

BEHIND THE ARTIST

Sculptor inspired by ‘muse of creation’

By J.C. Amodea

The year was 1987, and the event was a Harmonic Convergence Seminar attended by adherents of the New Age Movement, one of whom was actress Shirley MacLaine. While the participants — Joel Shapses was one of them — were deep in meditation, MacLaine stealthily moved through the room. She paused at Shapses and declared that he had a past life as a stone mason during the time of the pyramids. He was utterly amazed. By that year, he'd been playing his craft as a sculptor for more than two decades, enraptured with the three-dimensional art form.

Originally from New Jersey, Shapses attended the C.W. Post Campus of Long Island University in New York. He took art appreciation classes, and in his junior year, he took a sculpture course for non-art majors.

“I never knew I had a talent for working with stone until I tried it and have been doing it ever since,” he said.

Meanwhile, Shapses entered the field of dentistry, relocated to Fort Lauderdale, and practiced there for 30 years. He moved to Naples in 2006 and practiced another 10 years before it was time to permanently exchange his dental drill for a stone worker's chisel and hammer. In 2007, he opened studios in the Naples Art District and a gallery a few steps away.

Among the sculptor's most notable pieces was a six-ton marble abstract sculpture for Saks Fifth Avenue in Michigan. His work is displayed on his website, and he is represented on



Sculptor Joel Shapses at his Naples studio with a creation using his newest technique that incorporates canvas and paint. Photos courtesy Joel Shapses

three international sites: Saatchi Art (Los Angeles, London), Tricera Art (Tokyo) and Singularart (France and Germany).

Introspective, spiritually minded and affable, these days, the award-winning artist — nearly 100 awards to date — works on multiple pieces at a time; he usually visualizes his next five sculptures, and, on aver-

age, can produce a finished piece in a few months.

“My sculptures are created out of a vision given to me by the ‘muse of creation,’” he noted. “I allow it to inspire me to create the finished work.”

He teaches sculpture at the Marco Island Center for the Arts during the season. In conjunction with the Center, as one of 14 selected artists, he

will exhibit his work 5-10 p.m. June 20 at an opening reception at the Museum of Contemporary Art of the Americas near Miami. We wanted to find out more.

The Naples Press: How would you describe your style?

Joel Shapses: I like to do things that are outside of the box; I don't have a particular or set style because I don't like to be pigeonholed into any one style, so whatever comes to mind comes out. I started working in alabaster, but now, I like hard stones like granite marble. Most of my works are made of colorful stones, mixed media — and some with neon.

TNP: You've worked with Italian translucent alabaster and other types of stone. What other mediums do you work with?

Shapses: Besides granite, onyx and marble, I work with aluminum, welding it into various shapes and adding variations of neon and fused glass created in a kiln. I mix mediums and incorporate stone and glass with paint. I've also used a sculpting material that permanently hardens on canvas with paint. I first made a clay sculpture for a life-sized cast resin piece, then did a plaster cast over it and applied resin inside the negative space; it is life-sized and durable for indoor or outdoor display. I have also done a couple of bronze sculptures.

TNP: Has your work led you into new areas?

Shapses: I am now working with a new technique on canvas using gesso and cement, to which I apply paint. I love working with different colors and textures. One recent multi-colored piece made from canvas was

92 inches tall and sold to a Mumbai client. I create the shapes, paint the canvas and add texture.

TNP: Have you exhibited your work at street shows?

Shapses: When I started, I did as many as 14 grueling street shows yearly — even while I was busy doing dentistry, art and exhibiting, all part-time. As my schedule got heavier, I quit the street circuit.

TNP: What advice would you give to artists getting started?

Shapses: Sculpting is more adventurous than artistic paintings on canvas and other materials. You are working with stone, and it's precarious; if you break a piece, your vision is gone. The art world is saturated, and it's a difficult market to crack unless you get discovered. Start with street shows — if you can stomach it, keep up with that and get into a gallery. If you sell, great; if not, you must be above that and do your work for the love of art.

Joel Shapses Studio and Gallery

Where: 6240 Shirley St., #102, Naples (gallery by appointment)

Contact: joelshapsesstudio.com or 954.830.3156

'Marco to Miami'

What: (Exhibition of the work of 14 Southwest Florida artists including Shapses with his piece, “Etude”)

When: June 20-July 20

Where: Museum of Contemporary Art of the Americas, 12063 SW 131st Ave., Miami

Contact: mocaamericas.org or 786.624.0182