

Charmaine Spencer: Art through Dyslexia

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Charmaine Spencer is a highly skilled artist working through the lifetime challenge of dyslexia, a disability that ironically has enabled and informed but never defined her work. For Charmaine, reading and verbal communication are largely unaffected. It is “writing” that somehow gets scrambled as it makes its way from her brain to the ideas and concepts she captures on paper. While largely unintelligible to the rest of us, Charmaine, understands precisely what she records. As a parenthetical but relevant comment, I would add that she is highly intelligent, reflective, exceedingly kind and, as evidenced by her art, quite obviously talented.

Many artists cope with dyslexia and/or a wide range of other disabilities, so the obvious question arises as to why we should find her art any more compelling than another’s. It is a fair question that must be considered in the full context of her experience as well as her finished works.

Having met Charmaine earlier this year and having spent considerable time with her in recent months, I am profoundly affected by her story, one she is reticent to tell for fear it will bias how others perceive her art. Therefore, I have asked if I might relate it from my perspective, hopefully a reasonably balanced point of view. My frame of reference is as an artist, career business executive and now a gallery owner, who has an interest in the success of Cleveland’s artists and the community in which they live and create.

The large sculptures that occupy Charmaine’s studio at Cleveland’s 78th Street Studios are striking pieces, not only for their aesthetics but for what they communicate. In some respects, Charmaine’s story may be less about art than communication. She is painfully modest and quietly self-effacing - qualities that translate through her finished sculptures. In a contemporary way, Charmaine is an allegorical “Everyman”, embodying the aspirations and challenges of her craft, living life through art, continuously exploring universal themes of power, inequality, social change and, ultimately, transcendence.

Like “Everyman”, she has overcome circumstance and extraordinary odds, remaining engaged in life’s struggles, changing and reinventing as required. She continues her own reorientation and reinvention with the expectation to revitalize her career and achieve financial self-sufficiency - not unlike past and present day artists. At this moment, in order to pursue her fine art, she is increasing her income through workshops and the creation of saleable, biodegradable “crafts” that give back, quite literally, to the environment.

Hearing Charmaine recount the past and describe her creative process is to participate in a remarkable narrative of sustainability. Her finished sculptures reflect directly and simply her own values as they evoke questions about the intrinsic and residual worth of humanity and every day objects that frequently go to waste - no doubt a motivation for

selecting as her media such materials as Lake Erie's driftwood, discarded paper, strands of synthetic hair salvaged from a beauty salon, even simple earth and compost.

Born in Ann Arbor, Michigan in 1970 where she lived until 2000, Charmaine accepted a fellowship to the Cleveland Institute of Art and moved to Cleveland. Her parents migrated from the rural south to the Detroit area in the late 60's to find employment and to start a family. They too suffered from dyslexia, making reading and writing virtually impossible. Over time, however, the family evolved another language for communicating with one another. Charmaine refers to the words, phrases, gestures and body language as "Spencerisms". They provided an alternative means of communicating that was virtually indecipherable to outsiders. Whether or not this environment contributed to Charmaine's dyslexia is a matter for speculation. It certainly provided another means to perceive the world and quite possibly provided the inspiration for her work as an artist.

During her tenure at the CIA from 2000 to 2005, she distinguished herself, winning the prestigious "William McVey Award for Excellence in Sculpture." She was also selected along with a colleague to complete, posthumously, the last sculpture of David E. Davis, the founder of the Sculpture Center. Her degree culminated with her BFA exhibition in 2005.

Throughout the course of her studies she has directed and curated her own studio and held positions as an instructor for the CIA and other organizations. In 2008 she received the Sculpture Center's "Emerging Artist Award", a Creative Artist Fellowship from CPAC the following year and the "Ingenuity Project Award" in 2010. To date, she has received ten public commissions from major institutions including the Gordon Square Arts District, University Circle Sculpture Park, the Cleveland Clinic and the Cleveland Museum of Natural History. And, since 2004 she has participated every year in a variety of selected presentations and exhibitions, holding a one person exhibit at Groop Gallery in 2004; SPACES in 2005; The Art Gallery at CSU, 2004 and 2006; BK Smith Gallery, 2006 and the Sculpture Center and Gordon Square among others during the period.

Clearly, what interests Charmaine is not the length of her CV, rather it is her fascination with social anthropology - how we as humans become vested in materialism and the accretion of power. Her commentary, through her art and through her words is never rancorous; less judgmental than introspective. She seeks to understand why we discard "things" and people. Citing a moment of her own artistic clarity, she references a 1955 Life Magazine article entitled, "Throw Away Living" examining the emerging phenomenon of consumerism, over-consumption and waste. This provided a platform for her to explore the concept of intrinsic and residual value that society generally ignores.



Charmaine's sculptures are fluid, often moving physically as with "Drum" a (3ft x 2ft) suspended mobile, constructed from simple, translucent rice paper and oxidized steel rod.



Or, "Halo" (16"x16"x12"), a stunningly inspirational bronze investment casting, rooted solidly in its base, pulling us outward and inward as it reaches to the sky.

While she intends for her work to provoke questions about how certain social constructs evolved (i.e. class distinctions, titles, distribution of wealth and power), she offers solutions and commentary as well. For instance, "Journey" and "Generation" are large (11ft. - 12ft.) three dimensional wall hangings that share similar designs and themes. Both are sculpture as "systems", emphasizing the imperative of life-long learning. Quoting from her descriptive commentary for "Journey";

"The binding of materials with hemp relates to the discipline to learn and the will to continue. Implicit in our journey is the obligation to apply and share what we have learned along the way. Learning and its application inform our journey as we circle back to where we began."

Like the injunction of the great artist, William Sommer, "to look for the miracle", Charmaine somehow finds value in discarded materials and the lives of others.

As I've come to know Charmaine, I realize how sincerely she seeks to understand the mystery and ambiguities of the human condition. For many artists, the exploration of contradiction (i.e. permanence and change, agelessness and transience, wealth and poverty) is not without precedent, nor are many of the larger themes Charmaine considers. However, Charmaine always does so inquisitively, subtly, without stridence. For her, "time" as a journey and "experience" as transformation, are the recurring, syllogistic themes that define her work. And, from my perspective, it is part of a personal credo that defines her from day to day.

The question as to why we should find Charmaine's work any more compelling than another's is something, as suggested earlier, to be considered in its full context. For those of us who know her, she is as much a poet as an artist, communicating through language and through art, perhaps a by-product of the "Spencerisms" acquired in

childhood. She is in a perpetual state of quiet transformation, possibly the secret to “sustainability” as she reorders her time and priorities to cope with the economic exigencies of her vocation.

The final question Charmaine leaves us with is how do we extract value (dignity, economic or otherwise) from the discarded? The transcendence of her art may provide the answer.

Geoff Baker, 2013