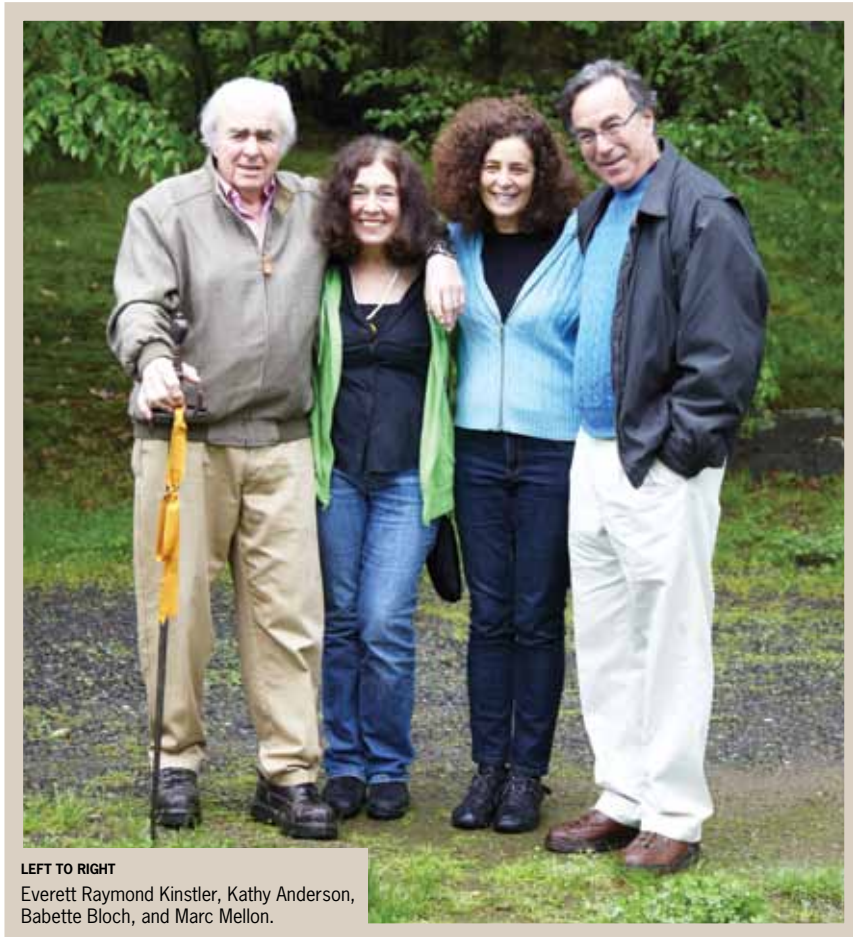


It Takes a Community



LEFT TO RIGHT
Everett Raymond Kinstler, Kathy Anderson,
Babette Bloch, and Marc Mellon.

to Make Art

As the stories of several artists with home studios in Connecticut and New York show, staying connected to a larger artistic community can lead to a more productive and satisfying practice.

BY MICHAEL GORMLEY



Babette Bloch and Marc Mellon.



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT

The north-facing view in Mellon's studio, with multiple model stands and various works in clay, plaster, and bronze; portrait busts by Mellon of Will Barnet and Everett Raymond Kinstler at the National Arts Club, in New York City; wax casts; (from left) Everett Raymond Kinstler, Marc Mellon, and Kathy and John Anderson, with a clay bust of Kinstler.

Babette Bloch and Marc Mellon: Sculpting an Artist Marriage

Babette Bloch and Marc Mellon are sculptors who have been married for 23 years. Bloch hails from New Jersey; Mellon from Brooklyn. They met at a sculpture foundry on Long Island, lived in New York City during the early years of their marriage, and in 1989 they bought a house in Redding where they raised their two daughters. Like their friends the Andersons, they are members of the NAC and Salmagundi Club. Bloch and Mellon retain a small studio at the NAC—which used to be Mellon's bachelor apartment—for the convenience

of Mellon's sitters and as a base for the arts programming Bloch has done for the NAC during the last 20 years.

Bloch and Mellon both have dedicated studio spaces in their Redding home. When they first acquired the house, Mellon used the family room as a studio, and Bloch set up her studio in the master bedroom. "At some point I tried to install a big crank easel so that I could work on bas-reliefs, and I found that it was too tall to stand in my studio," Mellon says. "I grabbed a broomstick and starting poking around

and realized that I had a lot of space above the existing ceiling. We hired a contractor who removed the dropped ceiling, reinforced the roof, and put in a couple of skylights. It was a simple collaboration between me and a good old country builder."

When Bloch was pregnant with their second child, the couple decided to build an addition on the east side of the house, and they collaborated with the same builder to create Bloch's studio. Mellon continued working in the family room for many years but eventually

he also wanted more space, and five years ago the couple built another addition. The build-out added a new studio for Mellon and also a lower-level garage large enough for two cars plus additional space for Bloch to paint or add surface texture to her works. Each artist's space has its own garage door and serves as a staging area for packing and shipping large works.

The couple hired an architect for this project, and the additional studio space has had a tremendous impact on Mellon's practice. "The bigger studio really allows me to think more expansively," he says. "In the old space, I'd walk in and would 'hear' numerous works in progress calling me. There was so much that needed to be worked on, and everything was so close to everything else, that I would often walk right out. The





light while screening the lower windows for privacy.”

Mellon is the classicist of this artist pair. His figurative work references traditional sculpture processes and materials, and demonstrates an impressive production output, including relief panels, medallions, full-figure pieces, and portrait busts that are first modeled in clay and then cast in plaster or bronze. The high level at which he practices his craft and his ability to capture a likeness have garnered him steady commissions. The time-honored processes that Mellon employs—beginning with exploratory clay studies and ending with the final surface chasing of his bronzes—are labor-intensive and highly technical procedures. Mellon is able to retain an aesthetic vision throughout this process, a tremendous artistic achievement.

In Mellon's cathedral-like space, there is abundant evidence of this classical

production. Plaster portrait busts with patinas mimicking bronze casting tones line the walls. Graceful clay figures, in all shapes and sizes, teeter atop waist-high modeling stands. Plaster casts lined with rubbery silicone await assembly. When I visited the space, I was enchanted by this crowd of figures and solemn heads that seemed to dance around and pay rapt attention to the larger-than-life-size figure that rose effortlessly in the room's center. All of these works evince a sustained study of life and an earnest search for expressive form and gesture. Mellon's studies of dancers—with their expressive displays of movement, grace, and poise—most clearly signify his embrace of classical form. While viewing Mellon's nudes, one is reminded of the great American sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens, whose embrace of humanist principles and classical ideals informed the founding of the Art Students League of New York, which was Mellon's training ground.



big space allows me to work on numerous projects at the same time.”

His new studio allows Mellon to exert much control over the light. “In addition to north light, I have 14-foot high beams, and each side of each beam has a line of lights controlled by its own switch,” he says. “I can selectively and simply amplify my lighting, including providing good directional light in the dead of night. The floor is a modified sprung floor, really a dancer's floor, and I installed 8-foot-high mirrors—again a dancer amenity. I love that my dancer models are comfortable and love the space as much as I do. The windows' shades are adjustable from the top or bottom, so I can add more or less directional



ABOVE Mellon working with a model in his studio.

ABOVE LEFT A wax and bronze cast, with photo references, of developer and philanthropist Kenneth E. Behring. This portrait bust was commissioned by the National Museum of American History, part of the Smithsonian Institution, for which Behring is a major donor.

TOP LEFT Mellon's clay study of his model.



FAR LEFT Babette Bloch at work in her studio.

LEFT Bloch assembled a paper model showing her planned composition.

BELOW A drawn and cut paper model from Bloch's Vase series.

BOTTOM Vase by Babette Bloch, stainless steel, 69". Collection the artist.



Although she has explored various materials during her artistic career, Babette Bloch now works primarily with heavy-gauge stainless steel. The steel is fabricated according to her specifications into three-dimensional pieces based on paper models and drawings. The steel pieces are first laser-cut, then the cut edges are smoothed and the surfaces ground. Some final pieces, such as those from the artist's Reflecting History series, remain relatively flat, like silhouettes. Others, such as those comprising her Vase series and Egret series, are elaborately shaped and assembled.

Bloch walks a fine line by successfully preserving the movement and lightness of these deceptively simple preparatory models and drawings in her final works. The

weighty stainless-steel sculptures, punctured by a continuous negative space, are experienced as animated three-dimensional contour drawings. Placed on-site, their open form seeks to incorporate, rather than compete with, surrounding environmental elements.

The sharp contrast of material, scale, and process in Bloch's work offers an insightful foray into contemporary post-colonial and gender theory. The drawings and paper models from which she fabricates heavy metal sculptures reference stencils and silhouettes—traditional home crafts generally associated with women. Large-scale metalwork sculpture, however, has historically been the preserve of men.

Bloch has experimented with numerous surface treatments to further express movement, light, and transparency in her work. Originally





she experimented with color; currently she grinds her surfaces with various power tools to manipulate the flow and direction of the steel's reflective surface. The effect, prized by the Impressionists, is one of flickering light. Form and materiality are further dissolved resulting in works that appear to sculpt light rather than steel.

The additional space Bloch gained in the recent addition greatly helps her work with large sculptures. "The new space made it easy for me to bring large pieces home from the precision metal shops where I construct my sculptures," she says. "I can back my car up to the bay and off-load the piece through a garage door. I can build crates in the space and pack and ship our work from the garage bay. The mess doesn't get into the house, and we do a lot less

lifting. Thanks to this addition, I can do any metal grinding and finishing in this space."

Bloch likes the natural light in her studio. She doesn't like to work at night with artificial light. "When we built the studio, we put a ceiling fan in the peak," she notes. "When I had the lights on, with every turn of the fan I felt like there was a strobe light above me. It is



important to make sure that the blades of a fan don't disrupt the light path. I also use a lot of lightweight papers for my drawings, and the fan would blow the papers I was working on, so I got rid of the ceiling-fan blades."

Although both Bloch and Mellon enjoy the proximity of studio and home, both acknowledge the challenges of having home studios and children. "The hardest part is to maintain a separation of housework and studio work," Bloch says. "When my children were small, I had a hard time with this, but not anymore. I am the luckiest gal in the world to have been able to successfully pull off being a mother, wife, and artist and still have the energy to do community service, such as serving as the president of the Artists' Fellowship, Inc. (AF) and co-chairing a committee



FAR LEFT Bloch's garage studio, which she uses for sculpture finishing and staging shipments and deliveries of large works.

LEFT
Egrets (detail)
by Babette Bloch, stainless steel, 90". Mahopac, New York, and Winter Park, Florida.

BELOW
Brookgreen Gardens Plantation Owner
by Babette Bloch, stainless steel, 108". Brookgreen Gardens, South Carolina.

OPPOSITE PAGE, ABOVE Bloch's second studio, with drawing tables and model-making supplies for research and design.

OPPOSITE PAGE, BELOW Bloch demonstrated machine cuts to heavy-gauge stainless steel suitable for large outdoor or public sculptures.

at the National Arts Club (NAC). With my husband's support and because we have our studios in our home—and are not confined by traditional working hours—we have the flexibility to make all this possible."

Some years after they moved to Redding, Bloch and Mellon's social life and critical feedback came primarily from fellow artists still living New York City. "We had a strong network of artist friends within the NAC; we

didn't really reach out much locally," Mellon says. "But over time, we met some wonderful local artists, including Kathy Anderson and Everett Raymond Kinstler. Everett and I had been friendly colleagues since I moved into the NAC in 1982, but in those early years I saw him more as mentor and was flattered that he respected my work. He'd offer to critique my projects; his eye is extraordinary, and he was always honest in helping me better see and conceive my portrait projects. He really has teaching in his blood. We had been in Redding about 10 years when Everett and his wife Peggy moved up; now we are neighbors both in New York and Connecticut. We've become very close friends, and I'm honored that he considers me a colleague. We'll get together, sometimes at Kinstler's home, sometimes at ours, sometimes at the Andersons', and sometimes at the Greene-Caporale home. It's nice to share the ups and downs of the artist's life with others who are living it.

"I can really count on my local artist friends and their families," Bloch adds. "The camaraderie and friendship makes living in this beautiful and isolated place not feel lonely. There is always a helping hand if you need it, from critiquing to modeling to helping build something. I've come to depend on that help. Making art requires a lot of heavy lifting—figuratively speaking!"



Studio Tips



Bloch notes that when she and Mellon built the new studio, they put the airflow on a different system, and this has kept fumes from their materials going into the living space. She adds, "The additional 30'-x-16' studio space we built for me attached to our garage has running water, a heat system, a ventilating fan, and a paint spray booth. When I paint my sculptures, I tend to work on the metal with water-based enamels, and they emit an odor and need to be ventilated. The booth has made a big difference.

"The best advice that I can give to an artist for combining a living and working situation is to be very aware of the toxins that you are exposed to with your materials," she continues. "All precautions should be taken to reduce exposure. This is paramount to living a long and healthy life. I have asthma and have had to control our work and living environment from the get go. Wearing protective gear, using safer alternative materials, ventilating, and using fans correctly should be in the forefront of all artists' thinking."