

ARTS | Gwen Marcus

A prodigy's idea file keeps growing

BY JASON LESLEY
COASTAL OBSERVER

Sculptor Gwen Marcus never knows where she will find her next inspiration.

She saw a young girl in the Museum of Natural History in New York City who became the model for a piece she's working on called "Nettie."

"I started following her, taking her picture," Marcus said, flipping through photos on her iPhone. "My boyfriend said, 'Stop doing that. You're going to get in trouble.' I couldn't let her get away."

Marcus has been exploring and defining her talent as a sculptor since the age of 9. She has a stack of ideas so tall that she could never sculpt them all. But they keep coming. She found an inspiration while on an airplane and sketched it in pencil.

"I can't wait until it's starting to breathe," she said, "and telling me where to go."

Internationally recognized for her work, Marcus will be in the Pawleys Island area until mid-October in a variety of capacities.

She judged the National Sculpture Society show at Brookgreen Gardens Tuesday and opens a month-long show of her own work at the Cheryl Newby Gallery today with a reception from 5:30 to 7:30 p.m.

"She's a sculptor's sculptor," said Newby, "at the top of her game. She's extremely detail-oriented, and that shows

in her sculpture. She shows the personality of the figure in body language and facial expressions that are amazingly lifelike. She gets it right every time."

On Sunday at 3 p.m. Marcus will give a lecture and answer questions at Brookgreen's Lowcountry Center Auditorium and teach a three-day master sculpture class beginning Monday. Sorry, all you hopeful sculptors, the spots are filled. In addition to those duties, she will be a sculptor-in-residence at Brookgreen until Oct. 13.

"I've been down here quiet a few times," Marcus said. "It's a most magical place. I love Brookgreen Gardens. For me, it's a slice of heaven."

One of her best-known sculptures, "The Bather," is at Brookgreen, under live oaks and overlooking a pond. Her original small version will be at the Cheryl Newby Gallery show.

"The Bather" is a nude that she did in her New York studio with a dancer in need of outside income named Kelly as the model.

"The pose happened naturally," Marcus said, "and then became more introspective."

Marcus added fuller hips and elongated the figure — at just 5-foot-1, Marcus says she loves long legs — but the energy and the soul of the sculpture is Kelly.

Marcus's talent, critics say, comes from her ability to pull strength, energy, spirituality and sensuality from the bronze, not impose it from outside.

Marcus says her sculptures have a rhythm and flow that she associates with music.

"It slows down and speeds up," she says. "That's how I want the eye to travel through my compositions. There's a distinct rhythm to each piece. I never want the eye to leave the composition."

Marcus prefers to work with models, sculpting the nude first and adding drapery later. "It's very important to get the underlying form," she said. "And the fabric is not just an embellishment, but something that adds to the statue, creating more rhythm and more energy in the piece."

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Marcus was labeled a child prodigy after her kindergarten teacher told her parents that she had an unusual ability to draw. With a family already entrenched in the arts — her mother was a ballet teacher and her grandfather, a fine art engraver — she was given art lessons and learned to paint.

"When I started working with clay," she said, "I knew that was my medium. It just clicked. All of a sudden, I felt I could breathe life into something."

Her parents moved from Long Island into New York City and managed to get famed sculptor Bruno Lucchesi to mentor their daughter.

"Dad brought me in on the weekends, and I would get an assignment, and he would critique my work and sculpt with me," she said. Marcus was also taught by masters Clemente Spampinat and Isaac Soyer in New York.

Later she attended New York University, the Rhode Island School of Design, Art Students League and the National Academy of Design School.

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Her first bronze left her proud and a little in awe of what she had done.

Still, she saw things that she wanted to change.

"I couldn't work with power tools and grinders then," Marcus said. "Now I'm obsessed with all the seam lines. I can't let a piece out of my studio unless I am 100 percent satisfied. I can't settle, and I'm not good at delegating. So that's why it takes me two years to do some pieces."

"Every sculpture has its own story, it's own energy."

That energy is always positive, like in "The Raincatcher," a child with her mouth open wide to catch rain drops, or "Hatti," a striding black woman exuding elegance, confidence and power.

"I don't want to make people miserable," Marcus said. "I don't want to create pieces that wrench out your heart or make you depressed. I want people to walk away feeling energized."