

# BÉLA BÁCSI

## CONTEMPORARY REALISM WITH A WINK AND A SMILE

by Fran Severn

**B**éla Bácsi uses humor as an invitation to engage his sculptures. While some contemporary art can seem intimidating or esoteric to the viewer, Bácsi's humor often suggests a kind of intimacy between himself and the viewer, like a private joke shared between friends, because he executes his work with a gentle hand and a wink and a smile that helps the viewer make a real personal connection to his sculpture.



Bácsi is known for his sculptures of voluptuous, *zaftig* women in exuberant and luxuriating poses and caricature-like portraits, which reveal the foibles of both self-important people and the common man. While others might see them as a platform for social commentary, Bácsi says, with these works, he has just one intention—to make people smile. However defined, Bácsi thinks humor is an essential element in the social fabric that serves to counterbalance hardships and angst. “There is so much devastation in the world. Humor is a survival



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*Opposite page: Bácsi carving untitled work in progress (2011); Bownita (2009), statuario crema, venata delicata, Cava di Michelangelo marble, 20 inches high.*

*On this page: Buz (2009), statuario crema, venata delicata, Cava di Michelangelo marble, 24 inches high.*

technique to deal with that. As such, it is an innate trait of the human psyche.” He considers his sculptures to be his contribution to psychic survival. “How many sculptures of skeletons with flesh hanging off them do you see? Not many. People don’t want that in their homes. They want to be surrounded by pleasant, joyful objects.” An example of what he terms his “gently humorous” approach is *Lord Woolsey* (2004). The tiny

(5 x 7 x 3 inch) piece shows the face of what could be a British barrister emerging from a sagging, rust-colored woolsack. With a mounting on two pegs, which act almost like legs, the effect is of a large sheep unsteady on its feet. The title is an amusing play on words and a reminder of the traditional wigs worn by British court officials. And this humor suggests an intimacy with the viewer as a friend sharing amusing observations.



With titles like *Lord Woolsey*, *Pearfect* (2003) for a lounging, Rubenesque lovely, and *Peerless* (1981) for a snooty aristocrat, it would be easy to assume that, despite his insistence otherwise, Bácsi starts with a point of view, humorous or sardonic, and creates the sculpture around that vision. But he says he rarely knows what he is going to carve when he starts a work. With *Lord Woolsey*, the characteristics of the weathered, stained river rock he had available suggested the idea. Other times, idle doodling turns into a figure. The challenges of dealing with form and volume in marble—his preferred me-

dium—lead to his voluminous women. The only “constant” is that after completing a serious, major work, he chooses to carve several smaller, lighter ones “to let off steam.”

While the *joie de vivre* attitude of his works is intended to do nothing more than reflect his personal, cheerful outlook, he appreciates that all art is subject to individual interpretation. *Pearfect* could question society’s attitude toward physical appearance; *Peerless* the nature of prestige. Like humor, Bácsi says, “it is in the eye of the beholder. The viewer may find a meaning that was not intended. That’s fine, but I would rather




people just enjoy what they see rather than overanalyze it." Describing himself as "an ornamentista at heart," Bácsi was born in Győr, Hungary, to a family with a tradition of stonemasonry, so his interest in sculpture can be seen as emerging from his genealogy. His family moved to the United States when he was six. He tells of using needles to carve figures out

*On this page, clockwise, from left to right: Gian Do' Medici (2002), Carrara Statuary and Porta Santa Marble, 17 inches high; Peerless (1980), Portuguese pink marble, 11 inches high; Pearfectly Obvious (2006), Italian marble, 26 inches high; Swinging Sisters (2006), bronze, 19 inches high.*

*Opposite page: Poised (2003), Italian marble, 29 inches high.*

of school chalk in elementary school. Advancing to chisels and more refined implements, he studied the art of fine detail carving at the Studio Ferdinando Palla in Pietrasanta, Italy, before settling in Santa Barbara, California. Among his inspirations, he admires the details of the bronze busts of Franz Xaver Messerschmidt. While many of them reflect the inner anguish of the artist (who said he was possessed by jealous spirits), they also show the elastic, exaggerated expressions often adopted by comedians and stage performers. Gian Lorenzo Bernini's bust of Scipione Borghese is another of Bácsi's favorite sculptures. The bust is more than an accurate physical depiction; it captures the personality of the subject. A powerful Cardinal who became Pope, Borghese, says Bácsi, is "laid back, fat, happy, and smug. He knew who and what he was, and the bust shows that. You feel his energy." Then there is Constantin Brancusi's *The Kiss* (1916): simple, yet endearing, and another of the sculptures most admired by Bácsi. The simplicity of *The Kiss* illustrates the design philosophy in Bácsi's work. "I believe in 'less is more' and the use of negative space," allowing form and texture to create the idea, with the viewer's imagination completing the whole. Bácsi used *The Kiss* as an example of negative space because there is so little detail in the work. Bácsi's sculptures of large women with pendulous breasts and bulging stomachs out of proportion to real bodies lack fully defined facial features, and their limbs are only hinted at. To add more, he says, would reduce the work to kitsch.

It is appropriate that Bácsi would choose *The Kiss* as an ideal sculpture, because *The Kiss* uses humor, through a novel association of forms: the two brick-like lovers are strapped in a mechanical embrace and yet, in the compressed space between the two figures, Brancusi expresses a wonderful moment of sensuality with nonsensual forms. And Bácsi's use of humor in his own work suggests the sharing of something intimate between himself and his viewers. 

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