

Remembering Elizabeth Egbert: Her Art and Approach

September 21, 2014, Memorial at The Music Hall at SHCC

Arrakhne

Nautilus

Burning Bush

Scylla

These are some of the sculptures Elizabeth Egbert shared with me one morning when we first met in her dining room on VanDuzer Street in 1985.

She had need for a studio assistant, since her works were large- and often installed in public spaces in New York. I was comforted by the warmth and calm of her life...she made art, taught college, was a mother of two young children- and lived in a huge and funky Victorian home with an intelligent composer husband. This seemed like a dream to me- a 21 year old art school graduate without a clue how to direct my own career or personal life.

Lacking the Melita coffee filters, she made us morning coffee using a paper towel. This was the first of many lessons I learned from Elizabeth Egbert.

She led me downstairs to the basement studio workshop and demonstrated a procedure, then and left me alone to cut, bend, drill, and bevel brass hardware for that would become the backbone for the sculpture "Brittle Star". After one and a half hours of working like a jeweler, Elizabeth returned to inspect my solitary perfectly honed 2" piece of metal. She squinted and said "very good, now make ten more in the next hour." I was, of course, paid by the hour.

In this way I learned how Elizabeth approached her work as an artist- and many other things- with meticulous care, a generous nature, authority, and a thoughtful economy. The costs, however, were always something that could be solved- the project's goal did not change. Like all great teachers, she was a strategist.

I spent 10 years in and out of that basement, backyard, and around the country building and installing sculptures. She invited me to collaborate on some large scale proposals, shows, and commissions. As partners she used her vocabulary of organic abstract systems- and I my narrative surrealism- sharing a rare, trusting and creative relationship.

Milkweed

Prickly Pear

Radiolaria

Desert Pergola

Monkey Puzzle

Elizabeth explored how geometry and pattern underlay the fabric of the natural world. When reflection was needed she said “I’m going to putter in the garden” and I would make lunch. Finding time to really look at nature is what fed her spirit-as compared to attending to SoHo openings. The results were both intellectual and sensual. Earthy and grand. And in an era that saluted the A-list of male sculptors with their minimalist steel shapes, she was exceptionally different.

Allison’s Dragon
Broadway Starship
Block Harbor
Triton’s Tower

Elizabeth believed that children, all children-and all people-deserve to have adventure, beauty, and magic through design. These “play sculptures” and installations physically embodied her moral code of giving the best one can to others and her assertive democratic principals. Not surprisingly, ethics were often discussed on Van Duzer Street-where she and Carl have spent 37 years living a life of refreshing frankness.. though their brand of honest discourse always had an added aire of the Marx Brothers mixed in. For those **not** familiar with what I call an Elizabethan critique, though low in volume, she rarely held **anything** back.

Some people may wonder-why did she leave her art work to follow to a career of public service working for cultural institutions? I know it to be true: Elizabeth Egbert had the confidence and ability to see beauty and make it grow-She could analyze a system, measure out a pattern, fashion the parts, attach the hardware, and got us all to carry it forward...and generally within the hour.

Thank You,

Diane Matyas