



COVER STORY

“I can feel (stones), they talk to me”

— French sculptor Sylviane Courgeau

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SUNDAY
CONVERSATION

By Umer Nangiana

Some people tell stories; others simply become part of some. She not only tells stories, making stones speak for her; she has been living one. She is that stone which her father wanted to write books about. It is a stone that has been living with people for generations; witnessing as their lives unfold, and passing their stories from one to the other.

Following is the story of French sculptor Sylviane Courgeau in her own words, punctuated in a sweet fusion of her French and Oriental accents. *Community* sat her down for a chat, filled with stories, while she was here to feature in an international sculpture symposium organised by Regency Art.

Courgeau is truly an artist by choice. She is the one who, driven by her intuition, chose her own path in life and has followed it relentlessly and fearlessly, leaving behind masterpieces of art carved on stones.

The French sculptor has been a global citizen in



Photos by Umer Nangiana

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essence, living her life between continents and countries as diverse as France, Syria and India. The exceptionally talented internationally acclaimed master sculptor is an ardent lover of Oriental *Sufi* music besides Indian classical music. She even practices it whenever she gets the opportunity.

She speaks Arabic, and some Hindi, with a good command. And she also practices Oriental healing techniques using precious stones. Speaking to this artist who takes her inspiration from spirituality and puts it into play to act as a bridge between cultures, people and ideologies is an uplifting experience in itself.

When she tells her tale, or well, her "so many stories" as she terms it, you cannot help but get dragged in.

"I am from France but my heart is very Oriental. People from one part of the world picture people from the other part in a certain way and vice versa but I prefer to stay in the middle," Courgeau tells me as we chat sitting in the lobby of Grand Wyndham Regency Doha.

"I do not pretend that I know everything but through my body and soul's personal experiences, I am able to see the actual picture. It is so easy for people to misunderstand each other. It is like a translator's dilemma," she adds. In the background, a musician plays harp.

The first of a series of stories from her life, that she narrates, begins with how she became a sculptor from a philosophy student.

"Ah! I do not know. There is a story about it. May be it (her being a sculptor) is coming from there (Smiles). I discovered it a long time ago," says Courgeau.

The story goes like this.

A few years ago her father told Courgeau that he always wanted to write a book about a stone. This stone is found by a man who puts it into his pocket. The stone then moves on to another man and it tells the story of his previous keeper. The stone keeps moving and stories continue.

"My father said he was not sure if he would ever be able to write that book. I thought to myself I am that stone he wanted to write about. So I believe my origin as a sculptor comes from that unwritten story," says Courgeau.

It happened when she, as part of her philosophy studies in the University, had to write a dissertation about Brancusi, the master Romanian sculptor. "Okay! So I thought I have to write about this sculptor and I know nothing about sculpture art myself. I felt it very silly to talk about something that I did know about," admits the French sculptor.

To enjoy her stories at best, the key is to let her speak freely with minimum interruption.

She landed with a traditional school in France, after deciding to learn the art, comprising middle-aged artists who were building Cathedrals and Churches following the tradition of Solomon's temple and pharaoh of Egypt before him.

These people were travelling from places. Courgeau went to meet some of the masters. It was the 90s era and she as a woman was not allowed to participate. She kept trying and eventually found a master who allowed her into his workshop. Her



ARTIST PAR EXCELLENCE: Sylviane Courgeau working on a sculpture.

journey as a sculptor formally began.

"The men were going from one city to the other, working on Cathedrals or Churches. They would eat and sleep in the place we called Family House. But as I was a woman I was not allowed in. So I would sleep outside. I did it just for the sake of learning the art," Courgeau tells me.

"First I was sleeping outside, eating whenever I can, and then I bought a van. So now I was living in my van, making my own path. Here, I came across a woman who placed with me an order for a sculpture made on a particular stone from Syria. So I went to Syria," she goes on.

Here comes another story about her life in Syria. She went to Syria

to complete the order and visited 'Deir Mar Musa al-Habashi', the monastic community of Syriac Catholic rite, situated close to Damascus. She had heard about the place from a man she had a chance encounter with in Morocco a few years ago after she missed her bus to France.

She went to al-Habashi and discovered that they were looking for a sculptor. So she decided to return to Syria. This laid the foundation of her subsequent long stay in Syria. It was here that she completed, along with her ex-husband who was also a sculptor, 'Abélard&Héloïse' the bronze sculpture.

"It is the only piece that I made

with four hands (two of her ex-husband). This masterpiece is unusual because we made it, from A to Z, from first clay sketch until the bronze. It took us nine months to complete it. Usually the artists get the mouldings and the bronze made from a bronze factory. This piece has been a challenge for us," recalls Courgeau.

Her basic material is stone but in France she has also conducted a bones casting workshop. Every stone, she says, involves different treatment process.

She has her sculptures placed at many monumental sites in different countries of the world like France, Germany, Italy, Saudi Arabia, Syria

and India where she made some monumental work.

In Deir Mar Musa al-Habashi, she worked on mountains directly and carved sculptures, including a five-metre high one that is closest to her heart even today even though she was not paid for it.

Later in her life, she turned to precious stones. And here comes her final story. Once in France, she went to find her missing semi-precious stone, the 500 million year old *Serpentine*, from an excavation site.

There she met someone who told her about a woman geologist who had died in a road accident, leaving behind a treasure of 50 buckets full of precious and semi-precious stones in her lodgings not too far from the site in France.

As the woman had no-one to take care of her house and thus the stones, it gave Courgeau an opportunity to get them and work on them. She selected the most attractive ones first. It is about 20 buckets of stones to work on this winter, she says. She started to make Cabochon, a healing stone from them. She is also wearing one in her necklace.

"Wherever I go if there are some special stones, I can feel them. I do not know how to describe it, but I can feel them, they talk to me," says the sculptor.

The precious stones she says are healing stones. "I am also working with some doctors in France. We work on practicing the Oriental techniques of healing and I used some stones because they can cure people," says Courgeau.

"I believe what cures you is yourself but these stones can help you because like everything they have special energy," she goes on to add. Among her sculptures, the one she made in India is also close to her heart. All her work, she says, eventually has a vertical inspiration. And she will never let it be otherwise.



WINNER: Equus Ferrus#1, 1m high slate stone. It won the Prize of Excellence for sculpture at the World Horse riding Games in Caen, France, last September.



DOHA MUSING: Courgeau created this sculpture during the symposium in Doha.



SYRIAN CAPERS: Abélard&Héloïse, the bronze sculpture that she completed with her ex-husband in Syria.