

Lauren Ewing's Incredible Vision

THE PROVINCETOWN AIDS MEMORIAL

By Deborah Minsky



PHOTO BY CHERIE MITTENTHAL

IT IS DIFFICULT TO FATHOM the complexity of Lauren Ewing's sculptural vision for the Provincetown AIDS Memorial, but, fortunately, Ewing is as gifted verbally as she is artistically. Referring to a kind of cross-pollination between sculpture and writing, evidenced by a summer class she recently taught at the Fine Arts Work Center, she said, "I am and always will be fascinated with the endless elasticity of language and its centrality to human cultures. It is this interest that made me comfortable with the challenge of texting the stone." She added that she knew that the words, the story, were already out there, and it was her job to preserve them on the AIDS Memorial. This elegy in stone is evidence of her efforts, and her account of this journey is fascinating to hear, down to the very last technical and aesthetic details.

When I interviewed Ewing about the origin of her piece, she said that a number of people asked her to submit her plans for the monument soon after the Provincetown Cultural Council put out its request for proposals. But she had some doubts: "I did not think mine would be successful because it was not a traditional, vertical memorial." However, believing that the memorial should be about "openness and endurance, not triumph," she quashed her misgivings and followed her own desire to "equate a fleeting ocean moment with the uniqueness and temporal nature of human life."

Since coming to Provincetown and living at the water's edge, Ewing has grown to appreciate the changing surface of the bay and its "infinite, startling beauty." She is also intensely aware of the love that everyone in Provincetown has for this extraordinarily beautiful, and vulnerable, place. "There is no substance or subject as big as water, an absolute essential in all life," she explained. "And waves, metaphorically and physically, are totally irresistible, overwhelming. Waves of creativity,

waves of enlightenment, waves of hatred and violence, waves of environmental destruction, and now waves of awareness are needed to stem the enormous hand of humanity if we are to exist peacefully on this earth with each other and God's other creatures."

In choosing the ocean as her inspirational metaphor, Ewing wanted to create something that belongs to everyone, something that would be a permanent and maybe much-loved part of the community: "I wanted to make something that was beautiful and could endure for this town, which has set an example of human compassion." After a nationwide search, the selection committee unanimously chose her design for Provincetown's long-sought AIDS Memorial.

From the very start, Ewing knew she would be utilizing computer numerical controlled (CNC) stone-milling technology that she has worked with for the last fifteen years in conjunction with the Digital Stone Project, an organization she helped found. Her process is a blending of centuries-old, "traditional" hands-on sculpting, a la Michelangelo,

This powerful inscription is key to understanding Ewing's goal for her piece:

The Provincetown AIDS Memorial is a horizontal monument, a unique moment in the living ocean. This memorial is a reminder of the lives lost to AIDS and the humanitarian achievements of the caregivers who responded to the crisis. It is also a reminder of those who are still fighting to live and the continuing impact of AIDS in communities worldwide. Provincetown was a first responder to the crisis in this country. In 1983 the Provincetown AIDS Support Group opened its doors to hundreds of people living with AIDS who came here seeking assistance and treatment. Here they found open minds, big hearts and an interest in their well being. Provincetown's commitment to being a caring community continues today.



(above and facing page) The monument being installed on May 22, 2018

PHOTO BY CHERIE MITTENTHAL



(above) A view of the installed monument showing the poetry inscription
(below) Three views of the surface of the waves: (left) the milling machine texture before refinement, (middle and right) the finished surface

The poetry inscription:

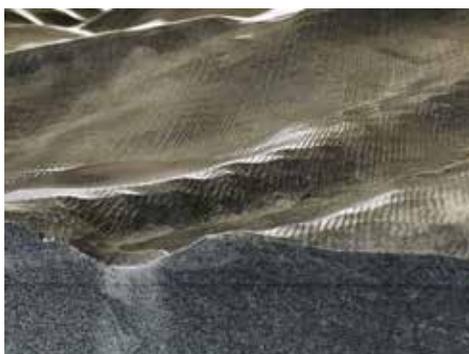
Steve's / holding Jerry, though he's already gone, / Marie holding John, gone,
Maggie holding / her John, gone, Carlos and Darren / holding another Michael,
gone, and I'm holding Wally, who's going. * Transcendence might be the term
Emerson would lend it. / What I'm trying to say is that it wasn't lonely.
* Look: I am building absence / out of this room's air * We are all made of /
our own people laying names on the ground * Most of it happened without music,
the clink of the spoon from the kitchen, / someone talking, somebody
sleeping / Someone watching somebody sleep.

with the latest twenty-first century use of precisely computerized robots, programmed with 3-D files to mill her vision of an ocean moment. She said, "I have literally hundreds of images of the surface of the water, in all states, from calm to rolling waves. I want an active but not dramatic amount of wave action. I want the everyday, common water surface that everyone knows and will recognize as a normative state."

Hers was a massive undertaking, involving long stays in Italy, first shopping for stone and then working closely with a highly skilled stone expert, Marco Lombardi. Even deciding on just the right stone was complicated. Provincetown is a harsh marine environment with salt air and extremes in temperature, so they could not use marble (too soft)

or granite, which has a visible crystalline structure that does not say "flow." They decided on a twenty-ton piece of Brazilian quartzite, a very hard stone, 40 percent micro-quartz, with an even grain that would not interfere with the pattern of waves or the text on the sides. This piece was then cut into two identical blocks for a total finish size of 3 feet high by 9 feet wide by 9 feet long.

Cutting out the blocks was just the beginning of a painstaking process. These halves were then transported to a stone-milling facility in Tuscany, Garfagnana Innovazione, which was equipped with the requisite milling machines and robots. A huge saw kerfed the sides (a "kerf" is a slit or notch made in the stone) so they could be smoothed to the



PHOTOS BY LAUREN EWING



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Igor Basisi at work



Marco Lombardi and Lauren Ewing

right finish dimension. The CNC machines ran all day long, seven days a week, to mill the top of the blocks into a finer and finer topography that realistically depicts waves. After this initial milling, two different texts, the single verb “remembering” and a longer narrative inscription, were engraved into the sides. Ewing worked with poets Marie Howe and Michael Klein on selecting the poetic inscriptions from the works of five poets to be part of the final piece, including “Atlantis” by Mark Doty, “R.I.P. My Love” by Tory Dent (1958–2005), “Drawing from Life” by Reginald Shepherd (1963–2008), “Naming the Elements” by Michael Klein, and “Without Music” by Marie Howe. A bronze plaque will be installed on the foundation listing each poem inscribed on the AIDS Memorial by title and author.

Ewing explained that finishing the surface of her piece requires lots of hand-grinding with stone and diamond pneumatic tools. She mentioned being fortunate to work with Igor Basisi, an expert stone finisher, and detailed the demands of his task: “It is cold, wet, laborious work that is hard on the back and the ears. Honing, a few steps short of polishing, requires a strict method of working up through levels of grit abrasives until a diamond finishing pad is used to remove all traces of tooling.” She further explained that honing differs from polishing: it is subtle and lets light play on the surface without creating glare, while polishing creates a shiny surface that reflects light back on the eyes.

The next step in the process is water testing, making sure that the surface is slightly domed so that water won’t pool on the surface. Ewing said this step involves the work of people with differing expertise as well as machines with different physical capabilities. She added, “In the

end, it has to be what I call ‘spherical thinking,’ to think the whole of something from idea to object. It requires much contemplation, physical awareness, human cooperation, and mutual respect between animate beings and inanimate materials.” In detailing key steps in the arduous milling process, Ewing emphasized the crucial element of joint endeavor: “Large-scale sculpture is a production that requires collaboration between many people—it all takes place in the real world, the physical world that we still need to honor and understand even while everyone is held in fascination with the miniature images of screen time. Sculpture is ‘in touch,’ and that is my enduring attraction to it.”

Ewing returned to Italy in early March to work out final finishing techniques. She explained that at this point, once her expectations were understood and technical processes were decided on, she was no longer needed: “My labor is not as good as the *artigiani/artigiane* who are experts in their craft. I know what I want and what the piece needs; after the method for arriving at that has been worked out, they take over—the whole process is known to me and very satisfying.”

However, there were still some logistical concerns. One worry has been the value of the dollar, which has dropped 20 percent against the euro since she first proposed her piece. As a side note to this anxiety, Ewing described her stay in Amsterdam, where she was working simultaneously on an installation for the city’s Light Festival. During a visit to Rembrandt’s house, she learned that at the height of his creative powers he had been bankrupt and his house was seized. He finished his life in a small apartment. “Our passions and our finances are not always in sync,” she said. “Being in control of *all* circumstances is not always possible.”

For Ewing the real drama, the intense worries, came after the memorial was finished. “Dropping one of the pieces would have been a catastrophe,” she said, “and as they are a matched pair we would have had to start all over again.” Once these massive treasures were moved from the stone-working facility, crated, put in a container, loaded onto a ship, and transported across the ocean, their journey was still not complete. Upon arrival in the States, they were then taken off the ship by cranes, lifted onto a truck, and brought to Provincetown. Try to envision that journey, especially the nerve-wracking crawl from the port to the Cross Bronx Expressway, and the excruciating leg along Route 95, moving toward the Mid-Cape Highway (Route 6). Finally, in Provincetown, the long-awaited AIDS Memorial was again lifted by crane and gently positioned on its foundation. Ewing noted that it takes patience and lots of cooperation to accomplish such a task.

The Provincetown AIDS Memorial was safely installed on Town Hall grounds on May 22, 2018. A dedication ceremony took place on June 16, 2018. The journey was complete.

WORKING ON ALL PHASES of the Provincetown AIDS Memorial has demanded a mind-bending marriage of art and technology as well as prodigious energy, optimism, and faith on the part of Ewing and her skilled team of stone workers. Throughout this arduous process, Ewing seemed totally enthralled, even blissful: “I am at one with my work in this brief time. I feel like a part of all humanity. I feel like water in sand, undifferentiated and totally immersed.”

Despite all the demands, technical difficulties and financial dangers, she has approached the project as an expression of complicated simplicity, as an embodiment of the sculpture’s own desires. Ewing’s art, from conception to design to creation, reflects a universal continuum of human history and social progress. And this memorial in particular reflects time and place, joy and despair. It captures the good and the bad of human enterprise. It reflects the universality of our condition. Ewing said she worked hard to bring this message into her stone: “Look at me, see me, read me, take me home in your mind.” In the end, this lasting memorial will also contain a piece of her spirit and her abiding love for her art. ❏

DEBORAH MINSKY has been a “summer native” in Provincetown since 1948 and moved here permanently in 2005 after she and her husband, Dennis, retired from teaching in New Jersey. She has written for the Provincetown Banner since 2001 and currently works part-time at Far Land Provisions.