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Embodying Spirit

By Rachel Oliva

"Art embodies spirit," says Toni Scott as she sits in the Noho Gallery LA a day after Art Bazaar opens, an exhibit featuring Scott, as well as eight other artists. She sits at a small table sipping diet coke while paging through her impressive portfolio which features her work in sculpture (using wood, clay, marble, alabaster, and fiberglass), painting, photography, and digital arts. "This is Eve, from my 'Eve Series'", she says, pointing to a photo of a large sculpture of what looks like an African Goddess. She looks at the photo with a contemplative gaze and explains how she longs to capture the strength and power of women in her art. Eve is without arms. "We're still fighting," she says, "that's why she's not complete yet."

Scott is a California native, though she's traveled all over the world, most recently a trip to Italy to perfect her skills in marble and alabaster carving. She's been creating art for over twenty-six years; a striking thought when you look at the youthful artist talk about her work with such great passion. She comes from a family of artists and has always been inspired by their work. She looks you in the eyes when she talks to you, referring to her work on the pages of her portfolio or on the gallery wall. "I prefer to not work with models. You store the memory of people in the subconscious mind." And as she says this, you believe she's remembering the spirit of many women who've come in and out her life. Women. It's hard not to notice the lack of men in her work. "I guess you create what you know," she says.

She talks about the women in her work, smiling as she points out her friend Pam, or her hairdresser, or a photo of a young Renee Zellweger. She points to a painting called "A Night In Paris". The beautiful woman in the painting stares out from the canvas, conjuring up images of Josephine Baker. She loves faces. That is very clear when you look at her work. "How many ways can you express a face?" She asks. "I don't know, but I can't get away from them," she says, answering her own question.

In front of the wall where her work is exhibited is a small table where four of her sculptures sit. To look at the smooth marble face of the first sculpture, your first inclination is to touch it, to run your hand along the cool stone. As if she's able to read minds, Scott says, "You can touch it. Sculptures should be touched." Art embodies spirit. Like a kid sticking your hand in the cookie jar, you look around, hoping to God you're not caught, you reach out and touch the face, cupping it with your hands. This feels so taboo, so smooth... So spiritual.

Art embodies spirit. This is why she likes using found wood and other found materials. One doesn't know the story of a piece of wood you find along a beach or in a forest, but it has a history. It's been somewhere. It's seen things. She looks for material wherever she goes. She can't pass up a piece of good wood - although it's difficult finding pieces large enough to accommodate her 10-foot totem sculptures. She tells a story about how she and her 70-year old father recently found a large tree that she thought would be perfect for something and how the two of them transported it back to her studio at home. She loves carving and her eyes sparkle as she talks about using her hands to create. "Man has been working with his hands longer than driving cars," she ponders. However, the carving required for, say, her 10-foot totems require the help of one very large machine. "The neighbors worry when they don't hear chainsaws," she laughs.

Scott becomes pensive when she talks about a series of oval-framed portraits where she used multiple thin layers of oil paint in the manner of Rembrandt; an old masters approach using African-American faces. She and her family have spent some years researching the family's genealogy, tracing the family roots back to a plantation in Alabama in 1705- also researching the family's American Indian heritage. "The more you know about your past, the more full you feel," Scott says. She talks about the lack of positive references in African-American art and culture. She says that she plans to create art that speaks more about global, human issues in the future, but for right now this is what is coming from her. "In the beginning, my work was more abstract, using lots of color... Now it's more cultural. Eventually, it'll be more spiritual." In whichever direction her art takes her next, there's no doubt that she has already tapped into the spiritual.

Find out more about Scott and other artists at the Art Bazaar, running through December 10 with an artist reception on November 19, from 4:00 - 8:00 p.m.

The Art Bazaar is located in the **NoHo Gallery LA** at The Lankershim Arts Center, 5108 Lankershim Boulevard, North Hollywood. Gallery hours are Thursday - Saturday from 2:00 - 8:00 p.m. and Sunday from 2:00 - 7:00 p.m.

For more information please call **(818) 761-7784**.

