

Where Nature



by Beth Young

When Fredi Cohen started building her Archsculpt Studio in East Hampton's Northwest Woods in the fall of 1999, she knew it would be a voyage that would last a fruitful lifetime.

She designed the house as a showcase for her artwork, at that time a series of sculptures and ceramic work. But as time went on, the house took on a life of its own, with images from the southwest, the beach and nature interwoven into mundane items from bathroom sinks to kitchen tile.

"My orientation is sculpture, but I wanted to live with all these little works of art. Things that are mundane — I wanted to make special," Fredi explained as she poured coffee for a conversation on her work on a cold, early spring morning.

"The kind of work I do can't be found out here," she said. "I had to design tiles to withstand the climate: frost, freezing and thawing, heat and water."

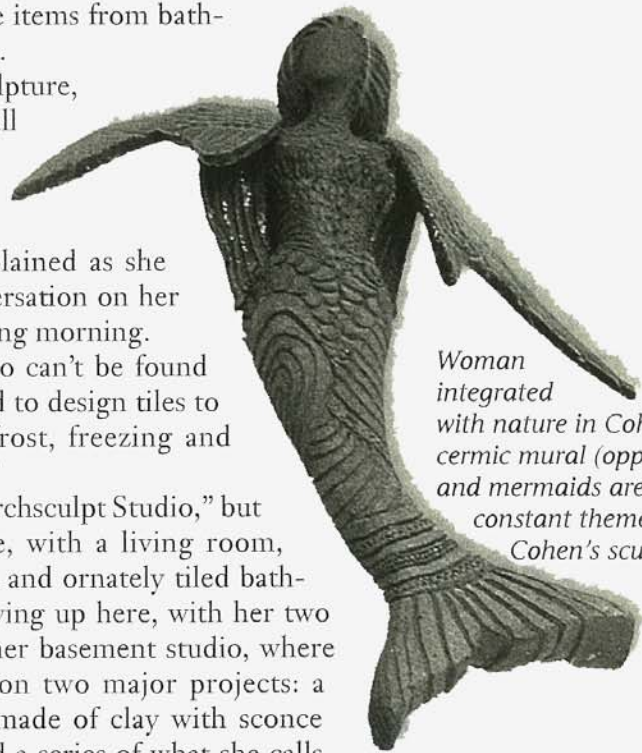
Fredi calls the space "Archsculpt Studio," but it is, in essence, a home, with a living room, kitchen, master bedroom and ornately tiled bathrooms. She does some living up here, with her two cats, but her heart is in her basement studio, where she's currently at work on two major projects: a bedframe and bedposts made of clay with scone lighting on the posts, and a series of what she calls "dresses" for parts of houses.

Instead of moldings, she plans on using her "dresses" to accent different openings throughout the house.

"They'd be wild openings for niches in the walls, fireplace boxes, some kind of organic shape," she said. "All components can be used to make these wild openings."

The wild dresses are her current labor of love, but they've

*Art: it's
not just
for the
walls —
it is the
walls*



Woman integrated with nature in Cohen's ceramic mural (opposite) and mermaids are a constant theme in Cohen's sculpture (left).

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Resonates in Clay



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also required her to branch out from the work she's done on her own house, looking for wilder locations to integrate these new organic forms.

"This house was the first house I did," she said. "I wanted to have beautiful works of art, but I was thinking in squares, straight lines. With this project I completely forgot about square edges. Now I have all these new components to integrate with existing structures."

Fredi's done artwork since she was a baby, but she didn't discover sculpture until she was about 20 years old. Her early work was more representational, and the pieces still grace the Archsculpt Studio, a constant reminder of the diversity of Fredi's talents.

"All my sculpture was just to look at," she said. "It dealt with women's issues, things I was going through."

Figuring prominently in her house is a large mural of a woman integrated with nature, with an umbilical cord holding her to the natural environment that surrounds her. It's a holdover from her days as a sculptor, but when she made the switch to making art a part of architecture, she faced a series of unique challenges.

"You had to figure out how to keep the surfaces clean," she said. "Is it going to be functional, will it weather or stain, will it integrate with the environment?"

"There was nobody to ask who'd ever done working. It's gone through four bad winters & looks the same as when it was installed."

To that end, Fredi spends a lot of time experimenting with different glazes, clays and kilns to create different effects.

She can produce brighter glossy glazes in air kilns and fires her work at different temperatures in electric kilns. She just bought a gas kiln, which she hopes will lead to new breakthroughs in her use of clay.

Her favorite material, though, is a high temperature ware clay that she orders in bulk and has shipped from Massachusetts.

"It's not porous," she said. "It's good for the color."

She's also begun to work with a very lightweight clay and has done some work in concrete on the paving her pool.

"I went around the house and said 'what's boring it up a notch,'" she said. "I'm going to make buildings coming out of the doors, something reminiscent of organic shapes. I needed a lightweight cement with the same kind used for outside stucco. It's very lightweight and dimensional."

The forms of her new work are very organic, but in her early sculpture, they're not very representational. She gets a lot of inspiration from the natural world, even though she doesn't spend a lot of time outdoors.

"I think I've absorbed a lot — nature resonates."

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A detail from Fredi Cohen's bath tile

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"What I use as a reference is reminiscent of many cultures, ancient Celtic, Native American, Spanish cultures."

"I absorbed all that — when I start working it comes out — now I've gone back to sculptural, smooth surfaces. Feminine, flowing graceful vertical spaces can be more dimensional, more flowing and wild."

"A lot of artists work in series," she said. "But with architecture you can't change in midstream. Integrating wild, or-

ganic shapes in my house is not necessarily cohesive."

This summer her house will be open to the public for events for The Retreat and The Nature Conservancy, and the house will also be on the Artist Alliance of East Hampton tour.

The Architecture and Design Forum has also invited Fredi to participate in their program this summer titled "Art in Architecture." But with contracts in place to build wild artwork into other people's homes, she's looking to branch out and create unique art worlds for other clients.

"I need to have other places to put these things," she said. "I'll only stop when I run out of space, but I keep rearranging things so that doesn't happen."

The whole idea, she said, is "to have people live in art." 🌿

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