



Cauldron in the Gnarls; plaster, wood; 1996; 39" x 31" x 33"; photo: Jacques Cressaty

VIRGINIA STEARNS

Sculpture

POTRERO

I imagine these cauldrons as the melting pots of the creative—the simmering of the primal energies, melded and seasoned with dreams, anticipations and chunks of life's encounters, to render a still ferocious but beneficent brew—a brew of offering.

VIRGINIA STEARNS

THE ART OF VIRGINIA STEARNS

The works of Virginia Stearns, in their formal integrity, are neither anthropomorphic, imitative, nor metaphoric, and yet, magically, they evince a human presence. "All art aspires to the condition of music," an aesthete wrote a century ago. We may observe of Virginia Stearns's sculptures that they aspire as well to the conditions of poetry, of dance and of philosophy. They are direct statements of life, vessels of grace, communications from What Is.

Virginia Stearns, early in her career, made works emanating from her intense inner life as recorded in a dream book. Viewing them was like peering into the artist's mind, "... surging with the magma from which art is made," a critic wrote. From this raw material Stearns made collographs and, from their torn fragments, collages, translating the dream images directly into finished works of art.

She later made three-dimensional works which were "...conversations between the outside and the inside." During their fabrication she found that she could "...talk about being human without using the human form." Viewers may, however, in these sculptures, as in the earlier two-dimensional works, discern merged female and male contours. Some, human in scale, seem linked to antecedents as disparate as totems of Oceanic and African peoples, of miraculous Madonnas and of works of Auguste Rodin.

Stearns, who is exceptional in the sensitivity of her use of materials



Bearded Cauldron; plaster, wood, sisal; 1990; 32" x 32" x 26"; photo: Jacques Cressaty

found in the environment, sometimes uses discards from human activities, such as rusty pieces of metal, but more often uses the remains of natural processes. Walking along the streets of San Francisco or traveling the roads of the Bay Area, she scans the landscape looking for materials responding to ideas germinating in her imagination. Most recently, she has collected tree limbs and roots, which, if left to decay, would nourish the soil and come to life again in another form. Stearns, however, changes nature's ephemeral forms into enduring works of art.

"I am letting the wood speak more for itself, instead of altering it," she says of her works of the past two years. Subtly trimming, adding, polishing, positioning, she interferes minimally with the natural structures to realize her functional vision for them as supports. Her most significant intervention is her use of plaster to mold "cauldrons" or basins within the natural, fibrous wood structures.

"Every act," she says, "is an irreversible decision — like a decision in

life. As I've worked, I've developed an intuition about making these irreversible steps. I define what I want," she continues," and clear out what doesn't work. I find it so exciting to trust the creative process. If I hang in there, the right answer will come. I'm reacting to given conditions and then acting in response to my personal vision. I don't develop an idea then find an inert and malleable material to impose my vision on. I've tried it, and it doesn't work. The result simply reads as an idea and what I want to do is to evoke a feeling. I have to be open to the material and reaching for a feeling."

She molds and colors her cauldrons so artfully that they appear to be parts of the natural forms supporting them. They could be nests, basins, bird-baths, fonts, stoups, chalices, whatever — resting places for human souls as much as for the forest's small creatures. As entities, the sculptures resemble dancers in the traditions of Isadora Duncan and Martha Graham.

"I view the cauldrons," Stearns says, "as melting pots where all sorts of strange components cook up into a healing brew — or possibly a concoction for doing ill, like a witch's brew. I find myself imagining vessels in which I simmer, digest and contemplate the myriad, sometimes contradictory experiences of life, the dreams and memories, the knotty chunks of fate, the unexpected gifts that are the ingredients of life's simmering stew. Out of this unique concoction bubble up the new forms — the artistic creations and fresh ideas, as well as the ever-developing personal responses to the challenges of this unprecedented world. Sometimes these cauldrons seem to me to be ancient in origin, perhaps formed naturally, perhaps crafted by those Knowing Ones who exchange them as gifts with the Big Cauldron in which we live.

"In my earlier pieces, I was engaged in 'self-dialogue.' In my recent pieces I'm stepping outside of myself. I'm thinking of our world's relationship to the larger environment. I'm much more comfortable in and grateful for my life. My cauldrons are vessels of thankfulness. Through them I hold out something to give back to the world."

ROBERT MCDONALD

San Francisco writer, curator and critic



Cauldron for Baba Yaga; plaster, wood; 1996; 44" x 41" x 21"; photo: Jacques Cressaty

Selected Solo Exhibitions

- 1994 South of Market Cultural Center, San Francisco
1992 Matrix Gallery, Sacramento
1990 Collector's Gallery, The Oakland Museum, Oakland
1987 Slant Gallery, Sacramento
1985 Bannam Place Exhibition Space, San Francisco
Artworks Gallery, Fair Oaks
1984 Davis Art Center, Davis

Selected Group Exhibitions

- 1996 Reynolds Gallery, University of the Pacific, Stockton
Twelve-Odd, Hollis Street Complex, Emeryville
1995 *The Sculpture Group Juried Exhibition*, The Sculpture Group Gallery, Blackhawk Plaza, Danville
The Women's Show, Danville Fine Arts, Danville
Through the Door, Pacific Rim Sculptors Group, Design Center, San Francisco
1992 *Telling Stories: Artists' Books and Journals*, Prieto Gallery, Mills College, Oakland
1991 *Sculpture*, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art Rental Gallery, San Francisco
Boundless Vision: Contemporary Bookworks, San Antonio Art Institute, San Antonio, Texas
Juried Exhibition 1991, Gallery House, Palo Alto. **Juror's Prize**
1990 *Matrix International Juried Exhibition*, Barbara McDonald Gallery, Sacramento
Artists Book Exhibition, Anchorage Museum of History and Art, Anchorage, Alaska
1989 *BACA National Juried Annual 1989*, Berkeley Art Center, Berkeley
Line and Form Works on Paper by California Artists, Hatley Martin Gallery, San Francisco
Calgene Contemporary Fine Arts Competition, Natsoulas/Novelozo Gallery, Sacramento
1985 *Book Arts II*, Hand in Hand Gallery, New York, New York
Los Angeles Printmaking Society Members Exhibition, Brand Library Art Galleries, Glendale
1984 *Faces*, Sun Gallery Hayward
1983 *Artists Books Show*, Soker Kaseman Gallery, San Francisco
The Artist and the Issue: Visions Beyond the Bomb, Southern Exposure Gallery, San Francisco
Fiber in Print, Kala Institute, Berkeley
1979 *Kala Institute Show*, Osaka, Japan

Education

BA Studio Art, Oberlin College, Oberlin, Ohio