



IOWA

Iowa West Public Art

DEBORAH MASUOKA
HISTORIC DOWNTOWN
COUNCIL BLUFFS
HAYMARKET RABBITS

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ABOUT THE ARTIST

Deborah Masuoka was born in Detroit, Michigan, and earned her Bachelor’s and Master’s degrees in Fine Arts with concentrations in sculpture and ceramics. She grew up in a large family as the oldest child and wanted to be an artist her whole life, and she says, “Group dynamics and the collective spirit always play a big part in influencing my art work.” For more than 20 years she has created large-scale rabbit-head sculptures often displayed in groups that capture this family dynamic and collective spirit. Deborah Masuoka currently lives in Omaha, Nebraska, and works with the Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts coordinating studios, tools and equipment for artists who come to work at the Center to make large- scale sculpture.



Deborah Masuoka’s sculptures are displayed around the country including in the Reiman Gardens at Iowa State University. She has worked full-time on her art for more than 20 years. Her typical routine in the studio is five to six days a week and six to eight hours a day. She says, “Making art takes a commitment of time and energy and the ability to focus over a long period of time. The most challenging aspect of making art is consistently working with an idea and exploring all the different possibilities.” For Deborah Masuoka making the work itself is the easiest part. She often works on several pieces at a time because, as she says, “Multiple pieces allow me to use my time and energy effectively and [the use of multiples] is a significant part of my creative process.”

Deborah Masuoka’s advice to students who want to be artists is to remember that, “the most important part of being an artist is working hard and staying focused on making art.”

HISTORY OF THE SITE

Deborah Masuoka’s three rabbits are located between Main Street and Pearl Street in the historic Haymarket District of Council Bluffs, Iowa. The Haymarket District was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1985 because of its architectural significance. From the late 19th century to the early 20th century this area was a vital commercial district. Once again it has become a center of commerce with antique shops paying tribute to Council Bluffs’ past. To connect with the past, historical features are being added to this downtown area including decorative brick walkways, mosaic tiles, historic lampposts and street signs. The Haymarket District is within walking distance of other sites important to Council Bluffs history, including Bayliss Park, which is the location for Brower Hatcher’s sculptures *Oculus* and *Wellspring*.

Deborah Masuoka hopes that her sculptures will encourage people to visit the historic Haymarket District. The three rabbits sit on their own island between the two streets providing a visual focus for the square. The artist hopes that families will enjoy visiting the rabbits, exploring how each side of each rabbit is different, and seeing that art can be fun. Deborah Masuoka says, “I love seeing the large pieces in groups in the landscape and in architectural settings” and that “the colors in the bronze pieces relate very well to the historic nature of the area.”

WORK OF ART

MEDIUM AND DESCRIPTION

Deborah Masuoka is particularly known as a ceramic artist. She has made ceramic rabbit heads weighing up to 150 pounds, a difficult task in clay. She paints these large-scale heads in colors that resemble stone, like cobalt blue, green, rust, burnt orange and yellow. She likes to work with clay because “it can be molded into any shape and records the human touch.”

The three 8-foot tall *Haymarket Rabbits* are cast in bronze. The layers of colors on these are made with chemicals that create both bright and muted tones. The textures, scale and colors of these bronze rabbits mimic those of her ceramic heads.

Visit the Educator Resources section of www.iowawestpublicart.org to see Deborah Masouka’s ceramic rabbit head.

Now compare the *Haymarket Rabbits* to her ceramic rabbit head. What similarities and differences do you see in these sculptures made in two different media?

Although the shapes of all three *Haymarket Rabbits* are the same, the features and designs are all different. Deborah Masuoka says, “Visually each sculpture has two distinct sides, and at times may appear to be somewhat contradictory.” Compare the front and back of the ceramic rabbit. What kinds of designs do you see? Do you see any repeated designs? How do the colors compare? How do the eyes on the two sides differ? What might these shapes suggest about the rabbit?

Deborah Masuoka says she wants “visitors to see her pieces and be left with a sense of curiosity and wonder.”

INTERPRETATION

Deborah Masuoka states that, “My personal style tends to be direct and honest, and I like to make things that have a simple shape and multiple meanings.”

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Dürer’s watercolor rabbit is painted very realistically. How does this differ from Deborah Masuoka’s *Haymarket Rabbits*?

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Jeff Koons, *Rabbit*, 1986, 41” tall, stainless steel
Deborah Masuoka, *White Rabbit*, 2007

Compare these three sculptures to the painting by Dürer and the Deborah Masuoka’s *Haymarket Rabbits*. Put these works in order from the most realistic to the most abstract.

What about the works made you put them in this particular order? How are the shapes similar or different? What features of each allow you to identify it as a rabbit? What are the features that differ from a real rabbit? Why do you think Deborah Masuoka only uses the head of the rabbit for her sculptures?

Compare the sizes of the sculptures. The Flanagan and the Masuoka sculptures are about the same height while the Koons is only half as tall.

How do these sizes relate to the size of a real rabbit? How does the scale of each work change the way you think about the animal portrayed? Imagine adding the body of the rabbit to one of Deborah Masuoka’s *Haymarket Rabbits*. If the head is eight feet tall, how big would the entire rabbit be?

Have you ever had a rabbit as a pet, or seen a rabbit at a fair or in a pet shop or in your back yard? Brainstorm a list of words that you associate with these rabbits.

Deborah Masuoka says that her sculptures deal with the idea of “how people interpret what they see and the information they bring with them. For example, the rabbit is seen as a prey. But if the scale is increased to 8 feet tall, the prey can be seen as the predator. The rabbit then becomes the intimidator, which opens up the opportunity to explore preconceived ideas of what certain images represent.”

Now go back and think about the 8-foot tall rabbit heads.

Which of your words would not apply to these large-scale rabbits? Can you make a new list of words you might associate with these rabbits that are taller than you are?

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What is this rabbit doing? Who would usually engage in this activity? Can you think of any other times that artists or writers have made animals act like human beings? What made the animals seem like human beings in these art works and stories?

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EXPLORE BIG IDEAS:

Artists abstract forms from the natural world.

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Great Serpent Mound, Ohio, c. 100 BCE – CE 700, 1348 feet long
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Louise Bourgeois, *Maman*, 2001, bronze
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What do each of these forms represent? What materials do you think each was made from?

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Compare the Nazca Spider and Louise Bourgeois’ *Maman*.

Which looks more like a real spider? What do you see that makes you say that? What features do both share?

Look at Deborah Butterfield’s *June* and the Great Serpent Mound.

Neither of these looks exactly like the real creature. What features help you identify what they are? What would you have to add to each to make them look more realistic?

Now look at all these sculptures along with Deborah Masuoka’s *Haymarket Rabbits* and put them in order from most realistic to most abstract.

What about the works made you put them in this particular order? How are the shapes similar or different from the real creatures? Did size make a difference in your decisions?

Experiment with Art Making

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What animals do you see? What shapes do you see?

Find a realistic image of an animal of your choice—a photocopy from a book, a printed Web image, an image from a magazine, etc. Look carefully to determine what geometric shape(s) most closely fit the animal form and then draw the shapes over the animal as Villard de Honnecourt did. Use a ruler and compass as needed. Measure the shapes carefully.

Calculate how much you will have to enlarge your shape(s) to fill a 12” x 18” piece of paper. Keeping the proportions the same redraw your shape(s) enlarged to fill the paper.

Look again at Deborah Masuoka’s *White Rabbit*. She started with the shape of a large oval. What did she have to add to make us see it as a rabbit?

Now think about your shape. What will you have to add to make your animal recognizable? Using your shape(s) add only enough to make us see your animal but keep it as abstract as possible.

Using colored pencils, pastels or oil pastels add color to your abstract animal. Do you want a single color like *White Rabbit* or will you add texture like the *Haymarket Rabbits*? Do you want to add designs that refer to some feature of the animal like the eyes on the *Haymarket Rabbits* or will you add patterns like the scallops or spirals on the *Haymarket Rabbits*?

Write a short paragraph reflecting on how easy or hard it was to portray your realistic animal in an abstract way. Would you choose a different animal if you were to do this again? Why or why not?

EXPLORE BIG IDEAS:

Artists throughout time have merged human and animal characteristics.

Connect with other Art, Artists and Cultures

Look at *Haymarket Rabbits*. Remember that Deborah Masuoka said that by making her rabbits larger than a human she changed them from prey to predator. Often when we think about predators we think not only about large animals but also about human hunters. Artists and writers often make animals anthropomorphic, giving them human characteristics (see the discussion of Barry Flanagan’s *The Drummer* under Interpretation).

Some cultures have combined human and animal forms to represent supernatural beings with special powers. Look at the following on www.iowawestpublicart.org:

Horus offering a libation, bronze statue, 22nd dynasty (c. 800 BCE); in the Louvre, Paris
Illustration from an Egyptian Book of the Dead, c. 1275 BCE, showing the jackal-headed god of the dead, Anubis, weighing the soul of the scribe, Ani
Jade Votive Axe, Olmec 1200-400 BCE, British Museum, London.

Look at Horus, Anubis and the Olmec jade axe. What features of what animals can you recognize in each? Which parts of the figures are human like? Read the information from the British Museum about the Olmec Jade Axe to find out all the different animals that are included in this figure.

Our culture sometimes combines human and animal characteristics to create beings with superpowers. Can you think of some superheroes that combine human and animal characteristics? What powers do they get from the animals?

Many cultures have folktales about tricksters who appear in animal form, but act like tricky human beings. Have you read or heard any of these tales?

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What does Harry Fonseca do to give each coyote its own personality? Do you think these figures are more human or more animal? Why?

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Look back at Harry Fonseca’s coyotes. A coyote is a four-legged animal and yet Fonseca fit him into an upright figure. How will you create an upright figure using your different animals? Which part will you make human? Will you use clothing on your animals or will they look more natural? If you clothe your animals what features will still suggest the animal characteristics? Draw your human part in one section and each of your animal parts in the other two sections being careful to center all the parts on your vertical guideline.

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Give your favorite combined figure a name. Write a paragraph describing the life of your imaginary figure. Where does it live? What does it eat? What does it like to do? What special powers does it have?

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Curriculum author credits: Center for Innovation in Arts Education, University of Nebraska at Omaha, Shari Hofschire, Dr. Joanne Sowell



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