

Nonnie

They say there are some jobs for women and some for men. Deborah Sampson never got this news. Neither did Lu Stubbs, my grandmother, whose work we are here today to celebrate.

I have always called her “Nonnie.” This comes from the Italian, our ancestral language. But “Nonnie” doesn’t mean grandmother—it means *grandparents*, plural. The word is inclusive, neither masculine nor feminine, not limited to the conventions of noun endings or the cultures of social norms. Nonnie is a singular woman with the creative force of the plural.

She is—or has been—a model and a fashion designer, a painter and a woodworker, a forager and a builder, a student and a teacher. With her own magnificent hands, she taught me to draw, built the loft bed where I spent my childhood nights sleeping, built me and my sister Rosie a secret cabin in the trees from old window shutters and scrap wood she found at a junk sale, and even built a bar for the living room of my law school apartment in New Haven. Nonnie doesn’t drink, and never has, but she still built me the most beautiful bar in the world.

Her creations, like the bronze sculpture that we can now see so beautifully polished and restored outside this library, seek not to glorify her own name as an artist or participate in the avant-garde rat race but rather to pay homage to the most beautiful things in her world, past and present: the knots in the trees, the curves of a ballerina’s bending body, the smirk on the face of an adolescent frog, or the courageous figure of Deborah Sampson standing at attention.

And then there are the large and less well known swaths of the work of Lu Stubbs that place function at the forefront, seeking simply to improve people’s lives in the largest or smallest of ways. With her own hands, she built a house from the ground up—not just a house but a beautiful and creative house full of hidden surprises, angular nooks and crannies and light beams from unexpected angles, a house that was sustainable and low-carbon-footprint 20 years before those terms were invented. And she did it with the help of one amateur architect: my grandfather, a mathematician. Our Italian family is a family of home-builders, and the do-it-yourself spirit still inhabits every single bone of Nonnie’s preternaturally able frame.

When I was a kid, my parents would drive me to Providence, and we would arrive at a giant foundry, the size of an airplane hangar—or at least so it seemed to a child—and I would look up and there she would be: Nonnie in a giant welding mask that looked like the helmet of a medieval swordsman—or swordswoman—in chain mail, with only a slit for the eyes. There she was, on top of a ladder, in fatigues, gun in hand, sparks flying. That’s right: my grandmother is also a welder. Had Nonnie had the chance to fight side-by-side with Deborah to free our people from the British occupation, I have no doubt that she would have been adept with her musket, too.

These days, the role of the public artist is often simply to conceptualize a project, to make some design sketches and then let the assistants do all the hands-on work. But Lu Stubbs is not of these days. She has never been an artist who is comfortable standing on the sidelines, never been a person who is comfortable having anything done for her by an underling.

When she took me to Italy for the first time, she showed me the Sistine Chapel, explained how Michelangelo had lain upside down in the scaffolding, hanging at precarious angles for years with the paintbrush extended above him and the blood rushing down into his face: not just his assistants but the artist himself. It was he that climbed the ladder, Michelangelo the builder, Michelangelo the acrobat, Michelangelo the construction worker.

I was a teenager beneath that ceiling when Nonnie first explained to me that art is not just about the objects we admire but also about their personal stories of execution, that the magic emerges not just from the brain but also through the blood that the heart pumps into the hands, animating them with the spirit of creation.

By Robin Stubbs Goldstein

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