

Sculptor Susan Cronin creates life in bronze

BRIAN McELHINEY

Arts Editor

MANCHESTER — The bronze elephant is kneeling down on one knee, holding a ring aloft in its long, twisting trunk. Its face is turned upward, front hooves mashed together in a pleading gesture directed toward an unseen mate.

The sculpture, entitled “Will You Marry Me?”, is by bronze artist Susan Read Cronin of Manchester. She likes to create pieces that can be used or played with by the people who purchase them, she said, and “Will You Marry Me?” is no exception.

“My dream is that someone will buy it and use it to propose to someone,” said Cronin, during a telephone interview last Friday.

Elephants are a frequent subject of Cronin’s sculpture. One of her favorite pieces, “XXO,” is an elephant grasping a stick in its trunk, as if it were writing something in the sand.

“In the case of ‘XXO,’ I knew that real elephants can draw in sand. I try to get inside the head of whatever it is I’m making,” said Cronin. “[It can be used as] a communicator between people; people can leave messages back and forth with it.”

Cronin’s work is on display in galleries throughout the country, including the Harrison Gallery in Williamstown, Mass., and the Hunter Kirkland Contemporary in Santa Fe, N.M. A solo show,



Submitted Photo

Susan Read Cronin works on a wax version of her sculpture “Rabbit’s Reward” at the Berkshire Fine Arts Foundry in Pittsfield, Mass.

“Eggcentricities,” featuring one-of-a-kind egg sculptures that Cronin calls “Ooofs,” will open at the Southern Vermont Arts Center on Feb. 7, and will run through March 9.

“They’re all eggs that have weird looking legs,” said Cronin.

“I start getting attached to these things, it’s like a little family I’ve made.”

Cronin has officially lived in Manchester since 1990, but visited the area often during her childhood in Long Island, N.Y. “We came up to Manchester to go skiing every weekend, so I’m sort of from the area for most of my life,” said Cronin.

She ran a mail order children’s costume business, Suzo, out of Grafton for 10 years before moving to Manchester to study English at Williams College in

coating on them.”

Cronin cast her first bronze piece in 1997. Since that time, she has cast over 1,000 separate pieces. She works out of the Berkshire Fine Arts Foundry in Pittsfield, Mass.

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However, the casting process is difficult and even dangerous, according to Cronin, and can take anywhere from three months to a year, depending on the size of the piece being cast.

The first step is creating a mold of an original clay sculpture by painting wet rubber on it. Once the rubber dries, the clay is removed and the mold is filled with hot wax. When the wax cools, Cronin makes sure the sculpture looks just right, and signs and numbers the wax. She then inserts a pipe and funnel with a board over the top into the wax and dips the object into colloidal silica, which turns into a hard shell. This process is repeated until the shell is about one inch thick.

The board is then cut off the top of the funnel, and the object goes into a 2,000-degree kiln upside-down, so that the wax evacuates the mold. Hot, liquid bronze is then poured into the funnel. Once it cools, Cronin breaks the shell off the bronze with a hammer and cleans it. Finally, the sculpture is covered with a chemical called patina, which is sealed on with a special wax. This protects it against corrosion.

According to Cronin, the process is “not something you can do in your backyard.”

“At each point, something can go wrong, and you have to start over again,” said Cronin. “It has places along the way that can get hairy.”

Cronin is at the foundry for most of the process. “Some artists just drop a piece off,” she said, “but some interesting things have happened at the foundry.”

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She ran a mail order children's costume business, Suzo, out of Grafton for 10 years before moving to Manchester to study English at Williams College in Williamstown, Mass. She became interested in sculpture soon thereafter. "I decided I needed to get creative again," said Cronin.

Cronin studied stone sculpture with Jane Armstrong of Equinox Village, and ceramics at Frog Hollow, before deciding to work with bronze in 1995.

"I sort of got to a crossroads. I decided I really wanted to do bronze casting in 1995," said Cronin. "[At the time] I had no idea how anyone made a bronze, I thought it was like M&M's, the

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Sculptor

Cronin is currently working on a book, with the help of workers at the foundry, that explains the bronze casting process. "I wanted it to be able to explain the process from a third grade level and up," she said.

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Sometimes a mistake during the casting process can lead to a more unique sculpture, as was the case with one of Cronin's pieces featuring two swordfighting knights. One of the knights had an air bubble in his leg during the wax stage.

"His leg didn't come out with the wax, so someone jokingly put a peg leg on him," said Cronin. "His hand is now a hook. It turned into a whole other piece because of the mistake of an air bubble."

Cronin sells her pieces through galleries around the country, and also has a small gallery of her work in her house. Visit her Web site at www.susanreadcronin.com.