

Tip Toland— Genuine Life in Sculpture

The local artist took a long inward journey to find her vision and her mission.

SARA THOMPSON, KP NEWS

Tip Toland, a sculptor renowned for her arresting, realistic, life-sized figures, moved to the Key Peninsula with her husband nearly two decades ago from Seattle. “At the time I thought it would take me from all my connections in town and I would feel very isolated. But I wouldn’t go back to Seattle for all the tea in China,” she said.

Toland’s spiritual life is central to her work. She follows Mata Amritanandamayi, a Hindu spiritual leader and humanitarian, known throughout the world as Amma, who offers a hug to all who seek comfort from her. Amma began conducting programs around the world in 1987, and Toland first met her in 1990. She said, “I wasn’t looking for anything per se. I was dubious and skeptical and then I got one of her hugs and something really happened.

For some people it’s just a hug. For others it is a spiritual awakening. For me, it was like a spear right to my heart and changed my life.”

Toland said she was feeling self-indulgent as an artist. She needed to hear directly from Amma that teaching and making art had her approval. If she did not get it, she was ready to leave her career and work with Amma caring for the poor. At a program with followers, which went into the small hours of the morning, Toland submitted her questions to Amma in writing. When she saw Amma was reading her questions she went to hear her answers directly. Is it OK to be an artist? “Yes,” said Amma. It is OK to teach art? Again, yes. How do I keep my ego out of it? “Be a brush in God’s hands,” said Amma. Toland plunged back into her work, creating striking images of the vulnerable and teaching in workshops all over the world.

At the time she was living in the Magnolia neighborhood in Seattle with her husband and working in her studio in Pioneer Square. Parking at her studio was a nightmare. She had to constantly feed a meter. “I’d get into my right brain while I was working, would forget to go to the meter. The parking violations department knew me by my first name,” she said.

When Toland received a small inheritance, the couple considered a move. In Seattle, they could afford a “small house in the Rainier Valley with bars on the windows.” They had never heard of the Key Peninsula, but when members of Toland’s satsang, or spiritual community, told them about a place owned by other followers of Amma, her husband paid a visit. “Kenny took one look and said, ‘We’ll take it,’” Toland said. She was a bit more hesitant. “I didn’t want to live in an ashram,” she said. “I’m not so spiritual so that I can’t enjoy my life.”



Photo: Lisa Bryan, KP News

But not long after, Toland and her husband purchased the 5-acre property and never looked back.

A few years ago, a grant allowed her to build a small studio filled with light. Her kiln and other working space is in a daylight basement. “I love that we have a place to park every day. I have dogs and they can just go. It’s like ‘don’t fence me in.’ I’m a happy camper,” she said.

Toland’s early works were wall reliefs in ceramics and wood. She transitioned to three-dimensional work in the mid-1990s. “It just seemed to happen. I was getting antsy, and at one point I just got impatient with the process of doing wall reliefs.”

At first, she said, “I had no real grasp of anatomy and so I went back to school.” She attended Gage Academy in Seattle, taking sculpting classes based on classical observational training. Her first sculptures were dolls. “They were sort of frozen and purposely stiff at first, until I got more confident.”

She said of her choice of subjects, “I tend to gravitate to people who have been marginalized and the vulnerable. I gravitate to honesty. And the vulnerable are stripped down to their basic humanity. Expression means a lot to me in portraiture. Any kind of underdog will grab my attention.” Her current work features the very young and the very old, and a recent exhibition focused on albinism in East Africa.

Toland works from live models. They pose, she measures them and takes photographs, makes sketches and then creates the sculptures, usually from stoneware, in her studio. She works with solid clay, using an armature of plumbing pipe as support. “I have to see the whole thing, to pound it and work with it,” she said.

Once the figure is complete, she cuts it into segments,

hollows it and removes the armature, and fires it in the kiln she designed to accommodate the large pieces. She said it takes as long to finish the surface—making skin and eyes eerily realistic—as the sculpting itself. She uses house paint, flecking colors in multiple layers with toothbrushes. She’ll add chalk pastel to a few areas, paint a fixative, and then add wax where she wants to have a sheen. The eyes are painted with clear nail polish.

It takes Toland about four months to complete a sculpture. She said at a lecture at the Bellevue Arts Museum, “At times one wonders in the many months of making work in one’s basement alone, if this is nuts or not. My belief is that it is nuts and at the same time a calling.”

Toland is now working on a show scheduled next year at Traver Gallery, the gallery that represents her in Seattle. Typically, a show will feature five or six new pieces. If all

are not life-sized, she can produce up to four in a year. She said, “Small is almost more of a pain. I fantasize about doing little quick things but then I know how I am. The ball continues to roll, and I follow it wherever it rolls.”

Toland has been featured in exhibitions internationally, including a 2008 to 2009 retrospective at the Bellevue Arts Museum. Her work is in collections around the world, including at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the Portland Art Museum, and the Renwick Gallery at the Smithsonian.

She has won multiple awards. This year she was selected by the NW Designer Craftsmen to be featured as part of The Living Treasures Project, described as “video profiles of individuals with lifelong involvement in the arts and a history of personal generosity and outstanding leadership.” The video will be presented Oct. 20 at Broadway Performance Hall in Seattle.

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