

UPSTATE DIARY

ART, HOME & NATURE *(and other things to do in the woods)*

Interview by Nicola Tyson

The artist Francesca DiMattio applies her virtuosic technical skills to the construction of implausible ceramic sculptures: mad vases and larger than life-sized totemic figures - statuesque, interrupted, boisterous and mummified-looking all at once. A torso might detour into a duck, be topped off with a gasoline can, or a fish, whilst standing on a toy elephant or a kid's wheelie. Beautifully painted scenes and motifs decorate the surfaces then shift unexpectedly into intense textures - almost infestations. Her work has been described as a post-modern mash-up of historical references: a scrambling that speaks not only to our contemporary confusion but also to her complete freedom to invent and to repurpose. A selection of her recent work will be on view at Art Omi in the fall of 2019, and her latest *Caryatid* series - humorous and slightly sinister - will be on show at Pippy Houldsworth Gallery, London, in September. A few years ago, she and her husband, artist Garth Weiser, built themselves a home on a 17-acre Christmas tree farm that they purchased in Hillsdale, a small town in Columbia County with fine views of the Berkshires.

Nicola Tyson: *I'm intrigued by the contrast between the space and the light of the landscape and studios and your decision to live in what you had originally planned to be the garage - an elegant yet windowless structure.*

Francesca DiMattio: We never cared about building a house. It was really all about the studios. After building them, and to create a courtyard, we threw up a very quick building to be a garage/ workshop. It had a huge trough drain in the center of the room, for hosing down cars, and very few windows. I made a garden in the courtyard and we realized we wanted to live in this windowless bunker rather than the '70s ranch house, on the side of the road, that came with the property.



To make it look purposeful we wrapped the whole interior in whitewashed plywood and, thankfully, found out we were having a kid before we were finished, making a second bedroom just in time.

NT *Did you design it yourself?*

FDM We worked with an old friend from Cooper Union, Sotirios Kotoulas, to design the studios. To save money we GC'ed the project ourselves. We'd never done anything this before and learned a huge amount.

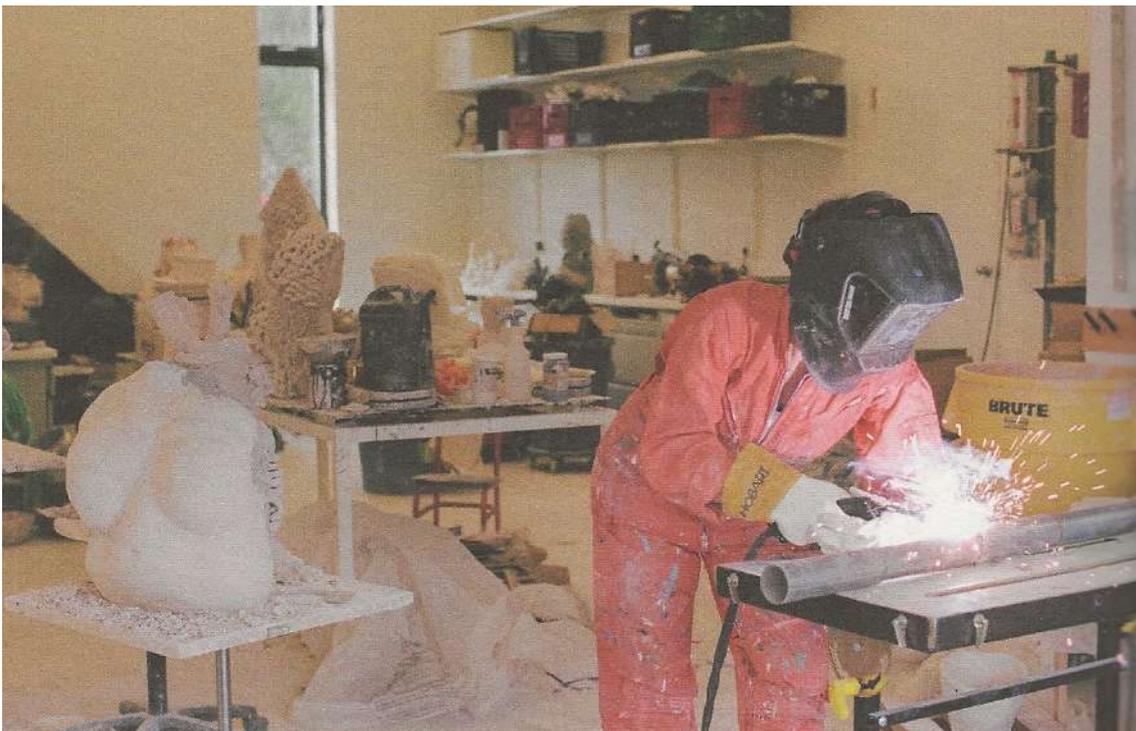
NT *That stuff can make or break a relationship!*

FDM Some of the most romantic nights I ever had with Garth were having dance parties on the concrete floor, before the roof was on. Every night he would carry out this heavy '80s Sansui amp and then carry it back when the contractors came to work the next day. When the walls are up and just before the roof is on is my absolute favorite stage of construction. It feels limitless.

NT *When you begin a piece, do you know where you are going or does it just grow as you work? How much is preplanned? The work is very organic and animated and doesn't feel as though it's designed, say, on a computer.*

FDM I definitely don't use a computer. I really find each piece leads to the next. I'm interested in making sculptures and paintings that pull you in different directions. I pull references from different eras in history and different cultures and through formal similarities and a kind of rhythm happens when it's all translated through my hand. The very different sources begin to dissolve into each other, creating a hybrid language. For this series of *Caryatid* sculptures, I know I want each one to be male and female, animal and human, inanimate and animate, revered and utilitarian - so there is a kind of checklist in my head as I'm working. Each sculpture doesn't contain each opposing pair, but I think about it as I'm going.

NT *I'm fascinated by the labor-intensive, chunky knit textures on many of these new pieces, how did you arrive at those? I hear a garlic press was involved ...*





Fish Corymbid, 2019.
Opposite: DiMaffio
in her garden.

FDM I've always been interested in finding ways to change how we encounter domestic materials and creative methods historically associated with the feminine; like ceramics, knitting, beading and basket weaving. I shift the expected scale and proportion in order to change materials that we are used to seeing as pretty and sweet into something more aggressive and stronger. I'm interested in how things are made and studied sweaters and baskets and figured out how to mimic them in porcelain. I use a garlic press to make the rug texture and I use extruders with different size dies to make the different knit and rope textures.

NT I love the crazy 'vases' - a kind of dementia of Sevres, Wedgwood, Minton, Meissen and Ming - each one a kind of visual and spatial crisis that can actually contain real flowers. Humor is important to you, I'm guessing. It is for me, not as an end in itself, but rather as a vehicle and method of disarming the viewer. How does humor operate in your work?



FDM I totally agree. I definitely want there to be a light-hearted hand in the way things are handled. Given how many things are going on and how many processes are at play in each work, it's important to me that it doesn't feel self-conscious or stiff. Humor helps you get away with a lot more I think.

NT *Speaking of disarming, I remember, as a painting student and ardent feminist back in the '80s, I was conflicted about drawing 'women' - or recognizably female figures - without arms. It was frowned upon, then, as it represented powerlessness. How do you deal with that reaction if, indeed, it still comes up?*

FDM There is nothing like the crits you get in art school, huh? I want these works to be amputetic. Each piece is made up of fragments stuck together to make a new whole. *Elephant Caryatid* shows a delicate stockinged foot, on tiptoe, balancing on a bright plastic kid's ride-on toy. The "figure" has one mannequin on its hip, and a torso of the Venus of Willendorf. The head has become overtaken with a colorful knit weave. As a woman, you're pulled in so many different directions but you pull yourself together and try to pose. I often feel like I don't have enough arms or that I'm precariously balanced on a heel or on a wheelie toy. My work has always been about domesticity taking on an aggressive

tone. Lately, I've felt this acutely and it's led to sculptures that are overwhelmed with rug, rope, beads and knit: materials intended to beautify or enhance instead take over in a viral way.

NT *I read that your father-in-law introduced you to ceramics, giving you free rein of the facilities at Arizona State University and its massive outdoor kiln ...*

FDM My mom makes ceramics, too, so it's really been around me my whole life. I'd never taken a pottery class or even a sculpture class so, when I decided I wanted to make this work, I went out to Arizona and got a crash course in my father-in-law Kurt Weiser's studio. He taught me everything I needed to know about replicating different glaze techniques, making slip, molds, and casting. I produced my first two sculpture shows by traveling all around, working at my mom's studio across the river and my father-in-law's studio in Arizona. I was so determined that I gave up any sense of normal home life to make it.

NT *You need a lot of space, where did you work before you moved here and how did that influence your work?*



FDM I worked in Dumbo for 10 years in a 400 sq. ft. studio with no windows and no heat, so this was quite a change. I loved that space and still have it but I could never make there what I now make here. There came a point where I wanted fresh air and light.

NT *Being based in the Hudson Valley myself, I'm always curious to hear about other people's passions outside their studio. It looks like gardening is something that you avoid, with that expanse of gravel and those fabulous prehistoric looking planters you made.*

FDM As a kid, I went back and forth to the country on the weekends. My parents were huge gardeners but they could never get me out of the house. I drew, constantly, in the attic. It took having land of my own to get into gardening. Watching my parents and knowing all too well how much work gardening can be; I tried to design spaces that are easy to maintain. I made a bunch of concrete planters and planted them with winter-hardy sedums, which come back stronger every year. I planted a full orchard of fruit trees and built a vegetable garden that we eat from all summer and through the fall.

NT *So, what else do you get up to creatively? I know you make and rearticulate clothes for yourself and your little boy, sourcing from thrift shops of which there are plenty up here.*

FDM When I first had my boy Bruno, I couldn't believe I had to give up my hands altogether. I was completely unprepared for that and quickly figured out something I could still do while holding him or feeding him. I set up a sewing machine and made all his clothes. I love repurposing material and the puzzle of working with existing clothes to make multiple smaller pieces was a fun challenge.

NT *What do you listen to in the studio? When I first moved up here there was no Internet and radio was very local. Now, I confess, I listen to the BBC most of the time in a homesick, British bubble. Do you prefer silence, talk or music, or does it depend on the stage of the creative process you are in?*

FDM It so depends on the stage of the creative process. Towards the end of a project, and in the inevitable clean up that follows, music is the best. I like a very random mix ... from Sade to the Nutcracker to The Prodigy. I like big jumps. When I am really in the middle of pieces, I listen to lots of books on tape or podcasts.

NT *How often are you in NYC, and what do you miss about the city?*

FDM For the last three years we have mostly been upstate. Adjusting to the new demands of having a small child, I found country living the most efficient ... no lost time commuting on the train. I miss the cultural and visual diversity of the city and still need to go back a few times a month. I love how impressive the flaky buildup of years of filth on a subway wall can be right next to someone's fancy Chanel bag. The country has much less visual or cultural contrast. Knowing that we will be in the city once Bruno goes to kindergarten, we have been really enjoying these years of freedom in the country.

Photography Matt Jones

Francesca DiMattio's *Caryatid* exhibit runs Sept. 13-Oct. 19, '19, at Pippy Houldsworth Gallery houldsworth.co.uk

Her solo show, *Statues*, at Art Omi runs Oct. 12, '19-Jan 5, '20, at artomi.org.

Nicola Tyson is represented by Petzel.com in the US and SadieColes.com in the UK. Find her @[nicola_tyson](https://twitter.com/nicola_tyson)

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