

Sculptor Julie Warren Conn carves a new niche in Kentucky

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Julie Warren Conn uses a grinder to carve a piece of Minnesota limestone in her studio near downtown Winchester. Her fork lift often doubles as a work table. Photos by Tom Eblen

WINCHESTER — When [Julie Warren Conn](#) was a student at the University of Tennessee, she hoped to be a French major, but couldn't speak the language. She became an art major instead, but continued to struggle with some basics.

"I couldn't paint, couldn't draw, but I loved working with my hands," said Conn, who in 1965 became the UT School of Art's first sculpture graduate.

Over the next dozen years, Conn mastered steel welding. Then she took up stone carving. Since 1977, the artist formerly known as Julie Warren Martin has developed a national reputation as a stone sculptor, with dozens of pieces in prestigious museums and collections.

Her work is in places ranging from the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, D.C., to the Holiday Inn headquarters in Stamford, Conn. Her largest piece is a 30-ton installation of New Mexico travertine outside what is now GlaxoSmithKline's U.S. headquarters in Research Triangle Park, N.C.

After her husband of 12 years, Philip Conn, retired as president of Western Oregon University in 2005, they moved to Lexington and she opened a small studio and gallery in Winchester (Juliewarrenconn.com). But she has shown little work in Kentucky, until now.

A collection of Conn's sculptures, titled *Stories in Stone*, will be featured during Gallery Hop, 5 to 8 p.m. Friday, at the Central Library Gallery, 140 E. Main St. The free exhibit opened June 15 will remain up through Aug. 11.



Conn, 70, grew up in Knoxville, where her father, Millard Warren, owned a specialty concrete business and had an interest in design. Access to his company's heavy equipment made it easier for her to begin carving and polishing stone.

Knoxville has had a significant marble processing industry since the early 1900s, thanks to East Tennessee's quarries of pink marble. Conn said she learned cutting and shaping techniques from marble mill employees who let her work in their shop.

"I became their resident artist," she said. "One of the things I've always enjoyed about my work is the opportunities to become connected with people."

Marble remains a favorite medium for Conn, although her gallery also includes pieces made of travertine, granite, onyx, alabaster and various volcanic and fossilized rocks.

Conn's typical day at the office involves driving a fork lift. It doubles as a workbench for large hunks of stone, such as the column of Minnesota limestone she was grinding down the day I visited her studio. Her tools include grinders, saws, chisels and a big exhaust fan to clear out clouds of gritty stone dust. There's a good reason her studio is zoned industrial.

The most time-consuming part of Conn's work is polishing her sculptures, which can take three-times longer than cutting the basic shapes. After progressing through sandpaper between 80 and 1,000 grit, she finishes each piece with paste wax.

The petite Conn said she has never been intimidated by the physicality needed to work with hard and heavy slabs of stone. While careful to avoid injury, she said she has fallen off ladders and scaffolding and once had a grinder disk fly apart and send her to the ground.

Some of Conn's work is representational, but most pieces are abstracts dictated by the stone she is working with. That often includes openings and holes, which give the sculpture a lighter feel — and can be useful for securing belts to move it.

"I let the rock guide me," she said. "I love to take a volume of stone and begin carving. I won't have a clue what it will be. Then it will start to look like something to me, or somebody will come in and interpret it."

Conn said she sometimes likes to see how far she can push a piece of stone without breaking it. She also enjoys experimenting with new and different kinds of rock, such as the small sculpture she made from a chunk of common Kentucky limestone she found outside her studio. Once highly polished, it was unrecognizable.

Conn has recently started making bronze sculptures cast from her stone pieces, as well as bas relief stone drawings inspired by ancient Egyptian ruins.

On one side of Conn's studio are a dozen large wooden boxes filled with rocks awaiting her attention, including a few her husband found and suggested she might want to experiment with.

"When Philip starts toward me with a rock, I run," she said with a laugh. "Because it usually means



trouble.”

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