

Against the Odds

Sculptor Mary Gorrara

BY LUCIANA RICCIUTELLI

Mary Gorrara's studio is crammed with an impressive array of sculptures carved from granite, alabaster, marble and ebony. Some of the pieces are large while others are small, some figurative, others abstract. Some have been cast in bronze while others are as yet unfinished. The walls are filled with pencil sketches, studies of past and future projects. Her small office is plastered with family photographs and postcards, a corner is crammed with an abundance of well-thumbed art books. The studio spills out through sliding doors into a garden that is Mary's pride and joy. Two-tiered, it houses an extraordinary variety of flowering plants that graciously frame one of her larger pieces. In the lower patio there is an enormous "hoptoon wood stone" lying on a custom-built bunker (or sculpting table), which Mary has yet to work. She comments that it is from an old Commonwealth building, a favourite haunting ground for sculpting materials.

Mary Gorrara was born in London, England in 1923 with a disease called Charcot Maritooth. She likes to joke about her handicap. Laughing, she describes herself as "all crooked" and brushes it off by mischievously adding that she long ago nicknamed herself "no-knees Gorrara." Charcot Maritooth is linked to muscular dystrophy and has been responsible for the progressive erosion of Mary's knees. As a result, she is painfully knock-kneed and arthritic; walking has become increasingly difficult. Her studio is equipped with an automatic chair that is hooked up to the staircase and effortlessly transports her up and down. Although the disease is also responsible for the constant tremor in Mary's hands, it in no way affects the powerful grip of her handshake, a testament perhaps to her lifelong love of sculpting and the consequent strength she developed in her arms and hands from working laboriously with chisel and hammer.

Even a cursory glance at her work makes it apparent that Mary's medical condition has never been an impediment to the creation of her art. Grudgingly, however, she concedes that "in England, if I had not been handicapped, I could have gotten a lot further. I couldn't move, I couldn't meet people, I couldn't go where I wanted to go all the time. I could have done much bigger stuff." But she is quick to point out that although "it was frustrating, you accept it and get on with your life and things come to you to a large extent."

She categorically informs me that she "started large," explain-

ing that she began sculpting by doing "big concrete stuff. It was cheap and I could [therefore afford to] go big. It is a wonderful feeling working big — breathing differently." Shrugging, she adds, "at that time you had to show you could do big things — large sculpture — you had to show you could cope with anything. My legs were getting worse and it was very painful but there was nothing they [doctors] could do so I just had to keep on working." Her only concession to her handicap is occasionally to take medication to stop the tremor in her hands when she does a portrait or something that is "very fine." Even this, however, is conquered by Mary's resolute determination. She adds that "at certain times, when you concentrate very hard, it doesn't seem to matter much." One cannot help but sense that Mary has used the strength in her spirit as well as in her arms to do and achieve the "large" things that her physical limitations might not have allowed her to do otherwise.

Health reasons were what finally prompted Mary to join her family in Toronto. First she had to have surgery to remove the cataracts in her eyes and later a series of operations on both her knees. "Now I have got both artificial knees and the muscular dystrophy rehab has decided that I've got to have lifting gear. Actually they're going to put it in for me which is absolutely fantastic." This means Mary will no longer have to depend on assistance from other people in order to lift and move the very heavy materials she works with.

Her small frame and cropped grey hair enhance large, dark eyes that exude a quiet and controlled energy. The impression she gives is of a woman who has always done exactly what she wanted. I am not surprised when my comments regarding the difficulties she must have faced early in her career, not simply as a handicapped individual, but more importantly, as a woman and sculptor at a time when the art world was dominated almost exclusively by men, prompt an abrupt and emphatic assertion: "I just never felt the problem. It was not the same as a man, a little different, but I never had a problem. I just did it."

Mary's service in the British Navy during World War II helped her to reject to some degree the conventional female role dictated by post-war English society. "I got a grant at the end of it which was very nice." That grant enabled Mary to enroll at the Camberwell School of Art where she attended sculpture classes. "I met a man there who was very enthusiastic about Aztec work

and that's when the sculpture bug hit me." It was there that Mary also met and fell in love with her Italian model, Primo Gorrara.

"I went on learning how to carve wood and stone and then got pregnant. We decided to get married six months after." Almost reluctantly, she explains, "I was brought up in a very large suburban family. When the war came, because of circumstances, I broke away from it and met so many different people. I decided to marry my gorgeous beautiful model, Primo, because he was so different from my family you see." Mary's casual tone is typical of her understated attitude towards the obstacles she must have encountered. Later, she confesses that "my parents didn't approve of me for a long time. I was always the odd one out. I was one of the wierdies — long hair, long skirts, bare feet, earrings and all that sort of thing. My father wanted me to be finished properly and married to a certain type. It was very difficult but they came to love me in the end." Considering the social mores of the time, Mary's defiant rejection of the traditionally constricting female role, her dogged pursuit of an artistic career and quiet rebellion against the patriarchal establishment is remarkable.

It was not an easy time but Mary was ingenious and resourceful. Having very little money, the newly married couple lived for the most part on Mary's grant and rented out rooms to supplement their income. She speaks fondly of those early days. "We had a house full of tenants — all sorts of characters. The house was full of energy. It was a really great time." Her husband, she explains with palpable appreciation, was always supportive and converted the front basement of their large and rambling home into a studio for Mary to work in. Wistfully, she adds, "I loved that studio." While discarded tombstones eagerly hunted out in old churchyards were an inexpensive source of working material, it was through Primo that Mary began to experiment with concrete. "I was one of the first to use concrete because Primo and his family were in the building trade. I learned you could do a lot with it. Primo showed me how to use the concrete and how to mix it. I learned how to handle it and how to model with it. I learned to build concrete armatures. You had to have a lot of stamina. I didn't have a mixer. I was the mixer." Grinning, she adds, "It not only takes a great deal of energy but you get very dirty. I had a lot of bleeding fingers before I learned that if you don't wear rubber gloves you'll take the skin off the tip of your fingers!"

Mary threw herself whole-

heartedly into mastering her craft. After Camberwell, she enrolled at the City and Guilds School of Art in Kennington and then studied sculpture at the Sir John Cass School of Art in Whitechapel. Working for other sculptors not only helped to make ends meet but also provided an invaluable learning environment. Not even the birth of her two children (Perry, with whom she lives in Toronto, and Andy, who commutes between Norway and England), slowed her down. "Of course, I had to stop sculpting for a short time. A very short time," she stresses, while explaining that the "c-sections" she had with both children "held me back for awhile." She continued to work by day for other sculptors, hopping on her bicycle when finished to collect the children from school.

"I was determined to enjoy my children," she states emphatically, "and I was very strong." She does admit that juggling everything was not without the occasional mishap. Laughingly, she tells me about the time that she "wanted so badly to do some work" so she put her daughter, Perry, into a pram and tried to "bump" her down the stairs into the studio where she could keep an eye on her while she worked. "I slipped and nearly shot ... [her] through the window!"

Later, Mary also "had to teach to keep things going," an experience she considers invaluable. "I learned a great deal by teaching," she explains. "I realized I had to know an awful lot. I used to tackle practically anything and then teach it afterward."

She joined the staff of the Camden Art Centre in Hampstead, London in 1967 and began by teaching children art. She was subsequently asked to teach sculpture and eventually appointed head of the department. "It was tremendously rewarding. It was a great place. Some good work went on there — great exhibitions — and I sold a lot." She is proud to inform me that when she left the school in 1984 the Sculpture Department was closed.

She remains nonchalant when addressing the obvious difficulties inherent in combining the management of her large household, her work, as well as her career as a sculptor, insisting that she was for the most part indifferent to the woman's movement and feminist issues. "Very important things are happening now but then I was far too busy working, working and working. We lived in a big old house. I cleaned it, I did the shopping, I was the sculptor, I was the mother, I looked after the children and I taught."



She grudgingly admits to the occasional testy moment, however: "To have a temper is a very important thing with a sculptor. Carving is a way of releasing it," she comments smiling.

Despite Mary's insistence that feminist issues have never consciously shaped her work, there are a number of pieces in her studio that appear to me to be evidence of its unconscious influence. I am enthralled by a striking series of sculptures of reclining women that have a tangibly sorrowful quality. Curled up in a fetal position, all the women have their wombs eerily scooped out, hauntingly empty and sterile. Mary explains that they are "late" pieces, sculpted in her late thirties and early forties. Eyes clouded, she confesses they echo her rage at the treatment of pregnant women in English hospitals. "I lost my first child and that was so traumatic. I was strong. I was fine. Because of this disease I've got, my pelvis is small and crooked and they never gave me an internal examination. I had a certain amount of pain, but not much. I had 36 hours of labour. And then the baby was lost." Painfully, she adds, "My first waking, the first words from the nurse were "Well, she better get over it." That really hurt and the ward was full of women having babies all over the place. It really ripped me, it tore right through me. I was very ill but I was strong and recovered quickly. After that I had to have caesarians. So it was a fairly dramatic experience."

The "empty wombs," as I come to think of them, are in stark contrast to the numerous sculptures of pregnant women also scattered throughout Mary's studio. Passively seated and quietly radiant, hands resting on full and welcome bellies, they are peculiarly beatifying. These pieces, she explains, came long before the hauntingly hollow wombs. Her interest was sparked by her daughter's first pregnancy, a time she remembers as being frankly "marvellous," prompting a series of sculptures of a young and pregnant model. Musingly, she adds, "Later, when I thought about it, I did a little one and I cut out the stomach and that really was about losing my first baby."

I am reminded of a particular passage in Lucy Lippard's book, *From the Center, Feminist Essays on Women's Art* (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin and Co., 1976) in which she debates the question of whether there is a "feminist" art. In concluding that there "are aspects of art by women which are inaccessible to men and that these aspects arise from the fact that a woman's political, biological and social experience in this society is different from that of a man," Lippard maintains that the characteristics of a "female sensibility" are manifested in "certain elements—a central focus (often "empty," often circular or oval), parabolic baglike forms, obsessive line and detail, veiled strata, tactile or sensuous surfaces and forms, associative fragmentation, autobiographical emphasis, and so forth." While for Mary these issues were not a conscious consideration, Lippard could very well be describing Mary Gorrara's empty wombs.

It seems that for Mary the struggle to be accepted by her peers, almost exclusively male, was arduous and her repeated references to having had "to prove herself" by "working big" can be seen as meaning being able to work on the same level as a man. In this context, Lucy Lippard's comment that "the resistance on the part of some women artists to identification with other women artists is the product of years of rebellion against the derogatory connotations of the word 'feminine' applied to art or any other facet of life" seems once again to reflect Mary Gorrara's reality.

Mary stresses that her sculptures of women are more than just a subconscious expression of the loss of her child. "It was partially because I felt very interested in the male and female in a woman too, in people. That is all part of it too. The male-female in everybody." She points to a beautiful 34-inch ebony sculpture of a woman standing, arms raised over her head, graceful in its abandon, frank sexuality and understated strength. "That's more about that," she says. "I call it "Woman." That is the woman, really male and female. There's a certain strength there. I like it."

Some of the more recent pieces are openly celebratory, joyous expressions of womanhood and the feminine creative principle. "Three Buds" is an exquisite sculpture, carved out of Carrara marble, an imposing piece of which Mary is particularly proud. When I comment that the work evokes the shape of a young woman's breasts, Mary laughs appreciatively, acknowledging that this sculpture was as much inspired by her daughter's pregnancy as it was by her love of flowers and gardens. "I had a camelia tree in my garden," she explains. "It always had wonderful buds. Then my daughter became pregnant and so [this work] was a celebration of [Perry's] becoming pregnant, settling down, and my camelia."

Underlying the work is a statement about woman's place in nature and the cycle of life, which is evident in another equally impressive work carved from alabaster, which was also the product of intensive studies made in Mary's garden of an hydragen flower. "It took a lot of drawings and a lot of thought," she remarks, adding that one "can't do anything without a lot of research." She began by working on two little flowers, the piece eventually blossoming into its present majesty. "Almost like a symphony," she states "tied up with breaking away from Primo and coming here." It is a happy piece, serene, joyful, fulfilled.

Mary Gorrara's strength is clearly both internal and physical. It is manifest in the personal power she exerted to overcome any limitations her physical handicap may have imposed as well as the subtle and not-so-subtle constrictions of a society hostile to women's independence and creativity, a power that is reflected in the size, the dynamic and the diversity of her work. The energy that vibrates in her art is a tangible expression of the wealth of Mary's spiritual depth and intuition as well as her experience as a woman and artist.

Mary Gorrara has been having successful one-woman exhibitions since 1960. Although in Toronto she was recently part of a group exhibition at the Neo Faber Gallery, finding a permanent gallery suitable for exhibiting her work has not been easy. Adapting to life in a new country is always stressful and for Mary this is compounded by the fact that mobility is difficult. The problems with her health have also been disconcertingly disruptive and it is somewhat ruefully that she adds, "it's been very spasmodic because I've been in the hospital so much." But Mary is eager to get back to sculpting and she is looking forward to the arrival of the lifting equipment. "I want to know more about the different types of stones in Canada," she says excitedly. "Now I'll be able to work comfortably and there are a lot of things smouldering." Nevertheless, she seems uncertain about her future and is poignant when she comments softly, "I just want to work. I want to have a clear run." It is with characteristic determination that she asserts, "It seems to me that I can go on working for a very long time, another ten years of good work."