

Ron & Janice Mehlman in a nutshell: PUSHING ART FORWARD

di Sara Giunchi, foto Federico Scoppa

Exploring the art world of sculpture and photography leads us up the hills surrounding Pietrasanta: from New York to the 'little Athens' of Tuscany, Ron and Janice allow us to enter their magic world of art.

Ron, Janice, when did you decide to settle here?

J: In 1979, before we decided to get married, we came to Italy to spend a month to see if we could live together. Since we didn't speak the language, we went first to Rome and then came here to Pietrasanta... We were told that Pietrasanta was the place to be for sculptors, even if Ron didn't work with stone at that time. We rented a little apartment in Capezzano Monte, overlooking the hills and the sea. We got along so well that when we went back to the U.S., we got married. The next year we came back and decided to spend as much time here as possible. I was getting my Master of Fine Arts degree and Ron was a University Professor, so he took a year sabbatical leave, and we came to Italy and became 'pietrasantini'. We studied the language. Ron started working with stone and my photographs began to include Italian architecture. At that time, we decided that we had to be here!

R: We were determined to find a way to root here, somehow. When our careers started taking off, we had a little money and eventually were very lucky to find the perfect place, this great house. At the time, this house was a ruin and was owned by the sculptor, Giò Pomodoro. It was a wreck, but with all the characteristics we were looking for. We bought it and we knew that with a lot of work, we would eventually transform it into

"the dream place" it is today.

Did you and Ron meet for artistic reasons? How did it happen?

J: I was Ron's student at Brooklyn College in a sculpture class. I was going to Europe that summer and he lent me all of his art/travel books, provided that I bring them back to him, as he wanted to see me again. I traveled through France, Italy and Greece. When I went back to the United States, I quit sculpture - (I was never really a three-dimensional person) - and I started studying photography. During my last year at Brooklyn College, when Ron was no longer my professor, we started dating. Our strong bond dates back to those years and, of course, there's art between us!

Have you been influenced by this place?

J: Moving here somehow changed our works, and influenced our artistic directions. Ron was mainly a wood carver when we first came to Pietrasanta, but he started experimenting with different kinds of stone, and he became curious about the local materials. I started photographing Italian architecture and structures and became particularly interested in the light and the geometry of arches as well as stucco surfaces... Now we are influenced by a mix, of both Pietrasanta and New York, as we live here five or six months a year.

Isn't it easier to give birth to new ideas in New York, where you are with no doubt more stimulated than here?

J: New York is very stimulating, but sometimes as an artist, you do not want to be overly stimulated, so we have created a perfect balance. I think we are among the luckiest people in the world. We have both,

the artistic stimulation of New York, together with the tranquility of Pietrasanta.

R: Don't get us wrong... we love New York! Nevertheless when we come back to Italy, it takes a few days to decompress, to get rid of all the pressure and bustle and make this place a new cradle of art for us. We both have great studios in N.Y., but I prefer working here; I can choose to work inside or outside, take a stroll, have access to large sculpture yards, when the opportunity arises. We have busy art world lives, and this spectacular balance.

Ron, what about the choice of mixing different materials?

R: I always used natural materials, except for a short period during which I used colored plexiglass. I used to carve and work with wood, but everyone here carves in white stone, a great tradition. I said to myself: "What if I try to use different materials such as natural colored stone, and eventually enhance or add color to their surfaces, using them in a way which is not usual for here?" To work in Pietrasanta is a sculptor's dream. I never wanted to work in a studio together with many sculptors, as I did not want to be influenced by others... My idea is to follow one idea to the next, always to move forward... I work in my studio on the property, combining different kinds of stones, often together with slabs of glass. I've found some very extraordinary materials that need very little effort to turn into a piece of art. My intent is to push the long local tradition of carving marble to a next level: For instance I recently started combining stone with wood in an unusual way, and I am excited about the results.



Janice Mehlman is a prominent New York Photographer. She has been exhibiting her photographs throughout the United States and Europe since the early 1980's. Her work is featured in International Museum and Corporate Collections as well as in major books on The History of Photography. She is a Professor of Photography in the Art Department at Kingsborough Community College, of the City University of New York. She divides her time between Pietrasanta, Italy and Brooklyn, New York, where she lives and works.

Ron Mehlman has been exhibiting his work internationally since the 1970's. He has created many large scale public and private commissioned sculptures, in the United States and Europe. He divides his creative time between his studio in the beautiful countryside of Pietrasanta, Italy, and his workshop in the new Venice of Brooklyn - the Gowanus Canal area - in New York City. His sculptures combine ancient stone and industrial materials to create a balanced union of modernism and naturalism. The juxtaposition of polished onyx and stone intermixed with layers of sheet glass and steel allows Mehlman to place ancient geology into a contemporary context.



How do you choose materials?

R: I go around from stone yard to stone yard, to find stones that I like. The idea for a sculpture develops from there. I never superimpose my idea on the stone. On the contrary, I let the stone suggest the idea for the sculpture. I find something in the stone that appeals to me, I then decide whether to alter or maintain the shape of the stone, its imperfections, the marks, etc. Sometimes I split the stone and reveal the magic inside. I may decide to polish some parts and leave some others natural, creating another aesthetic. Ideas can develop over a period of time.

You are very respectful of materials. You just suggest, you just give a hint of what could be done on the stone, never altering the essence of the material you decide to use.

R: I saw part of this one stone in a yard in Pietrasanta, and I literally fell in love with it: the stone was split and I was completely fascinated by the thousands of shells stuck in its silt mud surface. I did not want to polish it, otherwise everything would have become flat. I decided to simply design these waves, to recall the action of water, molding the stone over a long period of time. I'm really excited about this piece. I wanted to keep it simple, because its natural astonishing

surface is the main and most important feature.

How long does it take you to have a complete piece of art?

R: Sometimes very quickly, sometimes it takes 3 or 4 years to resolve and complete a sculpture. Over a period of time the original idea may change, and that's what makes every piece unique.

Janice, you carve photos out of light, while Ron carves sculptures out of stone: does your works influence one another?

J: Sometimes similar geometries and shapes can be found both in my photographs and in some

pieces of art made by Ron. Unconsciously we influence each other - it can happen with shapes or colors - and we are also very critical of each other. Many critics and writers reflect on how we speak the same language but use different materials. My photographs and Ron's sculpture are all about volumes, tridimensional shapes and light. We don't do it intentionally, but of course there is a common sensibility, a shared and similar way to approach our world through art. There is symmetry, a parallel but independent development.

You both seem to be ever floating from suggestion to suggestion.



Do you ever indulge in the idea of focusing only to some themes and ideas?

R: Many artists, in their careers, choose to do one thing well, and continue to do that similar thing over and over, and get known for that. I do not stick to only one idea. I do not want to repeat the same thing, but there's no real break in the progression of my works, no dramatic change, it's a long series of many little steps. There's a common thread all along our careers, everything is very organic, there's a direction throughout our works: a continuum. You can get the feeling of transition, as the work is always moving forward.

J: Some of the photos I take nowadays may seem kind of similar to something I might have made 20 years earlier, but what is fascinating is the way I look at things today. I'm more mature, photographing in a different way, and as things develop, I make an effort to push things further, asking myself, 'how am I going to do better?'

Have you ever grown bored with carving or taking photos?

R: Never, it's not possible, you see... It's always a matter of asking yourself 'how can I maintain my interest?' This going forward is always exciting, an ongoing challenge, as an artist you're always wondering about the next possibility.

J: It's thrilling, also, a little bit scary. When you're happy with what you do and people appreciate your work, you always ask yourself what you can do to go one better, to exceed expectations... Sometimes it takes a while to develop that new idea, then the magic turns up again and the excitement starts all over.

Janice, your studio is like a magic world of shades and shapes, where nothing is what it seems. Architecture melts with geometry to give birth to a completely different perception of space. How do you choose your subjects?

J: I've always been interested in architecture, but when my

daughter was born, for example, I started taking pictures of close-ups of parts of her body. Everything was new for me, and she was so beautiful I thought that I must turn that splendor into a piece of art. I could not stop looking at her and I found a way to enhance her beauty by focusing on her details. It's always about shapes and light, so I decided to construct these photos by combining them with architectural abstraction. I used film for a long time and I still believe in film photography. I loved using those rolls. For 25 years I worked in black & white film and a darkroom, and then digital came into my life. I've added subtle color, mixing scanned printed photos with digital photos.

In your newest works you explore a completely different approach to different materials. What material rouses your interest and grabs your attention?

J: I started being interested in paper and started making compositions with cut-outs, and I grew curious about the shapes and curves that the ripped paper described. For example; I made a whole series of pictures, enhancing the shades created by the light.

The series of images working with paper, feel like constructions of solid elements, while they really take their imaginative strength from the architecture and the geometry created casually by the paper cutouts. Most recently I became interested in metal, glass and plastic surfaces. I'm looking for textures, translucency, curves and "rusty" details. There are bubbles in plastic and the peeling of layers of paint on wooden objects that can be riveting.

The sensuality of the stone in the works of Ron accompanies the mysterious shades in Janice's photos; the pureness of glass marries the neatness of lines, in a perfect balance of volumes and shapes, black and white, light and colors: that of Janice and Ron is a perfect marriage, both in art and life. Always rising to the next level.

