



Beth Baruch Joselow interviews

Marie Ringwald

Marie Ringwald's work, since the mid-Seventies when I first became aware of it, has made me think of architectural models with souls. Ringwald manages to make sculpture that is pristine and geometrically perfect, but at the same time leaves the impression of a mature and sympathetic humanity within. Her buildings appear to have had real lives, to have served real people, and yet they are unscarred, serene. They are comforting: gentle, sturdy and somehow tolerant of human chaos.

Ringwald says her pieces may be inspired by an Ansel Adams photograph, a photograph of African-American soldiers standing in front of a building in 1865, or a barn in Middleburg, VA that she glimpsed in the Hitchcock film, "Marnie." She works in wood and metal, for the most part the same materials of which the buildings she admires were built. Sometimes she patinas the copper in her pieces with ammonia fumes. "I wanted something dark but not something totally opaque," she says, "and the copper has that wonderful luminosity. If you use ammonia fumes you get some really great surprises. And then you wax them. Most of the time I wax them and that will keep them from changing." But sometimes she lets them weather and age, like the buildings that inspired them.

Her studio space is an old row house built in 1868 as a boarding house, in Shaw, a neighborhood in downtown DC that grew up in the post-Civil War boom, at about the same time that the Pension Building was built. It's a three-story brick building that she and her husband lived in for some years, with half of it used as studio space, but now that their home is in Takoma Park, Ringwald has expanded to the upper floors.

Ringwald grew up in the Bronx and was educated at Hunter College and at Temple University. She came to Washington in 1971, and joined the Fine Arts department of the Corcoran School of Art in 1976. She is now Chair of the Foundations department of The Corcoran College of Art and Design. Her work has been shown at numerous galleries in the Mid-Atlantic region.

This interview took place in Marie Ringwald's studio on December 12, 2001.

BJ: I have an early paper piece of yours that already displays that sculptural bent and also an interest in architecture. So tell me a little about what architecture means to you.

MR: When I was in college, and then after I got to DC, I was really concentrating on non-objective art works. That seemed important, that it be about ideas and concepts and forms and shapes and colors. And I realized at one point that when I looked at buildings, I was looking at the placement of windows and doors, and at the space between architectural elements. And slowly but surely it crept into the work. I remember naming pieces after certain buildings. We started going to Cape May Point New Jersey, across the Delmarva peninsula. We were going up or down the Jersey landscape. I was really concentrating on that kind of vernacular architecture: bus stops, and warehouses and barns and I finally just thought, this is crazy, why not go into this more specifically. It has such emotional resonance.

BJ: I see these as utilitarian buildings, but on a personal scale. Utilitarian, but not like a skyscraper.

MR: I think it's the combination of man-made— usually not by a huge group of people but a small group of people— they're man-made, with very plain materials, sometimes scraps, sometimes just stuff that you can get pretty easily, not exotic materials, and then they're human scale. Even the warehouses have a human scale to them. They're also affected by weather and time, so it has that worn-out or weathered quality, or what's even better is a patina of time, because sometimes, a lot of times, things get much more beautiful when they have that.

BJ: How has your approach to this work changed? You've been working with that subject matter for a long time now.

MR: It's actually peaked and waned. Way back in the early or mid-70s, I had done some pieces based on windows in amongst doing some more abstract work. Then through the years they'd be mixed in with the silkscreens or with the paintings on paper, there'd be a window, and it had what they call mother-in-law plants in front of it, and pieces with venetian blinds, sides of buildings with lights or lattices. It really has been almost since the beginning. But I would say in the last few years it's been almost exclusively sculpture. I've done large installations that you walk into, pieces that are so big that when you step into them you look up as well as down, pieces with lights, or bars—

BJ: Iron bars?

MR: No, bars where you drink! I've done some neon and glass block pieces, and bar fronts. Again, it's that sense of— sometimes with those buildings it's a building that's been built for another purpose and then becomes a bar or a shop. For a while I was interested in amusement park architecture, but the kind of amusement park architecture that you get at Wildwood or Coney Island, or these towns along the coast that are towns, but then they have that kind of amusement park façade...

BJ: For a long time your interest has turned to rural subjects. Two things occur to me about that. One is that you grew up in the middle of a very big city, so it's interesting that rural subject matter would have that resonance for you.

MR: Well, first of all, I grew up in a big city, but I grew up in a small neighborhood. I grew up in a house and we had a garage out back, even though we didn't have a car, we rented it to somebody else. We had a little shed out back. I grew up near Poe Place, where Edgar Allen Poe had lived. Edgar Allen Poe's house had been moved up to the park, so I saw that kind of house. So you're right, it was the city, but it was also this funny little enclave, this Irish-Catholic ghetto in the middle of the Bronx. We'd go to Coney Island, we'd go to Rockaway, and those places had some of this feeling. We didn't spend a whole lot of time in the country, but we did go. My father worked for the railroad so we took train trips. And I think that that is something that has affected my work, this glimpse of something out the window, this sort of snatched image. A few years ago I did a series of warehouses along the train tracks between Albany and DC because I was taking that train trip to go spend time with my mother and I would sit in the train and just look at these buildings and draw them. What always strikes me is that you can go past something sometimes over and over and over again and then one day the light hits it in a certain way, or conversely, you're in a mood, in a certain frame of mind and you see something that you've seen over and over and over again, but it looks a way that you haven't seen. I love that moment of clarity.

BJ: The geometry is very harmonious, but also the lighting on them is as if it's clear, appropriate light for that building to show its best stuff. And here's the second part of that question: there's also something extremely American about them. You're nodding, so is that conscious?

MR: It's like a lot of things. I think I did it and then I stepped back and saw it. And then, there are artists who do American work, whose work I really admire. It's been a little back and forth, and of course reaction. People have reacted that way too. So, yeah. I love that idea.

BJ: These structures are very American in a way that we all might not even think about. When you think of buildings like this in Europe they're a lot funkier, more mossy – they're made more of stone and other kinds of materials....What scale are you working in now?

MR: The last few months I've been working mostly with fairly small pieces, four inches up to about two feet. And part of that is I'm just very fascinated with the idea of scraps. I'd started doing a bunch of pieces that were based on scraps, leftover pieces from some larger sculptures I was making, so I would cut things out and I would keep these pieces of wood or metal nearby. And I really just gathered them up and started working with them. I had thought I would leave that body of work, but I haven't. It just seems appropriate for me at the moment to be putting things together with nails or fasteners, pretty much sort of hammered out and pieced together.

BJ: These are chunkier and freestanding pieces.

MR: Even the wall pieces are more three-dimensional. I'm noticing that I'm getting off the wall a little bit more.

BJ: Do you know why?

MR: Well, it's a lot of fun to look around the sides and see a little bit more of the piece, to see that angle that you get when you look at the edge of something, and what happens when 90 degrees comes together. Or—I've been doing a lot of slanted roofs, not just slanted, but they come forward so they're almost faceted. The idea came from a scrap of wood. There was a scrap of wood at school that had a wonderful sort of faceted roof, and I liked that. I was also invited to be in a show at Washington Square and the work there had to be three-dimensional, so that just sort of kicked me into doing a set of Quonset huts and a set of warehouse forms. There's something about having the pieces on the wall that I like. When you have part of a building there's a nice sense of mystery about what's not there. I didn't really realize that was an important part of what I was doing until I started making the more three-dimensional pieces. Because we have everything there. And of course having three dimensions means you have more play. You can move them around and you can walk around them, but what I miss is that sense of mystery. You don't know how big that building is, the one that's hanging on the wall. It could be huge or it could be a shallow building.

BJ: I hadn't thought about that, but that's quite so. I also liked the way they lived on the border between painting and sculpture... I see that you work with a lot of power tools and different building materials.

MR: I started in college and my father was not – he did not do anything like that for a living – but he liked working with tools so I got a lot of that reinforced at home. I was encouraged as a kid to make things. I had good teachers in college. I've worked on houses, too. I've done a lot of renovating, fixing. And teaching. When I started teaching I also had to learn things in order to teach them. It goes back and forth. I still love that.

BJ: Talk a bit about the relationship of teaching to your work.

MR: It's complicated. I think that it's actually quite wonderful. When you're talking about art and about artists and you're around people making things it's about the best situation that you can get. You're up front, you're sort of out there in a way that you don't have to be if you're just in the studio. Of course, there are times when the administrative work or the other work gets a little bit in the way of the studio, but on the other hand, they really do feed into each other. I do feel that as a studio artist, it's a bit of a balancing act, but it's certainly beneficial.

BJ: You work on many things at the same time – why is that?

MR: I started doing it because it was really a way to not get in my own way. Sometimes when you're making a piece you just have all these ideas and you want to put them all in one piece and that doesn't work. I see my students do that a lot. And I find that if I have two or three things going, or more than that going, that I have plenty of places to put all my ideas. And that what doesn't work here will work over here and I end up having more work, which I find extraordinarily exciting and interesting. At the moment, I'm getting ready for a show at Sally Troyer's; it'll open in February. I am working literally on 35 pieces. And some of them are quite small. These are not huge pieces. But I have found that that is energizing and it makes me more productive and it gives me a chance to surprise myself.

BJ: So you don't suffer for ideas?

MR: No.

BJ: Has that ever been a problem?

MR: Yeah, I've had my ups and downs. I really have.

BJ: And after such periods did you find a big change in your work?

MR: No. I think my changes are more subtle. [Washington art critic] David Tannous talked about, I think it was Frank Stella at one point, but he was talking about how this artist worked in kind of an upward spiral. It wasn't like one direction, or many different directions, it was a sense of kind of going around and picking up from the past and moving forward but in a way that regarded what had gone before. And I hope that's what I'm doing. I think that's what I'm doing. I find that I really don't go in very dramatic directions. I do think the work is progressing.

Beth Baruch Joselow is a poet who has written extensively about art and artists. An editor with the *Washington Review of the Arts* for many years, she teaches in the Academic Studies Department of the Corcoran College of Art + Design



Photos:

First page: [Stable, Middleburg, VA](#); paint, wood and metal; 31.75" x 43" x 5.5"; 2002
(credit Derrie DeBorja)

Last page: photo of Marie Ringwald by Kate MacDonnell, 1999