

NOHRA HAIME GALLERY

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TALLAHASSEE DEMOCRAT

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'Straus & Straus' exhibit is a family affair

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The flame was lit and blue-white hot.

Sculptor Phyllis Straus, who turns 80 in July, brandished a welding torch and wore a dark visor over her face last Tuesday as she repaired the broken tail on her life-size steel giraffe outside the Florida State Museum of Fine Art. College students walking out of a parking garage next to the gallery stopped mid-conversation on their cell phones and gawked at her towering metallic animal.

"I don't (expletive) around with the small stuff," she said as she readjusted her torch. "I did have a heart attack (three years ago) and can't work as large as I want to anymore."

Then she pointed at the giraffe and said: "I think this son of a (expletive) gave it to me."

The brassy, outspoken woman is a reclusive artist who rarely shows her sculpture anywhere but at her studio and on her property in the woods between Lloyd and Monticello. But she's making an exception for "Straus & Straus," which opens with a reception Friday at FSU as part of the Seven Days of Opening Nights arts festival. The exhibit also features paintings by her son, Adam Straus, an FSU art-school graduate who is one of the most successful serious artists working in New York.

"Phyllis does not show her work," FSU museum director Allys Palladino-Craig said. "She's only doing this as a favor to us and Adam."

The last time she publicly displayed her work also was with her son. She and Adam had a two-headed exhibition of sculpture in 1983 at Miami-Dade Community College in South Florida, where the Straus family lived for many years before relocating to Tallahassee in the mid-'80s.

"I grew up in Miami before it really became the Miami it is now," Adam, 50, said during a phone interview from his home and studio in Riverhead on Long Island, N.Y.

"I grew up fishing and running around the swamps catching snakes and all that stuff. There was no Art Basil (international arts festival) in Miami back then. I got to see Miami before the developers and pollution really moved in."

"Adam was completely dedicated to the environment from birth — from birth, I tell you," said his mother.

"When he was 2, he was a very slow learner because he was dyslexic. . . . But I would take him to Baker's where they had 200 stuffed fish on display, and I would say the name of a fish. He would run to it and point. He knew the name of every one of those fish. That's pretty good for a 2-year-old."

The fish-fixated boy grew up and headed off to the University of Florida in the late '70s with the intention of majoring in marine biology. But he kept getting sidetracked by photography, which he became fascinated with at age 12 when he began using an underwater camera to take pictures of life on ocean reefs.

"I became completely obsessed and overwhelmed by photography while I was in Gainesville," Adam said. "But because I wasn't an art major (I) couldn't get in the photography classes. I began sneaking into the photo labs to do my work. Then I met Evon Streetman."

Streetman was a well-known photographer, Florida legend and professor who, when asked about what path to take, told Adam: "Do what keeps you up at night."

She also gave him "a secret pass" to take photography classes taught by her and noted professor-photographer Jerry Uelsmann.

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advised him to seek out FSU professor-artist-photographer Robert Fichter.

"Robert will turn your head upside down as well as anybody, and he certainly turned mine upside down," Adam said. "With Robert, you come in thinking you know something, and you quickly realize you don't. ... I felt ignorant. I was in grad school with art majors who already knew the world iconography. I had to look it up."

"Adam came along at the time of conceptual art, and he was perfect for that," Fichter said. "He was a really bright guy with a sharp sense of humor, and he was able to make really smart pictures. He always had this smart, political sense and loved social commentary."

In 1986, Adam, partly as a goof and partly as performance art, ran for the Florida Senate. His platform advocated electric bleachers to replace electric chairs and erecting a fence around Florida.

"It would go over big-time now. We were ahead of our time," Adam said.

Her son's enthusiasm about FSU's art program prompted Phyllis to move to North Florida to study sculpture at the school.

"I had been nosing around Miami looking to get an MFA, but none of the schools interested me," she said. "I was at loose ends. I wanted something I wasn't getting there. . . . So I came to FSU and during my first tutorial with (abstract painter and professor) Trevor Bell, he blew me out of the water. He was stern, he was harsh and he was incredible. It was just what I needed. He kicked me in the (rear end)."

Phyllis eventually ended up getting a job as a student adviser in the art department at FSU and just recently retired. Echoing the advice Streetman had given Adam, Phyllis said, "I used to tell all my students: 'Do what keeps you up at night.'"

In 1990, Adam decided it "was now or never to try living in New York as an artist." He had his first New York show at the Nohra Haime Gallery in midtown Manhattan. Haime has remained Adam's art dealer for 18 years, a rare thing in the fickle Manhattan art world.

"It is very unusual," Adam said. "Nohra works incredibly hard for the artist to develop a career. She's more of the European tradition where you nurture an artist. She never tells me what to paint or what sells better than other works. She keeps up with the resume and the business, which I don't like (to do). It's just a good match."

Many of Adam's recent paintings, which fetch in the neighborhood of \$45,000 per canvas and more, are, at first glance, traditional landscapes and mountain scenes. On closer look, though, the frozen alps are melting like ice cream in the sun. The heavy frames are made of lead.

His new exhibit, "Tick Tock, Drip Drop . . ." opening Tuesday at the Haime Gallery, features a powerful painting titled "The Next To The Last Iceberg."

"Adam . . . is this environmentally sensitive guy who is encasing his paintings in lead," Fichter said. "And let's face it, this is the year for iceberg paintings. Let's hope the Whitney (Museum of American Art) is smart this year (and gives him a solo show)."

The "Straus & Straus" show also features somber portraits from Adam's "Small Memorials for a Great Loss" series. The paneled works feature the faces of soldiers who have been killed in Iraq and images of candles.

"They're just poetic memorials I started doing for myself," he said. "I didn't expect them to be shown, but Nohra flipped over them ... and put them in her gallery. . . . My mom has done memorials of the Holocaust so I was probably thinking of her when I started them."

Like mother, like son.