then, as Doner said, "I like to invent new ways to do things."

The exhibition continues through May 20. Hours are 2-5 p.m. Tuesday-Friday, 1-4 p.m. Saturday and Sunday and through the first intermission when Meadow Brook Theater is in action.

Michele Oka Doner, right, explains her drawings and designs for the benches for the University of Michigan campus.



JERRY ZOLYNSKY/staff photographer

Michigan Fine Arts Juror says she responds to risk takers

By Jill Hamilton
special writer

An interview with Gracie Mansion is an intimidating proposition.

After all, she maintains not one, but two, successful galleries in New York City where she is recognized for her ability to find and showcase new artists.

Mansion has been written about in every publication from Art News to the New York Times and was described in one article as "the toast of New York."

She came into the public spotlight in 1982 when she opened her first gallery, The Gracie Mansion Gallery, Loo Division, in the bathroom of her East Village apartment. Attention-getting devices like the bathroom opening and even her memorable name (the home of the mayor of New York is also called Gracie Mansion) soon helped her become a media favorite.

Her galleries have a reputation for representing the best in New York City's eclectic new artists and Mansion found many of these new artists from slides. Since she is always interested in finding new talent, Mansion agreed to come to Michigan to be a juror in the 1989 Michigan Fine Arts Competition at the Birmingham Bloomfield Art Association. How would Michigan stack up?

"I'VE JURIED A NUMBER of shows... at the

Carnegie Museum, the Baltimore Museum...," she said. "They're interesting because I get to see things I would not normally see. I never would have seen these artists without coming here."

"Besides," she said, "I have family in Bloomfield Hills."

Mansion had to look through more than 800 slides for this show. She eventually selected 120 pieces from the slides for the Fine Arts Competition, but didn't see any of the actual pieces until the first day of judging.

"The work is very professional," she said. "I was really pleased when I saw it in person. There was a lot of really original work."

She's right. The pieces that made it to the finals are especially exciting this year, according to competition organizers. Entries include a broken television with photographs plastered throughout the inside and a funky patchwork quilt depicting scenes of almost everything imaginable — from religious events to violence and oppression.

What does Mansion look for in a piece of art work?

"How I respond to it," she said. "It's very subjective, like buying art. It just depends on what hits a particular chord."

"I LOOK FOR THINGS that are very creative in the way they represent something," she continued. "I respond to risk taking — in subject mat-

Staff photos by Jerry
Zolynsky

ter, in issues, using a medium in a whole new way or doing it in a more interesting way. In looking at 800 slides, I saw a lot of the same type of images, I looked for people who tried to strike out."

In other words, viewing hundreds and hundreds of landscapes gets a bit old after a while.

"I was most pleased with the photographs," she added. "Something must be a good influence around here."

She praised organizations like the Birmingham/Bloomfield Art Association. "There aren't close-knit organizations like this in New York City. There it's every person for himself."

Mansion said that a young artist should decide what his or her goals are before figuring out whether they should move to New York. "It depends on what you want to do. If you want to make a space in history, go to New York," she said.

"I guess if you're really great, you'll eventually be discovered," she said. "Of course, by that time you may be dead."

Quilt wins top prize in Michigan exhibit

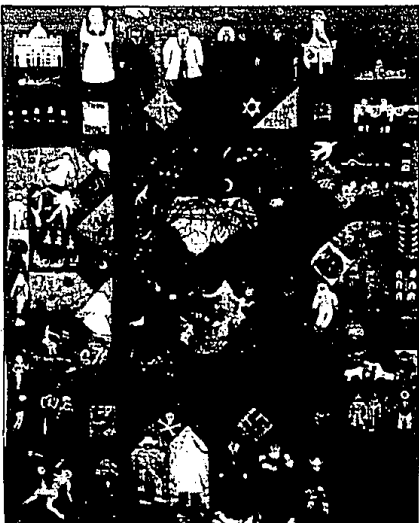
A quilt by Mary Gentry of Ypsilanti won best of show and the \$1,000 Arts Foundation of Michigan award in the Michigan Fine Arts Competition at Birmingham Bloomfield Art Association.

Second prize (\$750) winner was "Floating," a sculpture of four carved wood blocks by Liang Hao of Oak Park. The juror's award of excellence (\$500) went to Swayne Snot of Maple City. Additional juror's awards of excellence (\$250) were given to Kass Doyle of Bloomfield Hills, Pieter Favier, Oak Park and Jaymes Leahy, Bloomfield Hills.

Artists winning honorable mention included: Chris Allen-Wickler and Roger Allen-Wickler of West Bloomfield; Irene Curtis, Mason; Brian Fekete, Detroit; Matthew Holland, Haslett; Hildeki Kihata, Saginaw; Roger Mastson, Clarkston; and Nancy Adams Nash, Acme.

Others who won honorable mention awards were: S.J. Norbrenner, Bloomfield Hills; Eliza Proctor, Bloomfield Hills; Bruce Thayer, Mason; Carol Wald, Detroit; and Michael Edson, Ann Arbor.

The juror was New York City gallery owner, Gracie Mansion. The show continues through May 12. Hours are 9:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Monday-Saturday, 1515 S. Cranbrook, Birmingham.



Quilt by Mary Gentry of Ypsilanti won the best of show first prize.



"Floating," a sculpture of five shaped wood blocks by Liang Hao of Oak Park received second prize.