

Debbie Korbel: The Alignment of Inspiration and Laughter

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Debbie Korbel says what most inspires her sculptures is laughter. “I love to laugh and to make other people laugh. As a kid it was fun to go up to people and tickle them. I’ve found, as an adult, that is not so appreciated, but I can try ‘tickle’ them with something I make.”



And indeed she does. Her beautiful, sometimes poignant, sometimes wonderfully amusing assemblage sculptures are a pure pleasure to see, layered and sensorial indulgence that truly reaches into the viewer’s mind and heart. Her works tell stories we want to hear again and again.



“In a specific way, I am inspired when an idea just wafts in the window in my mind. There it rests, and blossoms – or festers – until I decide what to do about it. The origins of these ideas are varied –perhaps something is provoked from an overheard conversation, or I might come across an old car part that has a beautiful organic shape,” she relates. “Trying to dissect inspiration feels a little like trying to understand a butterfly by pulling off the wings—it doesn’t look that great when you tear it apart, but there is magic when everything is in alignment.”



Korbel explains that she hopes to connect with viewers on an emotional level, and wants viewers to recognize something they can relate to, or find familiar in her work. “Maybe, even see a bit of themselves at a vulnerable moment and by seeing me, a stranger, express these feelings, be reminded that as humans we all share them, even though we put on our socially appropriate adult exteriors.”

One way in which she tries to connect with her viewers is through the laughter that inspires her as an artist. “So, when I do pieces that *I* think are funny I am always so delighted if other people find them so, because in laughter, there is understanding,” she attests. “There is a bond in both laughter and tears. I am always on the verge of either laughing or crying. Some of the work I do is a combination of the melancholy and humorous, while other projects are more solidly in the *vin triste* category.”

Korbel has always gravitated toward art. She’s made jewelry, learned Chinese brush painting, written for television, and believes she’s truly hit her stride with sculpture.

Her sculptural assemblages are incredibly unique, and according to the artist, she begins with an idea or image in mind at times, and at others, with a material that attracts her.

“It combines the process of conceptual thinking with the tactile nature and satisfaction of physically making something,” she notes



“Sometimes I find a piece of scrap metal or wood that is interesting to me. It will ‘look like a part of something’ to me—perhaps the shape will remind me of a human leg, a samurai’s skirt, or a rabbit’s ear, and then I think about what the rest of a sculpture might look like. I base the scale of the sculpture on the size of

the initial piece. Other times, I have an idea percolating in my head and I consciously look for materials that might work well in the execution of my idea.”

The richness and texture of her work seems entwined with her use of found materials, but she has not always worked with such mixed mediums.



“When I started sculpting, I began working in clay. I soon came to realize that there were problems and limitations in working solely in this material. I didn’t want to be confined to these limitations. When I use pieces of steel and other metals, they have the inherent strength to support a large sculpture. Also, it was so much fun to find unusual materials and repurpose them in my art piece. I often don’t know the original use for some of the pieces I find, and people enjoy identifying them and will come up and tell me, ‘Oh, look, it’s an old air compressor valve’ or ‘Look, it’s a horse femur,’” she laughs.

To say her work is textured, or uses an incredible mix of materials to shape what are really classically perfect sculptures is almost to miss the point – of course her works are composed in this way, but it is the spirit that



infuses them through these techniques that makes them so fascinating. They are dream-like yet real, mysterious yet richly comprehensible. Her works feel inhabited – they have gravitas, wit, and soul.

One of the reasons Korbel says that she is so drawn to using assemblage is a philosophical ones. “I actually like the idea of assemblage being a metaphor for us, human beings. We are certainly the sum total of many things sewn together.”

Artistically, Korbel says one of the things she loves best is “the license to indulge my imagination, to be open to new ideas, projects and materials. It’s much more motivating to stumble across unexpected inspiration.” She adds “I tend to work on a couple of sculptures at a time and am very focused until I complete them. However, I don’t like to plan too many projects in advance, as that starts to feel like a to-do-list and kind of kills my creative mojo.”





For Korbel, the freedom to make impulsive choices in her work adds the serendipity. “I feel that I am able to maintain a level of excitement this way.”

Viewers can certainly feel that palpable excitement in her inventive work when they see it, and will be able to do so, soon.

Korbel will be participating in an open studio event at the Hawthorne Arts Complex in Hawthorne, Calif. August 5th from 2-6 p.m., and exhibiting in the show *About a Box* at Shoebox Projects in DTLA, August 12 through 26. She has shows upcoming with Red Tie Promotions in October and November as well, with dates TBA.



- Genie Davis; photos: courtesy of Debbie Korbel