

## Angels in Armor

by Carol Anthony

When artist Angel Ciolko doesn't feel well, she doesn't take medicine. She listens to music. "It can be any kind of music---Italian Opera, Spanish dances, Mozart," she explains. "Music is my battery-- my source of power, she explains. "Whatever I am listening to at the moment comes out in my work." And even in the joyless, painful moments we all experience from time to time, Angel assures us that music can fix anything.

The presence of music and particularly rhythm is apparent in the almost cinematic ebb and flow of Ciolko's vibrant female papier-mâché torsos, each painted in armor and each seemingly poised to lift and carry the walls of her studio into the next room. . . or maybe the next continent. It's clear that these ladies are not standing still nor are they waiting for someone to open the door for them. They have the *oomph* to open their own doors, and more importantly to open doors and give those less powerful a gentle push to get them through their next hurdle. Clearly Angel's armored ladies evoke not just the power of women, but the power of women to empower others.

There is more to Angel's art than a visual metaphor for a post-modern Joan d'Arc ready to take on adversity and save the world. Ciolko often plants the world itself, that is the globe, inside the belly of her sculptured torsos. "Why?" people ask. "Because women give birth to the world---civilization, humanity, life," she proclaims almost with a shrug, as if it were too obvious to explain. Well, when you put it that way, it all makes sense!

A different metaphor is revealed in the painting of a transparently muscular, though armorless blue haired lady holding tightly onto a flower as she is seemingly batted and tossed about like a feather in the wind. Now feeling better armed myself with woman power, I took a guess. This lady, I thought is hiding behind a mask of strength and invincibility, but she is actually sensitive and vulnerable, maybe even a bit fragile (though hardly helpless). After all, she never lets go of the flower, and perhaps the flower is even more delicate and defenseless than she is.

Whatever Ciolko paints or sculpts she contends "I am all over the place. I started with pottery," she recalls. "My grandmother raised me and taught me how to make clay pots---she would make beautiful pots all year, then cook for weeks before the Christmas holiday---whatever delicious dish she made was the Christmas present and you got to keep the pot, too."

She went on to describe other family members and I felt as if I were on a tour of hidden treasures. "My Dad painted and made wood furniture-- He could build anything and my mother--she could sew anything. And everyone is a musician," Angel added as if to say "I almost forgot!" Although Angel claims she sounds like "somebody stepped on a duck," music is definitely in her. She casually picked up an old violin and started double stopping with the bow, perfectly in tune like she was the soloist in a symphony orchestra. The sound was exhilarating; and I honestly felt as if the other ladies in the room were dancing across the walls to it.

Ciolko herself is luminescent, much like the armored sculptures she creates--- especially when she speaks about clay. "You can make anything out of it," she says with an air of both mystery and absolute conviction. "Anything. All you need is a little water." And if the inspiration from clay were not enough, she will also tell you that water is her greatest love. "When I meet my maker," she says,

the first thing I will ask for is to be near water. That will be my happy place“ What else, I wondered.

She read my mind's question and said quietly “Trees. “

Originally from New Jersey, Ciolko and her husband relocated first to Tallahassee Florida, then to Savannah, after that to Fairhope, Alabama, and finally returned to Savannah where she has been living for twelve years.

“My house was the first house in the neighborhood,” she announced. “There were no trees in Jersey City,” she continued. Well, of course there **are** trees in Jersey City, even in Newark for that matter, but they are not like the trees in Savannah! So, it was here that she discovered how precious these natural skyscrapers were; and where her journey to yet a new happy place began. She still loved working in clay but the expense of firing had become unsustainable. “So I started building my own canvases from reclaimed wood. I went to the dumpsters and gathered the wood that was left over from building my neighbor's houses.” Then she started painting the canvases she built. “One of my first pieces was . . .can you guess. . . a body of water. And I never stopped, “ she said.

In a way, Ciolko helped build her neighborhood by turning the throwaway wood pieces into art. When a neighbor admired one of her paintings, she explained “This was something left over from your house.” It made the piece all the more meaningful to the neighbor when Angel said “You can have it.”

From that point on Angel has continued to reuse leftover and reclaimed materials to make her art. She also started sculpting—not with clay, but with papier-mâché (hey, it's paper mache, ok?) Her creative process is one that she has been honing and refining for years in order to create the stunning armored lady sculptures that have become her signature. They look like clay; they are strong and durable like clay, but they are actually paper mache! Who knew such a delicate medium could become so emboldened!

Angel's process comes from her own ability to be omnipresent, as she says “all over the place.” She frequently wakes up in the middle of the night after being somewhere else in her dream, and can go right to work in her studio to create whatever she just dreamed. She tells me a story about meeting a man who made mermaids out of wood. “The wood was perfect,” she remembers. Angel asked him how he did it and he said 'I look at the piece of wood and the piece of wood tells me what it wants to be.”

“So I'm not crazy, “ Angel exclaims as she revisits the 'Aha' moment in her conversation with the man. “That's what I do. Sometimes I stare at a blank canvas for an hour and the canvas tells me what it wants to be. It may want to be something different in different lights—at different times of day. “

As I continued my gaze around the walls of Angel's studio and met each of the ladies, the implicit power within them ignited the room---much like music. Their radiance fills the room, any room as well as your imagination. You can't help but dream and begin to think beyond the physical shapes, colors and textures. You see these torsos as not just the core of the human body, but the core of human experience, even the soul. “Women can do anything so why not design a piece of artwork that shows how strong and resilient and life affirming we are as women?” Angel poses the question. Why not, indeed? We are the givers and renewers of life. “Guys may be the masters of the universe, but women are the ones that keep it going. “ It's true. Women throughout history and across every culture have bounced back after a crisis, never losing their way in the universe even as the universe itself becomes more wayless.

Each of the sculptures are of course unique, one of a kind. But what is also impressive is the one-of-a-kind intricacy in each one. The lady armor is an ever flowing, rippling, sweeping embroidery of puzzle pieces that will surely make your head spin and soar at the same time. You do get lost in them. “That's because we are complex beings,” Angel tells me. “Women. We are intricate and complicated, but we never actually get lost,” I'm reassured after spinning for a bit. “From our toes to our eye color, we are all so complex and so able to do anything.” I was convinced. The ability of women to get through any maze (with the help of each other, of course) seemed to be the pivotal piece of the puzzle and the purpose behind Angel's vision as an artist. Her women are all symbols of empowerment, strength and hope; and they are passing that on to the rest of us.

But Ciolko's vision is not just about what **she** sees in her sculptures. What's important”, she explains, “is what other women, indeed other people see. Once I'm done with my work, it belongs to someone else. I make art for other people. And if someone says 'I love this,' I would like to think they are seeing a piece of themselves.”

That art can be an affirmation of the specialness and one-of-a-kindness of each of us is itself a one-of-a-kind achievement. And Angel is fully invested in making art that does just that.

When asked what she wanted to do next, Ciolko answered without missing a beat. “I want to weld. I want to build a woman out of car parts.” To be fair, her husband, a service and parts director may have a hand in this novel venture. “Looking under the hood of cars is like looking at the inside of a watch,” she claims, “so that's where I'm going ---that's my next place.” A woman made out of car parts and set to music? That might just fix everything.