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People & Events

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## Blind Sculptor Possesses Unique Vision

By Suzette Martinez Standing

Her faceless sculptures possess distinct and peculiar personalities. Walk away and the figures resume moving — or so it would seem. Created at different times, but placed together, the little clay people appear to interact. A passionate man draws his bow across his violin. A middle aged woman considers the possibilities. The female torso with upturned hands on either side suggests Fanny Brice-style sass. "What do I have to lose?" it seems to say. The sculptors' animated qualities suggest secret stories caught in mid-movement.

The clay figures, full of movement and personality, are by created 78-year-old Harriett Schwartz of Raritan Township, who is legally blind. "I have some peripheral vision, but I can't read," she said.

Sculpting for the last eight years, she has created scores of little figures, caught in mid-dream or dance.

After a long period of gradual deterioration that began with night blindness and missing spots in her vision, Mrs. Schwartz was officially diagnosed with macular degeneration in 1986, leaving her legally blind.

In 1992, when she first began sculpting, Mrs. Schwartz was depressed over the death of her husband after 49 years of marriage. Together they had raised five children, and owned a baking business, The Bak-Kit Company, which produced pre-mixed baked goods. For a long period of time, the Burger King restaurant chains used the Schwartz's southern biscuit mix. After starting the company in New York, they owned it for 30 years, and sold it to an outfit in Charlotte S.C. In 1991, they moved to Hunterdon County.

Mrs. Schwartz took up sculpting for the first time with Readington

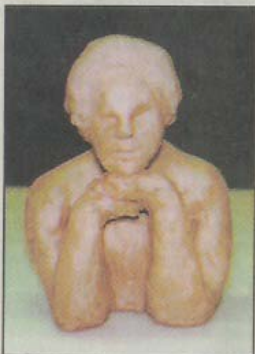


Photo by Suzette Martinez

**THE THINKER** — This clay figure was made by Harriett Schwartz, not Rodin. The sculpture expresses deep and secret thoughts through her expressive body language.

Township artist Cara London. Mrs. Schwartz's daughter worked with Ms. London through a Hunterdon County Adult Education art program and strongly urged her mother to give it a try.

Ms. London offers drawing, painting and sculpture classes in her home studio, and accepts commissions for portrait work. Her work is currently exhibited at the Ink River Galley in Flemington, and she painted the children's murals at the Women's Crisis Services' office in Flemington. Although Ms. London normally conducts group classes, she works one-on-one with Mrs. Schwartz.

Ms. London happened to see some of Mrs. Schwartz's early drawings and

agreed to take her on as a student. "They reminded me of Matisse's charcoal sketches — such a beautiful feel," said Ms. London.

Mrs. Schwartz insists her lack of vision was never a significant obstacle. "I never really thought about it. The only time I had a problem was when I couldn't see where the arm went. You just have to want to do it," she said.

Her instructor, however, was daunted by the task of teaching sculpting to someone largely lacking sight. Ms. London said, "At first, there were a lot of challenges. I was used to explaining things visually, and I had to try to find other ways."

But Mrs. Schwartz had an intuitive understanding of the medium and revealed in the feel of clay. "I loved the smoothness, the way it could mold," she said.

Ms. London explained the tactile attraction of clay as "very visceral."

Soon teacher and student found a working rhythm together. "We were on the same wavelength, I'd start to explain, and Harriet would finish my sentences," said Ms. London.

At first, Ms. London thought her student would like to re-create a sculpture by allowing her to get the feel of a previously created work. She quickly discovered her almost-sightless pupil had her own vision.

Mrs. Schwartz said, "I wanted to do my own thing."

And her "own things" were inspired forms. Ms. London said, "My vision was limited. Harriet would come up with poses that I'd never think of in a million years. They were very acrobatic."

The figures' poses are drawn from early childhood memories of ballet and dance classes. The moment before a ballet spin is captured. A dancer rests splay-legged after a rugged work-out.

A nude figure beckons from a reclining position.

Mrs. Schwartz enjoys "making it do something — give it some joie de vivre."

Of course, having vision problems presents some obstacles. Ms. London said, "When you're only working by feel, things are much larger by touch than it would appear. For example, you might feel a crevice that feels big, but overall, it's not a big deal on the finished piece."

Mrs. Schwartz hopes other visually impaired people will put away pre-conceived ideas about limitation, and take a chance on creating art. Ms. London shares the reminder, "Degas was blind at the end of his life. All of his sculptures and pastels were done after he was blind."

With hundreds of remarkable pieces, has Mrs. Schwartz sold or exhibited her

See **SCULPTOR** next page



Photos by Suzette Martinez

**HER INNER VISION** inspires legally-blind sculptor Harriett Schwartz (above) to create clay figurines that are seemingly caught in mid-movement. She has been taking sculpture classes since 1992.





Photo by Suzette Martinez

**CREATIVE JUICES FLOW** between Mrs. Schwartz and her teacher, Flemington artist Cara London. The background painting was created by Ms. London who teaches painting, sculpting and drawing.

## Sculptor

*Continued from previous page*

work? No, but the artist has a long simmering desire.

"There is one thing. I would like to have an organization sponsor a show, and sell them for charity. I have a whole houseful of sculptures," she said. Organizations

which assist the visually impaired, as well as Hospice, are especially welcome, but she remains open to assisting any charitable group with her unique fund-raising idea.

Charitable organizations interested in sponsoring a show can call Mrs. Schwartz at 806-7968, or art instructor Cara London at 806-4364.