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At 95, local sculptor continues craft

By Geoffrey Meredith



Sculpture Michael Rizza holds one of his pieces.
Photo Geoffrey Meredith

Imagine for a moment that you are nearly 95 years old, a widower for 28 of those years, and legally blind. As you lie down to take a nap, what do you suppose passes through your mind as you are in that twilight zone between awake and asleep?

Well, if you are Michael Rizza, what drifts into your mind are the forms and materials for new sculptures. Rizza, who currently lives in Rossmoor has been sculpting for 61 years, completing dozens and dozens of pieces, ranging from tabletop-size to cast bronze pieces over 10 feet tall, many that were exhibited in the Jennifer Perlmutter Gallery in Lafayette, until she went to Carmel. His materials encompass nearly everything used in sculpture: 10 different kinds of stone, bronze, aluminum, plaster and composites from all over the world.

Rizza grew up in the '50s in New York, which was becoming the center of the art world at that time. He was influenced by the largely organic, abstract forms exhibited by sculptors like Jean Arp, Constantin Brancusi, Barbara Hepworth, Isamu Noguchi, and Henry Moore. Before he became a sculptor, he says, "I was what you would call an architectural `detailer,' doing the finished architectural drawings to create decorative details." He moved from New York to Louisville, Kentucky to become a supervisor. "As a supervisor, I was unable to create. So, I took a sculpture class at a local college, because when you're in architecture, you work in three dimensions." But he didn't really get the "sculpture bug" until he moved to California and took classes at DVC in both carving and metal sculpture, using the foundry there.

Since then, Rizza has created more than 500 sculptures, getting his materials from a variety of sources. He used to get most of the stones from a company in Oakland called Renaissance Stone, but the proprietor died last year. So, he now gets his stones from a Kansas quarry called "2 Sculpt." There's also a stone yard in Ventura. He explains, "I call them and ask them what they've got. They say, `Don't you want us to send you a picture of the stone?' I say no, just send it to me - my hands are my eyes. Plus, it's been in the ground for a million years, and my job is to bring out the beauty that lies in it."

When he gets a block of stone, sometimes the block suggests a form. Other times he matches it with a maquette, a small 5-to-6-inch model of his concept. He has many, many maquettes; when he receives a new stone which doesn't call out what it wants to be, he matches it with a maquette. He then makes a drawing on the stone from the maquette, and the sculpture flows from that. The maquettes are not for sale - they are his original pieces, and he wants to keep them as a set. He is planning on donating the entire set to the Italian American museum in Fort Mason, where many of the works by world-renowned San Francisco sculptor Benny Bufano are displayed.

Rizza has created so many sculptures he is running out of names for them. For example, he named one piece in alabaster "Spanish Ice" because that's what it was called by the people that quarried it. As another example, a piece of alabaster he got was tangerine-colored, so Rizza named the finished piece "Tangier." Another time Rizza had a piece of cut travertine marble which is often used for countertops. He wanted to do a piece in the style of Noguchi - not a copy, but his own interpretation of Noguchi's style. When the piece was finished, a friend of his looked at it and said "that reminds me of a Picasso." So, Rizza ended up calling it "Paguchi."

To sum up a 61-year career in his own words, Rizza says, "There are so many different kinds of stones. Most people only know marble, alabaster, soapstone, that's about it. But me, whenever I hear about rhyolite, pyrite, I have to carve it. It's my job is to take that piece of stone, which doesn't have any character, and make it alive. I was put here on earth to do that."

A selection of Rizza's work will be displayed in a special exhibition at the Valley Art Gallery in Walnut Creek, which opened Oct. 1 alongside the annual Fall show of new work from the gallery's stable of 100 artists. For information, visit ValleyArtGallery.org.

Rizza's work will also be on display in Tracy, Calif., at the Grand Theater Center for the Arts from Sept. 10 through Oct. 29. Call 209-831-6278 for details.

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