

# Sculpture on a Human Scale

Installation of Sculpture by Mary Oros in the atrium at 505 Sansome St., San Francisco. Page 5 *Home*, concrete, mixed media, 9' x 7' x 7', 2004. Photo courtesy of the artist.

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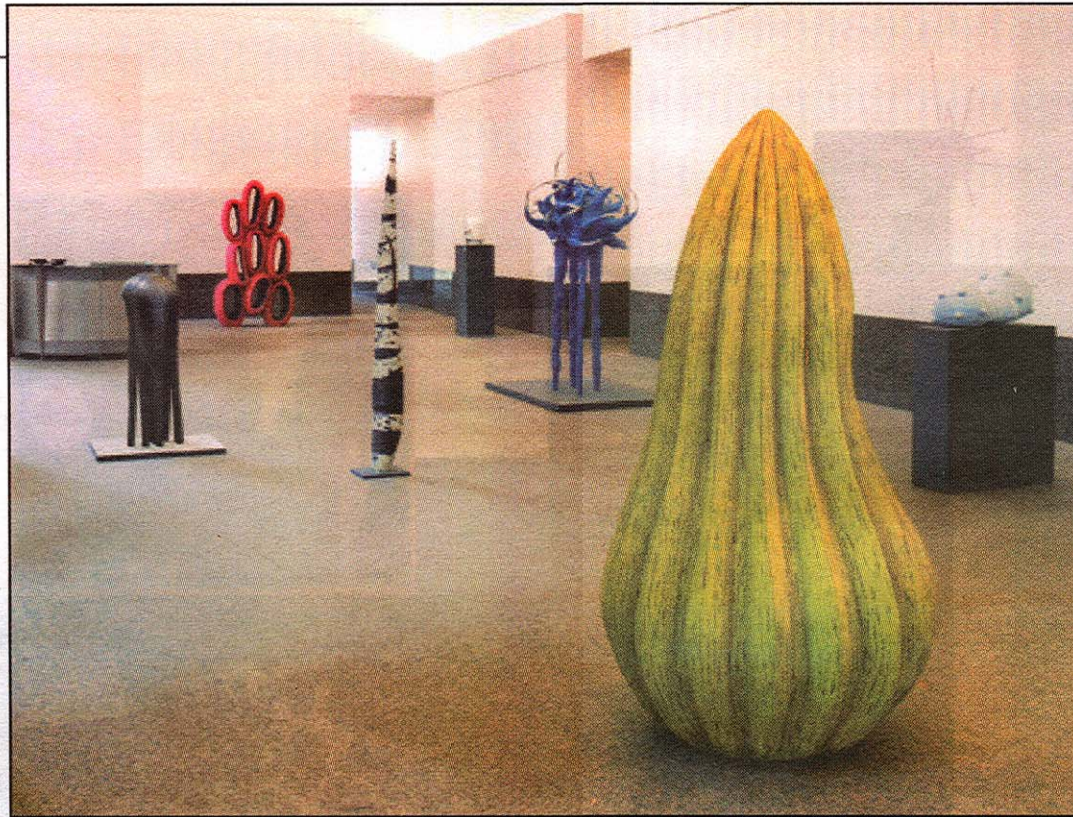
Sculptor Mary Oros, the Lower Arsenal's newest artist resident, is excited about participating in this year's Benicia Artists' Open Studios the first weekend in May; it will be the first time she has welcomed the public into her workplace, and she is looking forward to the experience.

Oros moved here last fall, a few months after she paid her first visit to Benicia; she had heard about Benicia's studio community from an East Bay realtor she had contacted after deciding to move from West Oakland. On her first visit, she was impressed to find such a vibrant community, great work spaces, and the Arts Benicia Gallery; she signed up then and there to work as a volunteer at Open Studios 2006, so that if a space became available she would know about it right away. Studio availability in the Arsenal happens rarely, so she was thrilled when she saw the listing for what was soon to become her new studio.

Before Oros moved to California, she spent several years in New York. She received a coveted summer scholarship for the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Maine in 1975, where she was awarded the Purchase Prize, and was honored with the Agnes Gund Award at the Cleveland Institute of Art where she received her BFA in 1977. After graduating, she successfully pursued a career in product design, creating cast bronze furniture hardware and contemporary cast resin costume jewelry, before she decided to devote herself to making sculpture full time. Following is an interview with the artist conducted in her studio March 7th.

**KWR:** (Kathryn Weller-Renfrow): When you were in school, was art or design your intended career?

**Oros** (Mary Oros): In school I was completely pursuing art; sculpture, as my intended career choice. My mentor was sculptor William King, who was very supportive and encouraged me in this. After graduating, I moved to New York, and was making art, supporting myself with restaurant jobs. I moved to the West Coast in 1987, and spent time designing cabinet hardware and costume jewelry; always trying to make a product that would make a profit. Both of my parents are industrial designers, and thought I



could have a business in product design and pursue my art, but it's not possible. My jewelry, which I made at first in my parents' garage, was featured in fashion magazines and represented in New York, but it just wasn't the "real deal" for me like making art was.

**KWR:** When, and how, did you decide to give up designing products and devote all your time to making sculpture?

**OROS:** The pressure in industrial design is to go corporate: to design products and have them made offshore. This just wasn't me. Also, it takes all one's time and energy to do this kind of business. My mom passed away in 2001, and I realized that I really needed to get back to sculpture. I was working for Hornblower Yachts to help support my dual careers; there was a party on one of the yachts for Richard White, who was installing art exhibits in the Atrium at 505 Sansome Street in SF. I met him at the party; he came to see my work and offered me a show there in 2003. I joined the Pacific Rim Sculpture Group and was included in three exhibitions with them in San Francisco and one in New Jersey. I met the Director of the SFMOMA Artists Gallery at Fort Mason and was included in a show there last year. So, making art is now a full-time commitment.

**KWR:** What challenges are you encountering in your work?

**OROS:** I need to focus on making my art outdoor-proof. I've been doing lots of research to find an outdoor material that suits my needs. I've been working with a guy who has developed a new kind of concrete that is 47% lighter and has lots of flexible strength. I will be applying this to the

piece I am currently building an armature for, and hope to develop this body of work for outdoor public art opportunities.

**KWR:** Have the issues that you address in your work changed over the years since you were in art school?

**OROS:** I hope that the work has changed, but the issues I deal with are not that different. The interconnections between vulnerability and strength, precariousness and certitude, and how that impacts physical form are concerns that interest me. I like to work in scale to my own body, seeing my relation to the sculpture as a kind of dance, so most of the work is about

the height of a person. This way the viewer can be really involved in the pieces. Sometimes they are an expression of protected personal space: what you allow in and what you want to keep out. They have multiple parts that can surround: they have both barriers and openings.

**KWR:** Like people-

**OROS:** Or sea urchins! We have a lot in common. Undersea life is an inspiration for me; its surface textures and forms provide such a wealth of information. I'm really interested in surfaces, and natural plant forms and patterns, and how they alter appearance.

**KWR:** What artists inspire you?

**OROS:** Martin Puryear, I love his work. Chakia Booker, who works with recycled rubber, and Ursula Von Rydingsvaard.

**KWR:** I have so much respect for your ability to translate these beautiful delicate drawings into 6-foot-tall, 3-dimensional forms. Can you elaborate on your method?

**OROS:** I put my ideas down as small drawings, then I make a small wax model. After deciding on the size and proportions, I make a full-size drawing using a grid for scale, then begin building the armature. The armature gets coated with plaster or the new concrete medium, which I work with my fingers to make ridges and other surface textures. I layer color in the undercoat so that it will bleed into the top surface to create a pattern.

**KWR:** Why did you choose Benicia for your studio location?

**OROS:** I hated living in west Oakland; I know that it's getting better, but my mood would just plummet when I went to the studio—it was so desolate. Everything else was so expensive; I started thinking that I would have to move out of the Bay Area. I was consulting with a realtor, and somehow she knew enough about sculpture to know about Manuel Neri and that he lived in Benicia. This is like New York space, and I didn't know it existed in California! When I saw this place listed on the BANG (Benicia Artists' Networking Group) list I called right away—the listing only lasted about 15 minutes!

**KWR:** What is your favorite thing about being here so far?

**OROS:** It's safe! I can have my door open; I can have the sun at my back and work. And I can ride my bike to the grocery store. And it's great to feel so welcomed by the community.

Open Studios will take place on May 5th and 6th from 10 to 5 in the Lower Arsenal and citywide. Look for more information at [www.artsbenicia.org](http://www.artsbenicia.org), and for more of Oros' work at [www.maryoros.com](http://www.maryoros.com). **IB**