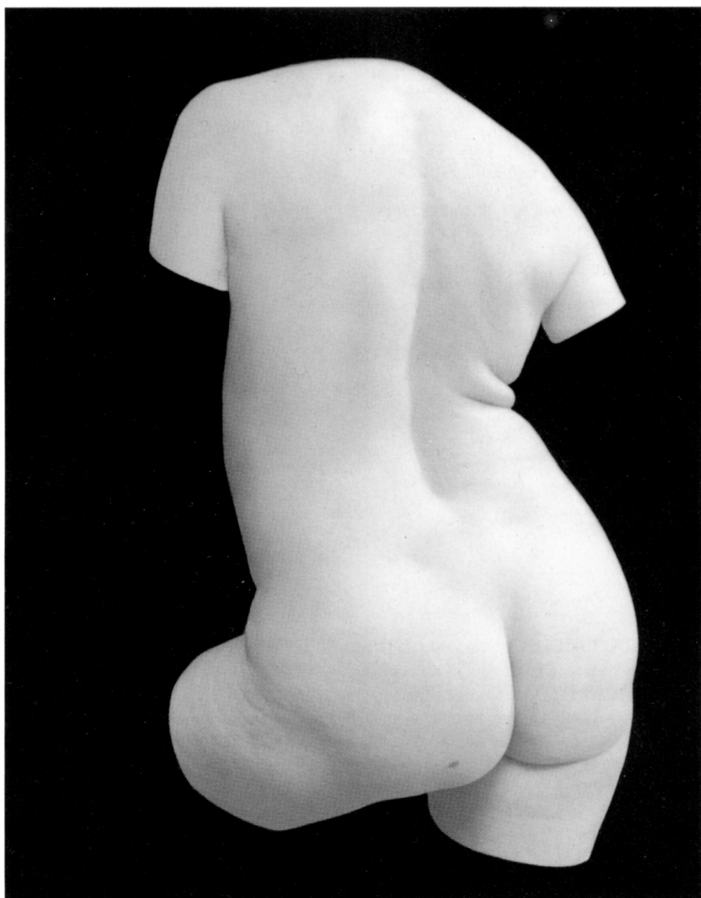


*arts & antiques



Stone Magnolias

Local artists capture the art of aging gracefully. By Abigail Foerstner

Barbara Ciurej and Lindsay Lochman have set out on what could be interpreted as a sinister mission — they want to transform gallery owner Bette Cerf Hill into stone! But before you go consulting your Greek mythology book for ways to stop these modern-day Medusas (known for turning their female subjects into Roman busts, headless Grecian marble torsos and Renaissance paintings), relax.

Ciurej and Lochman are mere (mortal) photographers who ask aging women to strike noble poses, often in the buff, recast-

ing them as sculptural heroes whose portraits celebrate the wisdom earned by wrinkles or gray hair.

“Women spend a lot of time never feeling good about the process of aging,” says Lochman. “It’s like just being alive is sort of pathological.”

The 52-year-old Ciurej and 56-year-old Lochman venerate a mature beauty dismissed by the minions of high fashion, Botox and a chemistry lab of skin creams. The black-and-white photographs do so by crafting a woman’s version of art his-

tory on exhibit in *All Things Are Always Changing* at Hill’s Hubbard Street gallery through Jan. 17. “In our society, we lack images that address women’s historical contributions, their aging, their inner life, working life, public life,” the artists note. “This work is our personal Stonehenge, Acropolis and Sistine Chapel.”

Hill, herself a painter, readied herself recently to make the leap from exhibiting these works of art to becoming one of them for the ongoing series. “The first thing about nobility is to hold in your stomach,” she advised sagely as she posed for what would become a classical Roman bust. For this theme, women wear a favorite black top that blends into the velvety background of the image, giving the

This 16-by-20-inch archival inkjet print, “Vessel 2,” is shown as part of Barbara Ciurej and Lindsay Lochman’s series *All Things are Always Changing* this month at Bette Cerf Hill Gallery.

illusion of a bust.

Instead of shooting with a digital camera, the artists attach their mahogany Deardorff view camera to a sturdy tripod and work in natural light. And what they do with light comes close to spinning straw into gold.

Hill sat in the cross-illumination of vaulting windows in an old manufacturing district — an upcoming arts enclave — just west of Ashland Avenue. Gold fabric-covered screens threw a warm glow across her face until Hill appeared as if she were bathed in a Mediterranean sunrise. The artists call this portable cocoon the “immortality photo booth.”

Ultimately, they scan their images into Photoshop and orchestrate the transformation from ordinary skin to statuary. “We pull it to the edge where it’s looking like stone but not losing the humanity,” Ciurej says. Like much of their photography, *All Things* explores inner identity with powerful allegories. The work reaches back across the ages to start the narrative with an image of the Venus of Lespugue, a fecund ancient fertility figure with pendulous breasts and ample buttocks.

Similar Venus figures commanded both reverence and desire for countless generations of human history. But Ciurej and Lochman deftly spoof the more recent

marketing of idealized bodies with a Barbie-doll image cut into the Venus photograph. “Vessels,” the photographs of nude torsos, introduce viewers to the Greek tradition followed by benevolent Roman busts of women as ancient goddesses.

It’s very serious stuff indeed until Lochman and Ciurej move into the Renaissance. Here, the artists take on Michelangelo with playful tableaux where women mimic the attitudes and gestures of figures from the Sistine Chapel. “Dialogues with Michelangelo” pairs the painted figures with the photographic nudes and challenges the authority of who gets to represent the divinity of the body.

Heading out of the past, the artists created mystical patterns of spirals, mandalas and totems with repeat images of human forms folded into themselves. The strikingly contemporary yet primeval designs take the viewer full circle back to the beginnings of art and symbols of infinity.

“We take it out of the specific and into the big picture — the universe,” says Lochman. The changes in their own bodies over time — the duo has been collaborating for 30 years — and the contradictions between personal experience and media myths inspired their current project, which they’ve been working on for four years.

“We are trying,” Ciurej says, “to deal with our own aging.”