



Bar at the Folies (left), Harlequin Zsa Zsa (above)

Suzy Birstein

HEBREW NAME: Tsipora

LOCATION: Vancouver, BC

PLACE OF BIRTH: Toronto, ON

MEDIUM: Ceramic sculpture & mixed media painting

YEARS AS A PROFESSIONAL ARTIST: 42

THE SCRIBE: CAN YOU GIVE A BRIEF FAMILY HISTORY?

SUZY: My grandparents on my father's side were Kalman Birstein, a tailor from Latvia, and Fanny Birstein (Yentl Freidl) from Lithuania, who owned a dry goods store. My mother's father, Jacob Kozinets from Kiev, was a scholar who studied religions; he had no education and yet received numerous honorary university degrees. My maternal bubby was Hattie Kozinets, originally from the Austro-Hungarian Empire. She owned a cigar store in Toronto.

My parents, Yetta and Morris Birstein, were born in Toronto. My father was a chartered accountant. My mother was a journalist before ►

WWII but lost her job when the men came back from war. After marrying, she became a housewife.

I was raised in a Jewish community in North York, Toronto. I thought everybody was Jewish! The only way I knew otherwise was because not all movie stars were Jewish. This was my frame of reference because my mother was a film fanatic.

My husband, Hartley Rosenberg, a trained chef, is in management at Whole Foods, and we have two sons.

THE SCRIBE: WHEN DID YOUR INTEREST IN ART BEGIN?

SUZY: Both parents were creative. My father was a wonderful cartoonist and illustrator. During retirement, he created clay sculptures based on his cartoons inspired by Jewish clients. We had a show together at the Sidney and Gertrude Zack Gallery when he was in his 80s called *Fathers and Daughters*. My parents moved to Vancouver in 2004.

My mother felt passionately about wanting to become a professional writer, but being a woman of the 1950s, felt she had to choose between family life and a career. She lived her life frustrated, very unhappy, and so empha-

sized to her children to pursue our dreams. I learned at a young age never to do what I don't want to because it wouldn't serve me or anyone else. My parents were very supportive of my career. In fact, for our wedding present, they gave us a kiln, my father saying, "Happy wife, happy life," to my husband.

Both parents had a great appreciation for original art, and frequently bought paintings by non-famous artists when they travelled. They took me to the Ontario Art Gallery, and bought me paint-by-number kits of famous artists' work. I didn't see myself as an artist, though, because I couldn't draw horses like the artistic girls in grade school did. I happily took dance classes instead.

I travelled to Europe extensively after graduating from high school, then went to York University for a short time, quit, and lived in Corfu and Crete as a hippy. When I returned, I was asked if I would be an artist's model. I was good at it due to my dance experience and started working as a model at Toronto art schools. As a perk, I could take art classes there for free. I still didn't think I was an artist, although I related to all that the teaching artists discussed. I learned to embroider, knit, weave and spin yarn. I had no interest in throwing clay, but when introduced



You Light My Dark (above), *Whisperings from Meli* (bottom left)

to hand-building ceramics, I thought, "I can do that." Then I shared studio space with my ceramics instructor and was mentored by her. I copied everything she did. That was when I realized I needed to go to art school!

When my husband and I moved to Vancouver, I earned my ceramics degree from Emily Carr University of Art + Design. I live my life as an artist because creating art is what makes me feel the most alive, present and motivated. It makes me excited to wake up each morning.

THE SCRIBE: WHAT IS YOUR CAREER BACKGROUND?

SUZY: I have been a professional ceramic artist since graduating from ECU in 1980. In the mid-80s, I worked at Romni Wools in Toronto, where I began a business designing, knitting, and selling knitwear. In Vancouver, I worked from my home studio making pottery and hand-built tableware. It became well-known, and sold in stores and galleries across the country. Locally, it was displayed and used at the very popular Tomato Café, where I was the "queen of latte bowls."

THE SCRIBE: WILL YOU DESCRIBE YOUR STYLE AND ART PROCESS?

SUZY: I make figurative sculptures, and then paintings are done in response to those sculptures. The style doesn't fit into any traditional art "isms," and is more expressionistic than realistic. I focus on colour, pattern, form, gesture, mood and materiality.

For my latest exhibition, *When I Have Wings to Fly*, my Frida Kahlo-inspired work is surfaced with oils instead of glaze on sculptures, and cold wax and collage with gold-leaf on paintings. While working, I don't know where each piece is going until it's there. I know when it's



not there because I feel sick in my stomach until it is! It's very visceral.

THE SCRIBE: WHERE DO YOU FIND CREATIVE INSPIRATION?

SUZY: From tableware to sculpture, themes that I need to express always come to me as figures and portraits. For example, I can look at linoleum flooring and imagine figures and faces throughout its patterns. I believe an artist needs to strive to be their most authentic self—what they intuitively respond to—and then share that authenticity with the world through their art.

The Frida Kahlo pieces in my *Ladies-Not-Waiting* series began with Kahlo's life story but, over time, surprisingly merged with self-portraits and my relationship with my mother. Frida had a tragic but gifted life. Through the act of creation, she transformed and transcended tragedy into something beautiful and inspiring. She was extremely resilient, making her life a work of art. This was not the case for my mother. Therefore, Frida and creators like her are my spiritual mentors.

My series *Ladies-Not-Waiting* comes from Velazquez' *Las Meninas* painting and Picasso's abstract renditions of it. *Las meninas* means "ladies in waiting" or "ladies of honour." I thought, "Is it an honour to be waiting upon your 'superiors,' and now honoured for being close to them?" The series is about not waiting, but having the self-determination to be and do what it is you must to become your most authentic self. That said, I realize that in some ways, I'm a lady in waiting—waiting to be discovered rather than promoting myself. But I aspire to be a lady-not-waiting, and to mentor not-waiting to others.

"I have similar religious beliefs to my grandfather [...] in the end, all religions are saying the same thing."

THE SCRIBE: WHAT ARE YOUR CAREER HIGHLIGHTS?

SUZY: In 2007, I was working on a series of life-sized sculptures called *Tap to the Muse*. I had a vision of tap dancing with these sculptures like Donald O'Connor did in the

1954 movie *There's No Business Like Show Business*, when statues came to life. I used to write to movie stars as a little girl: "Dear Frank Sinatra, When you're in Toronto if you need a place to stay, I've got a couch in the basement." And movie stars [PR staff *ED*] would send me autographed pictures in response. I was staring at the movie star pictures hanging in my studio when I suddenly received a phone call from someone working with the Academy Awards who'd seen my website. I told her about my new series and tap dancing vision. Although she'd called about the Latin Grammys, she said, "Maybe you'd like your work to be in our gift baskets for the 2008 Academy Awards? They're given to nominated actors and directors who don't win Oscars." I made them Motion Pitchers, personalized ceramic water pitchers. George Clooney, Johnny Depp and Cate Blanchett are among the recipients.

I hired a press agent and received huge press exposure for these swag gifts and for my exhibition happening at the same time. This included a recurring national TV news interview, *Elle Magazine Canada* article, and recognition in newspapers across Canada. These resulted in a gallery in London, Ontario, asking to represent my work, and selling much of it.

The other highlight happened just as serendipitously. When I saw the movie *Mamma Mia!*, which took place on the Greek island, Skopelos, I cried throughout it, remembering my time spent in Greece when young. I knew I had to go back! I remembered an artist's residency at Skopelos run by an American mother and daughter. I wrote to them the next day describing my movie-star letters and Oscars story, and they agreed to have me teach sculpture workshops there. I went to Greece five times doing this. I was in love with the site of the movie, imagining I was Meryl Streep's and Amanda Seyfried's characters, and bringing people to experience it and surrounding islands.

THE SCRIBE: HOW DO YOU SELL YOUR ART?

SUZY: In addition to the London gallery, I have shown at Gallery George, Parker Street Studios, where I have a studio, Sidney and Gertrude Zack Gallery, Seymour Art Gallery, POMO Arts Centre, Richmond Art Gallery, and Burnaby Art Gallery. I send e-newsletters, use Instagram and Facebook, and donate to events like Arts Umbrella's Splash auction.

THE SCRIBE: WILL YOU DESCRIBE YOUR CONNECTIONS TO JUDAISM?

SUZY: We were not raised as religious Jews, but were culturally very Ashkenazi Jewish. I learned the Torah, studied the stories, and reinterpreted what they meant for me. That was especially true for my *Tsipora* series which, besides being my Hebrew name, means "bird;" and so I interpreted its symbolism. I have similar religious



beliefs to my grandfather who studied religions, including Judaism: in the end, all religions are saying the same thing.

THE SCRIBE: ARE YOU INVOLVED IN THE ARTS COMMUNITY?

SUZY: I have been teaching at Arts Umbrella for 32 years, one of its longest-standing instructors. I've taught many children from the time they're six until they graduate from high school. Some have become fantastic ceramic artists, and some stayed in touch and came to my Greece workshops. I teach six to 86 year olds, including many from the Greek community because I think I'm an honorary Greek!

THE SCRIBE: WHAT IS YOUR FAVOURITE COLOUR?

SUZY: Colour is all about relationships—how they go together. So the answer is orange and mauve, turquoise and yellow...

THE SCRIBE: WHO IS YOUR FAVOURITE ARTIST?

SUZY: Pablo Picasso for his multiple styles and mediums, and ability to reinvent art history; Henri Matisse, who like Frida Kahlo, overcame serious health issues later in life that caused him to reinvent himself with new work.

THE SCRIBE: IF YOU WEREN'T AN ARTIST, YOU WOULD BE...

SUZY: A dancer and movie star—what I wanted to be when I was a little girl. ★

Artist's Website: www.suzybirstein.com

Interviewed by: Carol Herbert
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