


LIN EMERY

A photograph of Lin Emery, a woman with short brown hair, smiling and holding a large, circular, metallic sculpture piece. She is wearing a light purple long-sleeved shirt. The sculpture is made of polished aluminum and has a large circular hole in the center. The background is dark and out of focus.

Graceful, flowing and modern, "Wave," the sculpture situated in front of the New Orleans Museum of Art, is an apt reflection of its maker: Lin Emery. Working as a kinetic sculptor since the 1960s, throughout her career Emery has broken new ground for women artists, and in particular, for those who produce large-scale sculpture — a field that is dominated by men. Emery's work has evolved through the years — from solid church figures to the kinetic polished aluminum pieces most people are familiar with today. Her public commissions have gained her a loyal following as well as accolades, such as the prestigious Grand Prize for Public Sculpture in Japan.

"She is a very special artist living and working in New Orleans," says Arthur Roger, whose eponymous gallery has been representing her in New Orleans for more than 16 years.

Born: Larchmont, N.Y. **Family:** Husband, Shirley (passed away); son, Brooks Braselman **Resides:** Uptown **Favorite food:** Yogurt and fruit **Favorite movie:** I don't go to movies. **Favorite book:** Whatever I'm reading at the moment, which is a strange book by Georges Duhamel, "Cecile Parmi Nous." **Favorite music:** Mozart's *Jupiter Symphony* (also known as *Symphony No. 41*) **Favorite artist:** Isamu Noguchi

Tell me about your art education. I didn't have one. I don't know whether I would have come along faster if I had training or not. Or if I had been doing something different.

My father, who died when I was a baby, had been a collector and I spent my childhood drawing things around the house. I never thought of it as being anything but what I liked to do. I thought I was going to be a writer. I went to Chicago to attend the University of Chicago and I worked for the *Chicago Sun* as a copy girl. So I thought I wanted to be a journalist.

When I eventually went to Paris — I guess I must have been 19 by then — I got a freelance job writing for a French scandal paper. I lived across the street from a sculpture studio and I thought well, some day I may want to know what sculpture is about. And I went in there, [sculptor] Ossip Zadkine was instructing teachers on the GI Bill and he took me on as an example as what would you do with somebody who knows nothing. He was very sexist. Women were just sort of beneath consideration [for him].

What was it like to learn from Ossip Zadkine? About one piece I did, he said, "Well that's not so bad, I did something like that when I was 7 years old." It was a challenge and I discovered I was much better at it than writing.

I went to the studio every single day. We worked from a model, making a life-sized figure in clay, eight hours a day with a two-hour lunch break. At the end of the week you tore it down, then the following Monday started another life-sized figure in clay. You never did anything with it - except tear it down. It was simply a study - a learning experience. In the evening I would go to sketch classes and just draw from figures.

Is it hard for a woman to break into the art world - specifically as a large-scale sculptor, which seems male-dominated? It certainly has been, except in New Orleans. That's the reason I shortened my name to Lin, because in the national scene, when I applied for something it was neither male nor female. [Ed. note: She declines to give her full first name.]

In New Orleans, because the tradition of art is women's business, that is a very strong tradition. Angela Gregory was the pre-eminent female sculptor when I first came here, and she had done a great deal of work around the city, so I was accepted as a woman sculptor. She laid the groundwork.

Any specific incidents of losing a commission because you're a woman? I had been chosen for something in Saudi Arabia and when I went for the interview they looked at me and that was the end of that.

Do you ever have an artist block? Yes, but I have so many more ideas that come to mind than I have time to develop. I have a side yard filled with things that are started and boxes of paper models, so if I ever have a block, I just look at one of these and develop it. It's much slower than writing.

How long does it take to produce one of your sculptures? If it's a big public sculpture, I go to the site and come up with at least two ideas. I then make models out of cardboard or poster board articulated with straws - I don't draw. I work three-dimensionally. I develop the models, take them to the community or client or whoever - none of that takes very long, maybe two or three months. Then it can take a year for the contract, and when I finally get started, it can take six months to a year. So it takes about 1 1/2 to 2 years, but I work on several at a time.

Where do you make money? I make maquettes in aluminum, with miniature bearings, that I can show in a gallery, sell and recoup my losses, because making the big pieces almost always ends in the red. You can never guess how much it's going to cost.

If you could own any artwork in the world, price is no object, what would it be? If I won the lottery, the very, very early Mycenaean figures. I like the very simple forms.

Have they influenced your work? Very definitely.

Art writers often describe your kinetic sculpture as inspired by nature-based forms, but has anything else caught your eye? [For a commission for an oil and tool company,] the oil tools I saw inspired me. The →

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round hollow forms, the huge heights and curves, and the support elements for that sculpture required enormous tubes to be bent. I found a place in New Orleans that does nothing but bend enormous pipes. That was a revelation. I have a lot of enormous pieces of bent pipe that are intended for an installation piece - the one I am working on now has a political theme of loss and devastation, fed by images of Katrina and the cries for help.

Most of your pieces are made of polished aluminum - have you worked with any other materials?

I've also worked in bronze and stainless steel. The sculpture in the Renaissance Arts Hotel lobby is made of bronze, but I have to import the bronze. Since New Orleans is a shipping town, aluminum is on hand. But the dull gray of the surface was unappealing. I found that polishing the surface would [allow it] to be full of color, reflecting all that was around the sculpture.

What kind of art did you do before becoming a kinetic sculptor?

When I came back to New Orleans I did church figures because I had enough background doing figurative work. I did a lot of the church figures in this area - St. James Major and St. Catherine of Siena.

How did you evolve into doing kinetic sculpture?

I got to be fairly well known for making the church figures and did things around the country, and eventually I had to make the armatures [for the figures] and I had to learn how to weld them. In those days, Delgado would not allow women in, claiming they didn't have a women's

bathroom, so I went to trade school in New York and learned to weld. I came back to New Orleans and got a corner in a shop that made oyster tongs. I learned a lot by just being there.

When I began to make kinetic sculpture, I worked for a while doing sets for WDSU-TV and wrote copy for Kreeger's. So, some of the writing skills did me some good.

What would you tell the struggling artist, someone just out of school?

Well, I don't know if whether [art] school is such a good idea. So many of the young people who come to me with degrees saying they are sculptors have the ideas, but they haven't developed the technology. They don't know how to use the tools. And it may be because the universities are so afraid of insurance problems, that they always have a supervisor who does the nitty-gritty. I have found trade schools and working with industry gives you a much better background. By industry I mean in a shipyard or go to Delgado's trade school, learn machining.

What do you think of the art scene in New Orleans?

Right now I think we are in limbo. I think the art scene was amazing before Katrina, because the artists all liked each other, were interested in each other and they're on close terms with the musicians. The lack of competitiveness here is amazing as compared to New York.

Are there any artists that you think are overrated? Richard Serra, Damien Hirst and Jeff Koons

True Confession: Meditation is my secret vice.

-Sue Strachan

