

art

Making Babies

Binational sculptors conquer America after enduring homophobia in Latvia

by Julie Sabatier

Billie Holiday's voice drifts over the small, sunny studio space that Inguna Skuja and Melissa Braden are building for themselves in Northeast Portland. Partners in work and in life, this is where the pair spend the bulk of their time, their four hands working deftly to construct porcelain sculptures lush with color, humor and political savvy. They collaborate on every aspect of the work, from design to glazing.

Skuja Braden (as they are known in the art world) recently relocated to Stumptown and will be the featured artist at this month's reopening of the Museum of Contemporary Crafts in the Pearl District.

Skuja, 41, and Braden, 38, first met in 1995 at Humboldt State University nestled in the Northern California redwoods, but they would not start working together until 1999. That's when Braden traveled from her home state to Skuja's native Latvia to study at the Latvian Academy of Arts in Riga.

The two reconnected late one night in a bar popular with local artists. In broken English and Latvian, they commiserated over Skuja's recent divorce and the impending end of Braden's 10-year relationship with a woman in the States.

Skuja was becoming an established figure in the Latvian art scene, while the award-winning Braden was pursuing her passion for painting, film and art history.

"I really looked down on ceramics. I just thought that's where all the stoners were at Humboldt State," says Braden. "Everything changed when I met Inguna. Porcelain, the way it feels when it's green, is so exciting to me."

When the two began collaborating, the art world took notice of their fresh and exciting work. Synergy came naturally to them right from the

start, as they combined Skuja's classical training and eye for beauty with Braden's postmodern sensibility and radical politics.

"Her ideas sometimes are so gross," Skuja remembers with a smile. "In the beginning we made so many gross pieces, but some of them were really cool."

Braden is quick to add: "Inguna has such incredible skill. She really knows what porcelain will do. Without her I couldn't make anything."

After three years in Latvia—and, before that, California—the duo are finishing their sixth studio, building it themselves from recycled materials on property rented from friends in the Alberta Arts District. Skuja and Braden say they're starting to feel at home in a new city they find welcoming as artists, as a couple and as Buddhists.

They are certainly more free to express who they are here than they were in Latvia, where homosexuality is still reviled by many. The Baltic state erupted in protests against its first Gay Pride march in 2005. The next year, the city of Riga refused to issue a permit for the parade, citing threats of violence.

"When I first came to Latvia, Inguna was like: 'What is this lesbian? We don't have any lesbians in Latvia.' And I was like: 'Cool. I'm going to be famous here then.' And it actually happened. I did become really known there," Braden explains.

In a culture where artists are treated like celebrities and admired as sex symbols, many of Skuja's colleagues strongly advised her against coming out, especially to the prying entertainment media.

"We had this big magazine interview, and they asked, 'Are you lesbian or something?' And I asked what nationality that is," says Skuja. Despite this attempt at ambiguity, Braden says the two were physically assaulted and threatened for dancing together at art openings.

Skuja compares her life as a Latvian artist to that of a Japanese geisha—an image that is prominent in her collaborative work with Braden. "If you are good on your social skills, you can survive," she says. "You have to be charming, lovely, all those things."

When asked if she considers herself a feminist now, Skuja is hesitant to answer directly. "Feminism for many Latvians equals lesbianism, and she'll always say 'no' to that," Braden interjects. "She'll always say she's not a lesbian, even though she's been with me for almost 10 years."

Skuja nods, telling me she considers herself bisexual but shies away from labels in general.

Skuja was surprised by the reaction of her colleagues but found solace in one simple fact. "What can I say? The smart people are cool in all countries," she says.

Braden and Skuja's relocation to the United States has brought with it a shift in the kind of work they're making and selling. In Latvia, they say they were able to move more functional art pieces, such as ceramic plates and vessels, whereas here there is more of a demand for decorative sculptures.

"On the West Coast, it's more of a figurative scene. If you want to sell in California, figurative sells," Braden explains.

This was how the pair began making a series of porcelain baby sculptures.

"We make our children into pets and we make our pets into children, and it says something about our culture," Braden says. "And also because we're two women, I was thinking why not make babies?"

The series includes "Chick," a girl baby with a human body and chicken wings; "Flower Child," a child bent over with poppies coming out of its ass; and "Two Faced Bastard," a baby boy with two heads growing out of one neck. Another one titled "Pet" is a four-legged child with large, feline eyes.

Because they are large, complex pieces, the babies often require a lot of their "mothers." Skuja describes working on one for 14 hours straight, without breaking for a meal. "It's basically you're working on operations like a doctor. They don't run around and eat," she says.

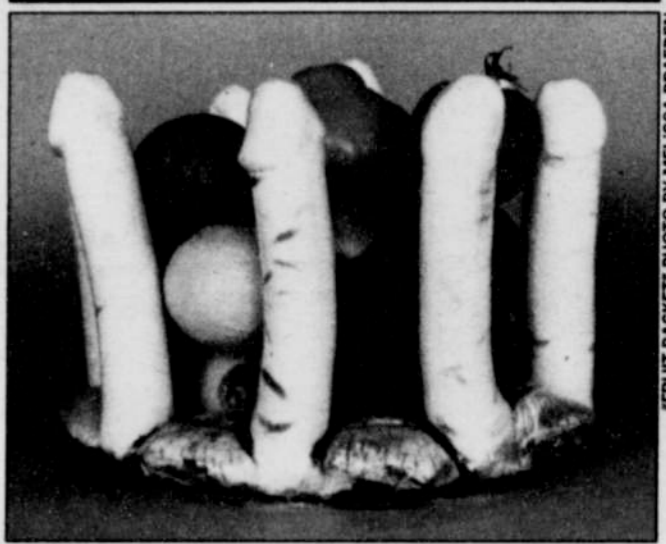
These labor-intensive pieces reflect the essence of Skuja and Braden's work—they are lush, colorful and masterfully constructed with twisted and irreverent humor.

"I like to make Inguna laugh when we're working...because when you're taking everything seriously, it can kind of dry things out," says Braden. "Usually, if I have an idea and I show her and she starts laughing really hard, then I know this is going to be a great piece and we have to make it."

While both women say they've learned a lot from each other, they do cite some other influences. Braden admires the work of prominent French sculptor Louise Bourgeois, and Skuja holds the work of Latvian painter Felicita Pauluka in high regard. Many of the pieces they've worked on



TWO FACED BASTARD: PHOTO BY TONY NOVELOVO



FRUIT BASKET: PHOTO BY MELISSA BRADEN

Skuja Braden's porcelain sculptures are lush with color, humor and political savvy.

together are painterly, as though the shape of the object is secondary.

Their shared Buddhist faith has also shaped Skuja and Braden's work. The couple are planning the work that they will do in their residency at Sitka Center for Art and Ecology in Southern Oregon. They want to create a series of painted porcelain tiles that will eventually become an animated interpretation of a Buddhist sutra story.

"To me, true collaboration is a dance, sort of like making a baby," says Braden. "You're just doing it together, and you're not trying to conquer the person that you're working with or make your mark stronger than their mark.... It's getting rid of the ego altogether and focusing on the best thing possible that the two of us can make together." ☉

SKUJA BRADEN will be the featured artist during the grand reopening of the Museum of Contemporary Craft beginning with Craft PDX: A Block Party from noon to 7:30 p.m. July 22 at 724 N.W. Davis St.

JULIE SABATIER is a Portland freelance writer and radio producer.



Inguna Skuja (left) and Melissa Braden were physically assaulted and threatened for dancing together at art openings in Latvia.

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