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Photo: Edwin Hurwitz

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Bigger than life

Penelope Jencks's terra cotta figures show at PAAM

By Ann Wood
Banner Staff

An older nude woman is walking the beach, breasts sagging, stomach bloated, looking down at the sand to avoid tripping.

A man is pulling off his last bit of clothing. The shirt is wrinkled around his shoulders and neck as he pulls it over his head. One nipple is covered, the other exposed.

A woman is kneeling on the beach, arms tucked under bare breasts, toes bend against the sand, she is looking off to the side.

These may be ordinary moments — on a nude beach — but these are no ordinary people. They are three of Penelope Jencks' many giant terra cotta figures that are featured in an exhibition entitled "Beach Series II," which opens with a reception from 7 to 9 p.m. Friday at the Provincetown Art Association and Museum, 460 Commercial St., Provincetown. This show runs through July 16.

Although many of the featured figures are larger than life, they don't seem that way to their creator.

"I think of that as being normal size," Jencks says of the eight-foot-tall figures that can reach 10 feet when placed on a base. "I guess I always have a small model that I work from."

"You can see that it could be any size," she says of certain models. "It has a lot to do with the scale and the proportions of the body."

These figures are perfectly proportioned with less than perfect bodies. Skin and breasts sag, bellies bulge, bodies are pock-marked — it's as if Jencks refuses to clean up reality. The terra

cotta often gives the figures a sandy appearance, which is part of the point.

“I was doing terra cotta figures because I thought that they were very connected to the beach, because they are made of terra cotta and sand ... the body shapes look like dunes,” she has said.

Jencks attended Swarthmore College, where she studied art history and French before deciding to transfer to art school at BU. She laughs as she says she decided she “would rather make art history” than study it. Jencks ended up with a BFA in painting, but she didn’t keep the brush in hand for long.

“I sort of had a complicated back and forth relationship of making things from nature,” she says of painting, adding that she quickly got sick of it. “I found that I could imagine things better three-dimensionally than I could two-dimensionally.”

Jencks spent two summers at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, where she met her husband, the artist Sidney Hurwitz. She and her husband quickly had three children: Edwin, who is now a musician; Adam, a painter; and Erica, who teaches at the University of Vermont, is finishing up a dissertation on religion and bluegrass music.

“I guess I managed to keep on working while my children were young,” Jencks says, adding that she had an artistic “break through” in the late ’60s, early ’70s. That’s when she began creating angst-ridden terra cotta self-portraits. That’s when her work became what it is now — which, she admits, has more of an Egyptian and European than American feel.

Very few sculptors work in terra cotta because, Jencks says, “it’s too heavy and too fragile.” With no one to look to — she never studied in the medium — Jencks decided to figure it out herself.

“I just made it up as I went along. I think my tendency is to do that,” she adds.

The figures she creates can take anywhere from 18 months to four years and Jencks has been commissioned to do several pieces. She’s now working on a Robert Frost monumental sculpture for Amherst College, but is perhaps best known for Eleanor Roosevelt, who leans on a rock in Riverside Park in New York.

“There were a lot of places that wanted to take it but couldn’t,” Jencks says about her current show, adding that the ceilings have to be well over 10 feet high, and then there’s the floor space. Each piece also weighs between 300 and 400 lbs. PAAM was happy to have room for the show, which brings things full circle for Jencks.

When she was 18 years old she, like many artists, came to Provincetown to study with Hans Hofmann.

“I think that’s why I became an artist, from studying with Hans Hofmann,” she says. “[We were taught that] art was it. That was what was most important in the world.”



Photo Ann Wood

Penelope Jencks in her Wellfleet studio. She spent two full years here creating a commissioned piece of an eight-foot-tall Eleanor Roosevelt.

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