

Material Man

A contemporary artist proves that when the mind is open, great ideas can enter

By: Diane Comer



Sabra’s media is descended from two worlds, both natural and man-made. Because of this, he finds himself drawn to all sorts of objects: leftover bits of copper, aluminum, shards of steel, or even computer waste in combination with earthly offerings of driftwood, roots, granite and marble. “I believe it is possible to work with any material,” he says passionately. “I do not see myself as a wood sculptor, or a clay sculptor, or a metal sculptor. I am simply a sculptor.”

In awe of nature, his use of man-made materials is primarily as a complement or extension of the natural resources he chooses. He explains his perspective saying, “I want to show how man’s accomplishments can and should flow in harmony with the natural world.” With current environmental concerns, it is an artistic idea whose time has come. And while it is tempting to label Sabra’s style as ‘contemporary,’ his skills reveal a respect for the principles of traditional fine art.

Recently, the City of Tampa, Florida, commissioned Sabra to create a sculpture from steel debris taken from that city’s old stadium, which had been torn down to make way for the new. Earlier, in 2007, National Geographic Magazine featured several of his popular “E-Waste” artworks in an article detailing the dangers of discarded computer waste. Says Sabra, “People are fascinated by the interaction between the works of man and the works of nature.” An example is a large E-Waste sculpture of his currently on display at the Austin City Hall, which intricately combines the simple weathered beauty of a gnarled tree root with the fried electrical remains of techno-trash. The visual results (which are really pretty cool) silently teach, but do not preach responsibility toward the environment.

Occasionally, elements of wit and satire can also be found in his work. One popular uses wood from the much-maligned Texas cedar tree to construct a larger-than-life image of an ancient Phoenician shipbuilder. Sabra sees this particular work of art as a humorous irony because the Phoenicians, who were known as shipbuilders, constructed their vessels from cedar. Sabra notes, “People love this sculpture; they stop their cars and get out to photograph it. So perhaps they don’t hate cedar as much as they think they do.”

Such imagination, as well as his passion for art, showed itself early in Sabra’s life. Born in Damascus, Syria, he recalls, “When I was only 10 years old, I read a story that inspired me to draw a woman’s face. The project took about a month, and when it was finished, it was almost three-feet wide. I hid it in my room, until one day my sister discovered it. Once she realized I had drawn it myself, she became totally supportive of my talent.”




After graduating from high school, Sabra attended the University of Damascus, where he received training in traditional art methods and discovered his love for sculpting. Though he still maintains his studio overseas, he and his wife moved to Austin, Texas, several years ago to pursue new career opportunities that were coming his way. Currently, he is working on a heroic-size sculpture that is his largest undertaking to date, as well as a new sculpture likely to be unveiled on Earth Day, in Washington, D.C.

Constantly aware of his surroundings, Sabra sees artistic potential at every bend of the road. “I can become inspired by simply walking down the street,” he says. “There are literally artistic possibilities everywhere in the here and now. I’ve learned that, in order to envision them, all I need is an open heart and mind.”

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