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NATURAL REACTIONS

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Natural Reactions

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“**A**ctuality is when the lighthouse is dark between flashes: it is the rupture between past and future, the void between events,” wrote noted art historian George Kubler in his 1962 book *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things*. His concept of cultural change as a series of moments knit together by manmade creations is something that his daughter, Cornelia Kubler Kavanagh, can’t help but illustrate in her own work. • The profound influence of her father’s words can be seen in the Norwalk

artist’s award-winning sculptures, which attempt to give shape to some of the significant events in our times. Her elegantly wrought images call on fluid arcs and vibrant color to depict the poignant duality in nature. A potent intellectual and emotional sensitivity courses through her iconographic forms, where counterpoints of solid and void, light and shadow serve as a proxy for the vital rhythms of creation and destruction, living and dying. • Kavanagh was immersed in the metaphorical language of art at an early age. Her aesthetic

Artistry

took root as the family moved around Latin America and Europe following her father's scholarly work. "Visits to museums and cathedrals throughout western Europe created a rich background for my lifelong appreciation of art and its symbolic content," she says.

Still, becoming a professional artist came relatively late for the former art history teacher and mother of two. Driving through Vermont with her son one day some twenty years ago, Kavanagh stopped at a quarry, where she bought a small block of marble.

"I bashed at it in the garage with my husband's hammer but nothing happened except for a loud ping," she remembers. "In a moment that could have held frustration, I found my life's work. I was forty-six years old and was about to become a sculptor."

She is entirely self-taught, learning her craft by trial and error and by emulating some of the artists she most admires, in-

Above: Magdalena Abakanowicz II, from the Muse Project (2007), painted resin over foam, 20.5"H

Right: Odalisque II, from the Muse Project (2007), painted urethane over foam, 42"H

cluding Henry Moore, Barbara Hepworth and Isamu Noguchi. "Although most of my early work was pretty clunky, I loved

the entire process of chipping away, turning 'pings' into sculpture," she says.

Eventually she found her own style, but echoes of her mentors remain. Henry Moore's influence can be detected in Kavanagh's 2007 *Muse Project*, a figural series honoring some of the heroic women whose work has inspired her. Each of her abstract muses wears colors designed to reflect aspects of their life: Buddhist nun Pema Chodron wears the saffron and red of a lama's robe while British sculptor Barbara Hepworth is painted to represent the green grass and blue ocean of her Cornwall home.

The colors and shapes of the ocean dominate Kavanagh's work. Traveling be-





RICK SCANLAN PHOTOGRAPHY

tween homes on the Connecticut shore and in the Virgin Islands, the artist has become acutely aware of how the sea responds to environmental change. “Looking at the water every single day I’ve become sensitive to how imperiled we are by what we’re doing to our aquatic world,” she says. It was through this affinity that she found her ultimate voice.

After the tsunami hit Southeast Asia in December 2004, she made a deliberate decision to focus on natural disasters in an

Above: *Wing Form* (2004), Carrara marble, 12" x 43.25" x 29" Right: *Tsunami VIII* (2005), painted bronze, 17"H x 18"W

effort to come to terms with nature’s dual capacity for transcendent beauty and cataclysmic destruction. “It’s no

longer sufficient to create something that’s just beautiful,” she says. “Maybe it’s my age, but I feel it’s the time to do something with greater meaning.”

She has traded stone for the more forgiving materials of foam and plaster, but a finished series can still take several years to complete. Working closely with her husband, Penn, who helps with the engineering of the often-monolithic pieces, Kavanagh spends weeks meticulously planning and drawing the details for each sculpture.

This was clear in her exhibit *Arctic Ice*

Melt: moulins of my mind, which was introduced as part of the 2009 International Polar Weekend at the American Museum of Natural History in New York City. She did a great deal of homework on the melt-

ing of the polar ice cap, going so far as to consult a leading climatologist who showed her videos of the seldom-witnessed phenomenon of ice moulins, the narrow holes worn into the glacier by surface water.



JAMES GROUT

Artistry



Kavanagh is realistic about the possibility that she's putting a lot of time and energy into work that may never sell, but she says that rendering her feelings into form has helped her deal with the horror of monumental destruction.

New Haven-based designer Rosalyn Cama is among the admirers of Kavanagh's unique ability to translate her empathy into beauty. When Cama, who specializes in healthcare facilities design and authored the 2009 book *Evidence-Based Healthcare Design*, was asked to design a therapeutic art program for the new Smilow Cancer Hospital at Yale New Haven, she selected Kavanagh's *Wing Form* for the facility's elevator lobby.

The designer liked the scale and the uplifting exuberance of the large marble sculpture and felt that the sensual cool curves had a comforting tactile appeal. "It has a quality that makes you stand and contemplate it, which is a distraction for those who have bigger things on their minds," she says. Cama explains that the elements that define soothing art are something that can't be articulated. "You have to be able to feel it. It has got to be powerful to have that effect—therein lies the magic of how art becomes healing."

Kavanagh is currently working on a project that will help her express her concern about the environmental damage to coral populations worldwide. She's also trying to imagine how to acknowledge the recent crisis in Haiti, but admits that the devastation is too raw to put her thoughts around at the moment. Despite the intensity of her process, she finds balance with smaller projects on other beloved subjects like contemporary dance.

In his book, Kubler referred to art as a "visible portrait of the collective identity." Kavanagh's work reveals the deeply personal impulse behind that phenomenon. The sculpture that results from her fusion of unique insights is a perfect example of how our creations can serve as the benchmarks of human experience that define the shape of time. •

Editor's Note A retrospective titled *Cornelia Kubler Kavanagh—Sculpture, 2000–2010* will be on exhibit April 14–June 24 at the Hess Gallery at Pine Manor College, Chestnut Hill, Mass., (617) 731-7157. To see more of Kavanagh's work, visit www.corneliakavanagh.com

Above: Moulin I (2008), painted plaster on glass base, 14"H x 10"W Left: Solar Moulin (2008), painted aqua resin, 50"H x 10.5"W
