

In the art world, Bernard Abtey is known for his aesthetic sculptures, especially for his female figures, for which collectors pay high prices. The French artist creates statues and sculptures from marble, iron and granite. Figures with soft, flowing lines, sometimes delicate, often long limbed – of the most rugged of materials, firmly grounded. His graceful lines elicit a delicate beauty from these rough materials – giving shape to even our most troubling feelings: his pieces have titles such as “Loneliness”, “Vulnerability”, “Bewilderment”; but also “A Look of Dignity” and “Shy”.

Many of his sculptures were created following an emotionally taxing, frequently difficult mission: for example after driving humanitarian aid convoys to Sarajevo, where he ended up being detained for several weeks – in the turmoil of war, surrounded by grief, despair and horror. Upon returning home he worked through his experiences and feelings in marble, granite and rusty iron. These sensitive and expressive pieces did not go unnoticed for long – especially against the background of his intensive social commitment. The art world soon became aware of the young artist. The President congratulated him on his work when he created sculptures for Oradour, a town destroyed in World War II by the Germans and Alsatians who had been forced into labour. Later he dedicated time to working with prisoners. Showings of his work around the world followed; he opened up a studio in Carrara, Italy and realized projects in Brazil and Bethlehem.

Many of his sculptures are inspired by brief encounters, snapshots or glimpses into the inner workings of others. Bernard Abtey sees himself as an observer and witness to history; he uses a variety of materials to express what he feels as well as what life and the people around him show of themselves and their feelings. On paper he sketches what he sees, which is more than others intended to show – “I often take more than people give me,” Abtey says. And this he turns into finely worked sculptures in his light-flooded studio in southwestern France.

Bernard Abtey trained at “Oeuvre Notre Dame”, the stonemason’s workshop of the Strasbourg Cathedral. After 12 years of intense training as a craftsman learning old artisanal skills, including the consummate techniques that for centuries had been required for the construction of cathedrals, he left the workshop as its youngest master craftsman – and as a sculptor. This was because the famous and prestigious vocational school also offered a second training programme, which Abtey took advantage of, attending additional evening courses to become a sculptor. He was born into a family of artists – his father was a sculptor and his mother a teacher of calligraphy – and, now finally, he too was an artist! It was a world he felt at home in, a world he navigated with ease and self-confident grace. He soon found his way and ‘his’ galleries.

Twenty years of work and a life dedicated to art have passed since then, including exhibitions and projects throughout France, Germany and the rest of Europe; the USA, Canada and Ukraine. Official awards, attention from the media and public recognition followed – but suddenly, while this was all happening, Abtey turned his life around completely.

Ten years ago, he moved his studio and residence to the rugged landscape of the Atlantic coast. Why, after all the urban glamour, did he opt for such a radical change of lifestyle, a lifestyle that appeared to be a withdrawal into rural isolation?

Looking back, Abtey sees this change of lifestyle as a “way to preserve continuity in his work.” With all the attention being paid to the highly creative artist by the art world and the public, with all the media presence and all the commotion involved, he felt that something had started to cloud his normally clear vision. He finally understood, “I was in danger of losing my authenticity by allowing myself to be increasingly influenced by trends and adapting my work to the expectations of my audience! But I never intended my work to be ephemeral!” This is confirmed with every glimpse of the heavy, solid and sturdy materials that Bernard Abtey selects for his work – even though he unburdens marble of its heaviness, granite of its weight and iron of its heft. No matter what tools he uses, a precise chisel or heavy drills – he creates finely made works of art that are often moving and delicate.

To this day, Abtey, the artist, periodically needs to distance himself from the glitter of the art world. He needs to be in contact with nature and completely immerse himself and his senses in the rugged elements of the Atlantic coast.

Being in close contact with the maritime environment also allows him to keep in touch with his roots. Growing up, he drew energy from these surroundings, as he does today – the sea, the coast, its inhabitants, their mentality and way of life – all this combined is his source of inspiration, his lifeline. He says that in order to remain true to himself and his art, he must preserve his 'authenticity'. And protect it. Doubt, he says, is more often than not the driving force behind his work – a force that inspires him and pushes him forward.

Unusual: Visitors at his showings are invited to touch many of his pieces. The sculptor likes people to explore the materials, just as he himself does; he wants them to feel the contours with their hands, and feel the power that lies within these works of art.

The great centres of art, culture, beauty and elegance are part of Bernard Abtey's life; he often accepts invitations from collectors. His pieces have been shown in major exhibitions in the USA, the Netherlands, Germany and France – the world of art and aesthetics is, and remains, his world. However, larger solo exhibitions of his work in galleries are very rare. Abtey's sculptures are never on display for very long; the pieces shown in the gallery that handles his work in Dax in the southwest of France sell quickly and move on to private collections.

His latest work includes very narrow, tall constructions made of stacked layers of wood or granite; When viewers lean forward they can catch a glimpse of the vertical structure which supports the entire piece, reminiscent of the human spine... and the layers become stories – stories, which we humans are made up of, depend upon and that give us our identities.

Heike Rudloff, July / August 2015

www.abtey-sculptures.com