

Arts In – The Creative Pinellas Podcast

Christina Bertso

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Transcript

Christina Bertso: I love the artistry of fashion. These beautiful couture dresses and the fabrics and the gorgeousness of it. And then you look to stone and you see some beautiful pieces of marble – and they're just so similar to me, you know, it's beauty. It's beauty.

Barbara St. Clair: Hello and welcome to Arts In, the podcast produced by Creative Pinellas. I'm Barbara St Clair and I'm your host today. I'm with Christina Bertso, who is an amazing sculptor. Christina, hello and welcome.

Christina Bertso: Hi, Barbara.

Barbara St. Clair: I wanted to ask you from your very personal and specific perspective, what does it feel like to work in stone?

Christina Bertso: Hmm. I love that question. I would say the biggest feeling that I get with working in this beautiful medium is the thrill of uncovering something within the stone, that's within it and also within me – and creating something of beauty and pleasure that people can enjoy.

I love the physical process. It is very physical between all the standing, and the kind of muscles that I have to use. I'm never sitting still when I'm carving – I'm always kind of moving in and out. And it can be demanding, but it's exciting to watch something come into form from an idea or a thought.

And I really I leave it open to the stone to guide me. That's what makes it so interesting and unique, because each stone is its own individual, almost. It has its own veins. It has different idiosyncrasies, of that particular type of stone. But it's fascinating and it just continues to spark my interest.

There's never really a dull moment because there's so many different types of stones and things that you could do with it. It's so versatile.

And I love the surprise that I get in the end when you say, okay, I'm finally finished with it. And it's something that I've really enjoyed putting my efforts and my body and my mind and my heart into it. For me, it's really exciting.

Barbara St. Clair: And when you say stone, by the way, you're not talking about pebbles. What is the typical size of the stone that you use for sculpture?

Christina Bertsons: I would say my typical size is probably about 300 pounds. That would be typical. Marble is much more dense and heavy, alabaster a little bit lighter. So it kind of depends on the type of stone that I'm working with and that determines the weight of it.

So right now, the piece that I'm working on started about 200 pounds. I don't take off much of the weight, so it might end up about 150 or 100. So they're very heavy. It's really a challenge to move around. But that's why we use these little tricks that they did, like in ancient times – if you put a pebble underneath a really big piece of stone, you can move it around or you slide it from place to place.

And we have people that work in like a co-op studio and we'll help each other. What I've come to realize is it's a whole – it's like a group process. Everyone gets involved and that makes it really fun, too. It's something that you could do among other artists and and they could help you, whether there's tools that need to be fixed or things adjusted, and ideas – and they can help you move things, because I weigh about 120 pounds. So most of the stones I work weigh more than me, much more than.

Barbara St. Clair: Can you tell me about the tools you use to carve your work? [

Christina Bertsons: So the typical tools I use are the same ones that have been used since the days of Michelangelo and prehistory – the hammer and the chisel, your basic tools. And the rest are the shapers.

Once you've kind of carved out the form with your hammer and your chisel, then you go in with a rasp and you shape the form. And there's just

thousands of different types of abrasives that you can use to refine the surface.

And then because I want to move quicker and we have technology since those days. I use a lot of pneumatic tools. So that's like an air-powered chisel. It'll just move the stone a lot quicker. I use grinders and blades, lots of power tools.

So I might, if I want to get through a lot of stone, I'll use a blade and then whack off big chunks of it that way. So lots of power tools, but still the original tools that were used back in the day, and all sorts of different abrasives – like stone itself abrades against each other. Sandpaper.

Barbara St. Clair: You know, you talk about the challenges of moving this heavy stone – I'm listening to you and there's also a lot of push and pull with the stone. You're right there, with your body.

Christina Bertzos: Yes. Yeah. It's like I feel like I connect with the work in the process of that physicality. It's something that I enjoy – I enjoy getting in there and making it happen with my hands.

And I think that's part of the process that makes me feel connected to the piece as I'm working with it – I enjoy working with my hands. I enjoy figuring out, okay, what my next move is going to be and how I'm going to achieve it. And over time – I've been doing this for about ten years – I think you just learn what you need to use in order to do something in particular.

It's actually a lot of fun. I might be exhausted when I'm done, but it's energizing at the same time.

Barbara St. Clair: What brought you to stone ten years ago?

Christina Bertzos: I've always been interested in classical sculpture, especially classical Greek sculpture, because I'm Greek. And growing up, we would go to Greece, we'd visit the museums. And I was just always fascinated by that and always have been fascinated by the ancient works in stone from thousands of years ago, along with my love for modern abstract art.

In sculpture, I also attribute that direction to my fashion design background because you're looking proportion and line and how to adorn the body in a

certain way. And I feel like it's all come together with the idea of being a sculptor.

So once upon a time, I guess about ten years ago, I was sitting at home and I got a catalog from the [Dunedin Fine Art Center](#) and saw a stone carving class at the Dunedin Fine Art Center, which is about 5 minutes from my home. And I thought, this is really interesting.

And so I went and I just, I took to it immediately and I started learning and working with that teacher. It was just something that kind of got under – that I took to.

And I really enjoyed the beauty of the stone. There's so many different types. I mean, it's just kind of endless. But I love working with marble and seeing what I could do with it. It's almost surprising to myself that, wow, it's really fascinating. It's something that that you could do for your entire life.

I have mentors, one that's passed. But she sculpted until she was about 95, Sylvia Goldstein. She was using power tools and she was doing smaller pieces. It's something that I think takes a lifetime to master. But you could just keep doing it.

Barbara St. Clair: You mentioned your work in fashion. Can we talk about that?

Christina Bertson: Sure. I went to FIT, the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York. I have always wanted to be an artist. That was my goal, my dream, ever since I could remember.

But at the time, it didn't feel practical. I wasn't really sure how to pursue it. I went to college and I was pre-med, so I knew I wanted to help people. So I chose medicine, but then realized that this is not really for me. So I went back to school and studied at FIT. And when they asked me what I want to specialize in, I chose couture. So those are one of a kind handmade garments that are made of the most exquisite and fabulous materials you can imagine.

I love the artistry and the artisanship that you can get in couture fashion versus ready to wear. And it just really intrigued me. And so I majored in that and I loved it. I didn't go off to Paris, but I went back to Chicago and I

worked for several designers and I also produced my own line, several lines, and I worked in womenswear.

I still use things I learned in fashion. I did a lot of illustration, fashion, illustration, and I also did, through the years, lots of life drawing. So I think all this drawing and concentrating on the female form has really helped as I'm using the theme of the abstract feminine form with a lot of my own creations. I think all of that is coming into the present right now.

Barbara St. Clair: I'm on your website and I'm looking at a work called *Night*. It's in antique black marble. And you write, "She is stuck with delicate shells that are reminiscent of stars and planets."

It's a lovely sculpture and in my mind it reminds me of the draping that you'd do if you were working with fabric. At the same time, it's so different from classical sculptures – and it occurs to me that the difference is between a male gaze and a female gaze.

Christina Bertson: You nailed it. I mean, that is what I endeavored to do.

It's as if the fabric is a part of the body and it's in movement and it's becoming – and I am moving more in that direction with my current collection, just outright showing drapery, but in an abstract form. And the drapery is on top of the body, but it's also a part of the body.

And in that sense I am connecting what we wear to how we identify with ourselves. And so much of what you wear, what one chooses to wear, becomes a part of who they are. And so in this collection that I'm doing that that's reflected, even more so.

So I think in my evolution, they're becoming even a little bit less abstract, and you could really see that. But I'm glad that you picked that out. And it's definitely intentional. You're right. It comes out of the draping, which I had to do quite a bit of when I was in a fashion school. And outside of fashion, when I worked for a dressmaker and I was in the factory, I was draping. And that's what I did for quite a long time.

And then I also did pattern making. And so with pattern making, you have to be so exact, like a quarter of an inch and a half an inch. I'm really good at eyeballing things. I use that with my sculptures because the line has to

be just so, you know, like the hem of a skirt can't be crooked, unless that's what you're going after. It has to be perfectly straight.

And that learning to see things and learning to look at lines and how things overlap and in three dimensions, I think the fashion definitely, that training helped me with what I'm doing in sculpture today, in the exquisite materials.

I, I love the artistry of fashion, these beautiful couture dresses in the fabrics and the gorgeousness of it. And then you look to stone and then you see some beautiful pieces of marble, and they're just so similar to me, you know? It's beauty. It's beauty. One is manmade and the other is natural. But it's all really about beauty.

My art now is definitely feminine, but I want it to be strong feminine. I love when young girls come up to me and say, "I want to do that. I'm interested in doing that." I had one recently – that's just so, wow, it's like the greatest compliment, when a young woman says, "Oh, that's so interesting. Can I see how you do that?"

Sculptors today, most of them or many of them are male. It's wonderful to see women do it and create such beautiful work reflective of their spirit.

Barbara St. Clair: So tell me, so where does a sculptor who works in stone go shopping for material?

Christina Bertson: Again, I am so lucky with how this whole story came about. So once I once I got into the idea that, okay, I really love this, I'm going to continue to pursue this – I came across a sculpture studio that's been around for about 30 years. It's near Clearwater-Largo Road, the Belleaire area. And I met another group of sculptors there, and through them I came across now a dear friend, a man who sells stone and tools to sculptors, and he's out of Kansas.

His name is Miles Shatner, and he's a teacher as well, if I have any questions about anything. But if you want to start this endeavor, if you want to try your hand at stone, you could just go on his website. It's called 2sculpt.com and you'll find whatever you need – anything you want to create, you just ask him and he'll guide you as far as the size of the stone, the type of the stone. So again, that community that I talked about – it's not

just me doing it, but I have so many wonderful people that I've met that really help make it happen.

And then he ships the stone to me – it comes by truck, by freight. You got to make friends when you're working in stone because this stuff is heavy, so you slide it from surface to surface, and rolling.

Barbara St. Clair: You get it where you need it.

Christina Bertzos: Yeah, where you need to get it. You will have to roll it or use 2 by 4's to put it in a position where it can be tipped onto this hydraulic lift. And from there you lift it to the table you're working on – like a wooden table with wheels, then moving it around. If it's 400 or 500 pounds, then that's more challenging to move. But if it's a couple hundred pounds, I can do it with someone helping me move it around a little bit. And the least you can move it, the better, because you don't really want to expend too much energy or hurt yourself. So I try not to move heavy stones too much.

Barbara St. Clair: So you start the conversation by finding some stone that is interesting to you, because it started with seeing the stone in this electronic environment. Or does it start with an idea? 'It's something I would like to bring to life and I need to find a stone that will do that.'

Christina Bertzos: Well, for me, it definitely starts with the physical stone. So I'll see, I'll see it. But I actually have to have it physically in front of me, and then the mind just starts to go, you know, like you start to imagine what you could do with it.

And then a very good friend of mine who's a sculptor, another wonderful mentor, she says what she would recommend is trying all different types of stones. Just try them all and see which one you like.

And that was such good advice, for a young just starting out sculptor, because you you want to see, well, what do you enjoy working with? Which one do you enjoy working with the most? Because they're all different and they feel different, you need to work with them differently, they react differently to different tools. They all have their own unique character.

And so I love being able to explore, but I actually have to have the actual stone in front of me. And then I'll say, 'Okay, what should we do with you?'

Barbara St. Clair: So your creative process is kind of a dialog with the stone. You leave it open to the stone. So you've got this stone that arrives by truck, your crew and your friends unloading it. And there it is, it's own stone self. And you start a creative process that will ultimately evolve into a sculpture. Can you tell me about that stone talking to you and how how it happens in that magic moment?

Christina Bertson: Well, that's always exciting. You have this raw piece of stone. And now what? What are you going to do with your your blank canvas?

So my process is to examine it, look for things in terms of whether it's a colored stone. Are there any interesting veins? Sometimes they're literally boulders. Other times they're rectangles or squares. But then I'll look for something, some characteristic, a vein, or maybe how it was cut and just those little things. They start to guide me and then I just start to see things. I'll walk around it.

I'll also have ideas of things in my head that I like to create. And it also depends on what's going on in the world and kind of where my mind is and really what's happening. So I do connect this inner process with what's happening in the world.

You know, when we had the pandemic, everyone was, you know, secluded. I was in the studio working. So different things were going through my head as I was picking up these new pieces and trying to translate what was happening in the world and how that's affecting me into what I'm about to create.

So I'll give it some some thought, you know, maybe several days, but not longer than that. Because for me, the way that I work is I have to just dive into it. I have to start taking some pieces off. I have to start really getting into the stone.

And I really mean what I say, 'into it.' I mean cutting into it deeply and sometimes making some more aggressive moves because that's the only way, at least from my perspective, to really start to see a sculpture take shape and move, is to dig deep into the stone, the design, thinking, the creation is just happening as it's happening.

Barbara St. Clair: So you don't have an end in mind when you're looking at the stone?

Christina Bertso: Sometimes I do, but sometimes I don't. My last piece was called *Aphrodite Rising*. That really – you could definitely see the drapery. It was in the Arts Annual. So that one, I really enjoyed that concept of the drapery as part of the body, you know, the abstract feminine, this sculpture kind of rising out of the rock itself.

That theme is still in me. I haven't explored it enough to let it go. But I still keep it open and then it evolves into what it's going to be.

So this particular piece that I'm working on now, it's evolving into, again, a goddess – but it's a representation or a personification of the wind, and what that would feel like if it were personified. So I'm doing drapery. I want it to feel like there's wind blowing. So I'll kind of go with these concepts and it just keeps evolving. And I'm never finished until I'm finished.

Barbara St. Clair: And how do you know that you're finished?

Christina Bertso: I know when I'm finished with the actual sculpting of the form, and then there's the finishing. Now you're trying to shape and smooth. Then you've worked out the main details. But at that stage, I know it's finished. When I look all around it, from every angle. I've examined it from every possible angle, and there's nothing more that I could do to change it that would enhance it.

I try to be very objective. I'll ask myself, Does it need anything else? Is there something missing or there's something more that I can remove to make it more interesting?

But if there's nothing, if I'm satisfied with how the form has come out, then I'll spend maybe as much time shaping. So then I'll be shaping it with rasps, these long metal implements that are jagged and they shape the stone. And then I'll be deciding, okay, how do I want this edge? Do I want it rounded or I want it sharp? And so I'm continuing the process. Even though I've been carving it, I'm still working out the finished detail of the sculpture.

And you see all these things make a difference, like how these edges are going to be or if there's a line that I maybe I want to remove. And so you

keep refining, refining, refining, and then you'll get down to actually sanding – there's different grades of sandpaper. And I usually go at least five or six grades of sandpaper over the entire sculpture – and this all by hand, because my arm, they have rotary things you could use and devices, but sometimes those impart scratches that I've already tried to remove and my sculptures are usually curvy and you need to kind of get your hands into tight spaces, so that's all completely by hand.

And I'm still kind of thinking about, okay, do I want this smoothed or I want it textured? How high of a shine? Do I want it shiny, do I want it satin? So I'm still making those decisions. I also have examined every single centimeter time and time again to make sure there aren't any scratches that are left from the tools, because that takes away from the surface of it.

So sanding and that whole finishing process takes hours and hours. It's got to be just so, you know, you want it to reflect that level of love that you put into it. At least I do.

So it's really not done until the even the very end when you decide, what do I want that surface to be? All that plays a role in in the piece and what it reflects and how people feel about it.

But I think ultimately I'm done after I've really sanded the surface to a level where you would want to touch it. So if someone goes up to and says, 'Oh, can I touch that?' – then I'm usually done.

Barbara St. Clair: Have you ever been in a situation with one of your stones where you think you're going in one direction and the stone says, 'Oh, maybe I'm going to take you somewhere else?'

Christina Bertson: There are moments, and they're not uncommon, to sometimes feel a bit lost, like, okay, I've gotten this far. And I'm like Hansel and Gretel, I'm following the crumbs – but now I'm a little lost.

But yet, during those moments, I just leave it because I think it could be a factor of, you know, maybe I'm tired or I'm just not I'm not seeing it. And for me, it's like anything – I leave it and then I go away and then I come back the next day and I pick it up again. But I'm never lost for too long. I mean, there's always something I could do.

And because I'm open and I have this kind of free flowing expression, it's never a problem to not know where you're going. And I can usually find my way again. I go with what's being offered. It's kind of my, I would say, my philosophy in life – if something else shows up or something else is being shown to you, then maybe that's a better way. It's offering another way to go that might be better than what I thought it was going to be.

I'm hoping that it'll help people connect with just this awe inspiring – like every day when you wake up in the sunrise, it's so amazing just to be alive for another day. And how could I personify or how could I reflect that feeling of this new day in a sculpture reflecting just the elements, and how beautiful it is when when wind or a beautiful breeze passes across your face, and how that makes you feel.

I really want my sculptures to make people feel – to feel beautiful, to feel alive, to uplift them, to make them happy. My sculptures, they're sensory. The experience is sensory.

It's the greatest compliment when someone asks, 'Can I touch your sculpture?' Because it's something that I'm doing. My hands have been caressing that thing for four months. So in order for someone to really connect with the feeling of the piece, it's nice to be able to touch it.

And it was the [Arts Annual](#) in 2020, so this was during the pandemic – I went to the gallery and I had some of my pieces there. And this was a Saturday afternoon and there was a young child with her parents.

They were walking around the gallery and I was in the back to look at the other art pieces. And I looked through a doorway to the main gallery, and I looked through and just right at that moment, it's this young child, maybe eight or nine years old. She looked around, she looked behind her a couple of times quickly. And then she touched my sculpture with her finger really fast.

And it was just the most precious moment. There you go. They're wanting to touch it. They can connect with it. They can see, 'oh, I see what this feels like. And I'm looking at the shape and it reminds me of something.'

And I think through that, we can have this interchange of just feeling and emotion with the artwork. And I never realized how important it is until I'd

been showing my work – how important it is to connect with other people, to have your work be seen and out there connecting with people. And that really brings the whole experience of being an artist, such joy.

I mean, that is why I think I do it now. It's definitely satisfying and I enjoy it. But that element of it – you just can't replace that. It's really beautiful. If I can make someone want to interact with my work, I mean, that's – what what more happiness, could I ask for?

Barbara St. Clair: I've been talking with sculptor Christina Bertzos. Thank you so much for taking your time to talk about this.

Christina Bertzos: Oh, thank you. It's an honor and a pleasure to be here with you, Barbara. To be a part of this community is just wonderful. Thank you so much.

Barbara St. Clair: I'm Barbara St. Clair, and you've been listening to Arts In, the Creative Pinellas podcast. Sponsored in part by the Pinellas County Board of County Commissioners, Visit St Petersburg Clearwater, the State of Florida Department of Cultural Affairs and the National Endowment for the Arts. Arts in is produced by Sheila Cowley. It's easy to subscribe on your favorite podcast service.

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