

THE SHAPES OF KARIN SWILDENS

BY CHARLES LONBERGER



There is a joyful creativity building within Karin Swildens, and it finds expression perfectly in the sculptures she brings us – works that are the product of an alchemy that draws from life experiences and her “c’est la vie” optimism. Swildens’ style is strongly – if unconsciously – influenced by the formative years she spent in Morocco, where she largely grew up – and are hallmarked by the circles and soft shapes of Arabian art and architecture. Raised by a father who was himself a painter, she grew up in a world of art that, by her own admission, “was all around the house,” art which, coincidentally, helped to make her comfortable with nudity, as “my dad always had these beautiful nudes hanging on the walls.” Interestingly observing that her father, like herself, did not work from live models, but imagination (and memory, recalling the Arab faces he had seen). She learned through assimilation how to metamorphose reality into artistic expression. After attending L’Ecole des Arts Decoratifs in Paris (which, she boasts, “had no lasting impact”), Swildens married French TV figure Claude Gaignaire and moved with him on assignment to Los Angeles. Once in L.A., Swildens started painting, but one day walked up to one of her creations and wanted “to reach into it.” Although she had been drawing and painting since the age of 20, she became totally committed to sculpture. “I started with wood before switching to clay. I got an exhibit right away at the Brand Library in Glendale in ‘83, got good press. And I’ve been going ever since.”



Swildens’ impressive intellect has found a way to express its concerns in a way that is happy, open and welcoming. Almost all of her work has something of a soft curve to it, making it quintessentially feminine. And her concerns are feminine as well: she has a series of Goddesses, which celebrate the Goddess in every woman. “In the ‘80s I came across the academic work of Marija Gimbutas, which dealt mostly with primitive Goddesses. I felt very close to the Goddess, and started to use my sculptures to express the marvelous things that I found inside myself.” She paused, looked inward, then continued. “I found there was much more to me than I expected,” she marveled, and was cheered that her work gave her a focus to express much of what her rich, emotional life had given her.

She delighted in exploring the world of mythology, and there are many references to Daphne in her drawings and her sculpture. She created a very personal mythology in her Fantamyth series, in which her father’s words – “you are rich inside” – found haunting affirmation. There are Sanctuaries, Eggs and Doors, the latter being a meditation, sometimes gently self-critical, of her own personal journey. Then there are her Talismans, charms against evil. She means them to be objets d’art that trigger the viewer’s perception, saying more about them than the subject itself.

Much more intriguing are other series she has done. Mysterious and otherworldly are her Symbolic Portraits. Although raised Catholic, this Cancerian came upon this stunningly beautiful idea when she read “Life You Were Born To Live,” by Dan Millman. She takes the date of a person’s birth and uses a formula to illustrate a personal numerology in making highly individual, highly evocative works. It results in picturing a lawyer as a bull and an engineer by his hands, in reducing personality to its essence. She wishes to use these portraits like an oeuvre d’art, much like the Masons. “Make it there, leave it there,” she sighs.

Celebrities such as Anthony Hopkins and Whoopi Goldberg have purchased works from her “Women” series, wherein the circularity of style and the anonymity of subject lend the sculpture an iconic quality. Most of her subjects in general are women. “Why mostly women?” she asks. “I try not to think about it. I can’t answer that question. When I try to make a man, it ends up being a woman.” But her women are uniformly positive, even joyous, figures devoid of any neuroticism.



Predictably, she sublimates herself into her popular “Horses” series, which have as a theme energy, strength and intuition. “I love the feeling,” she admits. “I love the muscles and the power.” She relates closely to the Horses in a Januslike fashion. Her “Stallion Ax Imprint” shows the physical imprint of her hand in the clay, while on her “Doors of Instinct,” she brilliantly frames a vagina with horses’ heads and manes that suggest pubic hair. In general, Horses have for her “a male energy.”