

Sculpting More Than Stone

by Kara Moyer

SCULPTURE, IN ITS MOST BASIC TERM, TRANSLATES into ‘to carve.’ But one quick scan of Joel Shapses’ gallery and it becomes blatantly obvious that there’s so much more to the three-dimensional art form than simply carving. And if you’re anything like me: wholly unfamiliar with sculpture in its artistic form, aside from the typical decorative objects on bookshelves and commercial entryway fountain displays, Joel Shapses’ work is a great place to get your feet wet.

Prolific is the first word that comes to mind upon entering his gallery, located on Shirley Street in the heart of the Naples Art District. Classical music plays over the sound system just loud enough to have to speak over it, and a mini studio is tucked into the front left corner with a doorway wide enough to see a wall of award ribbons and countless tools for detail work. He shares the space with two other artists, both predominantly watercolor painters, whose pieces oddly and perfectly complement the sculptures.

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It’s packed from front entrance to back exit with what can only be described as an overwhelmingly eclectic representation of artistic talent. From the white glass and aluminum fused bird dangling by twine above our heads to ‘Valkyrie,’ a crystal alabaster winged abstract piece illuminated in blue neon light on a pedestal against the wall, there is, quite literally, something to generate a connection, or at the very least spark a conversation, from anyone who allows themselves the opportunity. There is even a life-sized terra cotta sculpture paying homage to his



beloved dog, Tucker, a very good boy sound asleep on his belly with back legs kicked out behind him and surrounded by his collection of favorite toys and raw hide bones. ‘Tucker’ was awarded first place in the Naples Art Association’s ‘Your Choice art exhibition.’

The list of awards and accolades is unsurprisingly extensive (over 90 and counting), but Shapses is humble and modest, a man of few words, even when discussing his work, which consists of over a thousand pieces to date. When I ask where he draws his inspiration from, he pauses, gives a half-smile while looking around, and replies, simply, “Everywhere. Everything. It’s hard to turn off the ideas most of the time.”

Originally from New Jersey, Shapses completed his formal education and earned a Doctorate in Dental Surgery from Temple University in 1971. During his schooling, his elective credits were dedicated to sculpting classes, an avid interest since childhood. He studied with Alfred Van Loen, an internationally renowned German-American sculptor whose works have been featured in galleries all over the world, including The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Van Loen recognized his talents and encouraged him to pursue sculpture. Shortly after graduation, Shapses traveled the world studying various stones and quarries, and the history of stones from ancient civilizations through present day. After relocating to the east coast of Florida in 1972, Shapses built a successful career in dentistry that spanned over 30 years, but always continued sculpting and featuring his pieces in his own gallery in Fort Lauderdale, Gallery 421. “The two go hand in hand, although some may not initially think so, he says. “Dentistry is a form of sculpture and the attention to detail is its own kind of art.”

After his statement, I half-jokingly ask if he’s ever sculpted one, and in the most perfect representation of uniting and honoring both careers respectively, Shapses takes a few steps from where we stand, proudly grins, and presents to me an

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CLOCKWISE STARTING TOP LEFT: Spirit of '83, Firebird, A Dolphin's Kiss, Involutions AT LEFT: Une Touche de Rouge

After relocating to Naples in 2007, Shapses began exploring mediums outside of stone, such as fused glass, aluminum, even found objects like ocean coral rock, and how to intertwine multiple mediums into one singular sculpture.

oversized and anatomically accurate sculpture of a tooth. His ability to blend the kismet of his drastically different yet curiously similar careers alongside the significance of his contributions to the art world further emphasizes his master level skills and

artistic abilities. He really does see inspiration in everything, everywhere.

In July 2007, after retiring from dentistry, Shapses relocated to Naples and opened his current gallery. While his range of stones had grown over the years,

including but not limited to granite, marble, and onyx, it was after his relocation to Naples that Shapses began exploring mediums outside of stone, such as fused glass, aluminum, even found objects like ocean coral rock, and how to intertwine multiple mediums into one singular sculpture. His artist's statement explains it best: "I don't like to limit my creativity to one material or style. I must flow with the muse of creation." He has since integrated bronze, LED and neon lights, cement, and acrylic. "With all the materials available, this gives me more freedom to create."

Mixed media work is prominent in the gallery, and it's easy to see how the melding of mediums expands Shapses' creative abilities. The front window holds a bouquet of flowers, 'A Touch of the Blues,' which is fused on a coral rock with aluminum stems supporting vibrant blue and pink glass flowers reminiscent of a Chihuly display.

Perhaps one of his more thought-provoking, even somber pieces, 'All Lives Matter' is a compilation of 145 stern and solemn faces,

"I used to do everything by hand, and then I discovered power tools, which speeds up the time, but you have to be so careful."

mouths closed, eyes mostly blank or closed, in various sized spheres. It almost touches the ceiling on its pedestal at over six feet tall, with a wide base of faces that narrows to a singular one at the top and is comprised of seven separate pieces of stone hollowed to fit over a steel rod. His gallery book describes the sculpture as "a tribute to all who have suffered from the hardships of the pandemic, racism, discrimination, and other injustices."

It took ten years to construct, and he finished during the pandemic in 2020, using dental instruments to finalize the intricate details. Shapses

didn't elaborate much more in person other than to explain the mediums of the piece, but it echoes back to his artist's statement once again: "I create to delight, to interest, to provoke thought, and to move and inspire."

Shapses' work is known not just in Florida, or even the United

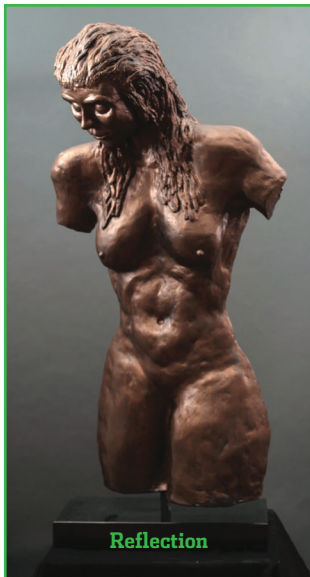
States, as he's been internationally recognized throughout his career. His sculptures have been featured in museums in London, Paris, Tokyo, and most recently he shipped a commissioned piece to Saudi Arabia. "That was a



nightmare to crate and pack, but it made it and they're happy." His largest commissioned piece (so far) is a 6-foot abstract made from Minnesota marble for Saks Fifth Avenue in Fairlane, Michigan.

After a tour of the gallery, we take a short walk across the street to Shapses' studio. "This is where the magic happens," he jokes. The studio is a common storage unit in the middle of a strip of about twenty, and most in the complex are used by artists as studios. As he unlocks and raises the aluminum garage door, I can't help but exclaim. It looks as though a blizzard of stone dust detonated inside, which is about large enough for a pickup truck.

Piles of raw stone in various sizes and shades of gray are heaped onto a rolling platform truck, spilling into cardboard boxes around it. A handful of oscillating pedestal fans convene around a pergola of sorts that Shapses constructed himself with two by fours and plywood, canopied with canvas drop cloths. A standard shop vac sits next to it with the suction tube inserted



which speeds up the time, but you have to be so careful." He goes on to explain that one wrong move could shatter a sculpture at any point in the process. Staring at the raw stones immediately after touring the gallery of finished work is a stark contrast that further highlights the fragility of the immense precision required to create his sculptures.

into PVC pipe and duct taped to the plywood wall of the structure. Inside it sits a work bench he also built himself, with four massive flood lights pointed downward.

Everything he creates is conceived right here. It's not lost on me how such precise, masterful works of sculpture are created from what looks to a novice sculpture-admirer like me as pure chaos.

He nods to the other wall full of chiseling tools. "I used to do everything by hand, and then I discovered power tools,

Shapses points to the hundreds of different sanders hanging from a peg wall, a kiln in the back corner beneath a moving blanket, and a table saw with a piece of rough aluminum resting along the blade, all integral tools, all staged exactly where he needs them. Then he asks me to step closer and points to the back left corner.

"That's my ongoing project," he says, as I squint through the dusty air and spot, beneath two bath towels, a massive metal sculpture that resembles a shark's tail with what could be crab claws welded to the sides, and a huge underbelly of some sort. The edges are all meticulously cut and crimped in a perfect pattern.

"What is it supposed to be, exactly?" I naively ask.

"I don't know yet," he answers with another modest half-smile. "But it'll eventually tell me what it wants to be." •

Joel Shapses' Art Gallery is located at 6240 Shirley St., suite 102, in Naples. The Naples Art District hosts Seasonal Open Studios on Thursdays from 1-5pm, November-April. He teaches sculpture classes on Tuesdays & Thursdays at the Marco Island Center for the Arts. To enroll in his classes, visit marcoislandart.org. Visit joelshapsesstudio.com for more information.