

Artscene

PEOPLE AND PERFORMANCES IN ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT

A MAGICAL MEDIUM FOR ART

Portola Valley sculptor strives to imbue her work with 'the expression of basic human emotions.'

By **Apala G. Egan**
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Exposure to places and things in childhood can leave a deep mark, and influence what you might pursue later in life. So it was with sculptor Danielle Fafchamps, a longtime resident of Portola Valley.

A native of Belgium whose body of work is in large measure reflective of a childhood spent close to nature and an early fascination with ancient peoples and their art, Fafchamps grew up in a small town outside Liege, which falls in the French-speaking region named Wallonia in the southern portion of the country. She, along

with her brother and friends, routinely wandered in the thickly wooded grounds of the nearby Chateau de Fayenbois, in ruins at that time, exploring, climbing trees, playing by the pond and smelling wet earth, and touching the squishy mud and clay. Going on long nature hikes with her mother was an integral part of her childhood.

"I was so happy, and still am, to be in a forest," she said. "We also grew our own fruits and vegetables. As a family we all worked in the garden and developed this deep connection to the earth. We were aware of where our food came from," she said.

When she and her brother were young, her mother took them regularly to the international geography presentations sponsored by local universities and held at various locations in Liege. "You learned about the people and architecture. That gave me a sense of wonder and a desire to travel," said Fafchamps.

She recalls that she was attracted to Asia and Africa because it was something different, and the art, including folk art and sculpture of those regions, made a deep impression on her.

Fafchamps studied psychology at the University of Liege and later worked in literacy development programs in small villages



Photo by Magali Gauthier/The Almanac

Danielle Fafchamps of Portola Valley has been creating sculpture for almost 15 years.

in countries in French-speaking Africa. Through her work she traveled extensively and visited the Ivory Coast, Rwanda and Burundi. She was moved by the kindness of the local people, their devotion to their ancestral traditions and the creation of unique pottery, she said.

Working in remote villages influenced her on many levels; she learned how crucial a holistic approach to culture is for successful program design and adoption.

Later, she earned a multi-disciplinary doctorate at Stanford University that encompassed the fields of education, anthropology and computers, and eventually settled in California.

Her inherent interest in art led her to take various workshops and classes at the Pacific Art League and the Palo Alto Art Center, as

well as drawing lessons at Canada College. She has also taken workshops with a sculptor while visiting her mother in Belgium. She said that she likes to try different mediums, and that you need perseverance and resilience to find the medium that resonates with you.

The medium is the magic

One afternoon she visited a sculptor friend, an emigre from Russia, who put some soft clay in her hands. "It was moist, soft and magical. I experienced a deep concentration and felt a sense of absorption with this malleable medium," she said. The mud that she had rolled on her palms during her childhood came back to her, now imbued with artistic potential.

"When you get a medium that's right for you, you know it," she said.

Fafchamps, who has been creating sculpture for almost 15 years, began with figures. "I like things that are more primal. I use natural pigments, items that are basic and tactile. Clay is coarse, it is not smooth, not perfect," she explained. "An intimate part of humanity that is deep inside us all is expressed in my sculptures."

Ancient peoples and their life and art have had a deep influence on her work. During a visit to Chaco Canyon, New Mexico, she saw ruins of the Pueblo people who had inhabited the land over a thousand years ago. Anthropomorphic rocks along the many trails seemed to stand as sentinels and inspired her first figure of a head. The rock formations of Mesa Verde in Colorado have influenced her

sculpted heads as well.

On a visit to Musee du Quai Branly in Paris early on in her artistic career, she saw huge totems made of wood from Polynesia and tall African creations. Inspired, she returned to California and created a number of totem sculptures. Some of her sculpted heads, with meditative, half-closed eyes gazing towards eternity, have been influenced by Polynesian pieces, she said.

"In clay sculpture everything you do is with your hands. There are no synthetic colors or materials, only natural pigments and oxides," she said. "My sculpture is not about fancy forms or display of exquisite techniques. Rather, it is about authenticity and the expression of basic human emotions. Art for me is a means to connect with others."

Stem cell connection

In 2013 she appeared on the Discovery Science Channel in a program that combined science with visual metaphors. "Through the Wormhole" was a series hosted by Morgan Freeman, who invited Fafchamps to represent the visual and Professor Renee Reijo Pera, the scientific perspective for the episode: "Will Sex Become Extinct?" Pera's professional interests lie in regenerative medicine and stem cell biology.

According to Pera, sculpting stem cells from other cells — such as skin cells — is a lot like a sculptor taking a small ball of clay and directing it to be the sculpture that he or she wants to create.

For the show, Fafchamps arrived with a large lump of clay.

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Photo by Magali Gauthier/The Almanac

Pieces created by sculptor Danielle Fafchamps at her Portola Valley home. Her interest in art led her to take workshops and classes at Cañada College, the Pacific Art League and the Palo Alto Art Center.