

# ARTES MAGAZINE

---



*An International Fine Arts E-Magazine: Passionate for Fine Art, Architecture & Design*

## The Many Faces of Sculptor, Shelly Fireman

By Edward Rubin

---



**B**ronx-born Shelly Fireman is an artist, restaurateur, raconteur, occasional lecturer, and—as I like to tease him—a mini-god. Other than granting me two lengthy interviews, one at his Bedford Hills home, the other at his office in New York City, and a couple of eye-opening lunches in which I got to study the guy in action, he does not suffer fools gladly. Like all uber-successful people living in a cacophonous, 24/7 world, and even more so with the ever-exuberant Fireman, who is multi-talented in the extremis, he'd rather be doing than talking about it.

*Left: Miss Hospitality (2014), Bronze, 60 x 40 x 38"*

Even thinking, which he wavers between not thinking at all and always thinking, or so he says – his wife insists that he thinks too much – takes a back seat to getting the job done. If one were to single out two or three of Fireman's most prominent traits, all of which serve him well as an artist and entrepreneur, it is his bull-dog tenacity, keen sense of whimsy in which anything can materialize and does, most prominently visible in the wide range of subjects his art embraces, and a highly developed set of observational skills which are always on alert. Nothing escapes his all-seeing eye.

While Fireman is a true New Yorker through-and-through, his very demeanor, infused with a strong whiff of Bronx tough guy talk, complete with expletives peppering his

speech, gives him away. Picture a swaggering James Cagney talking in rat-a-tat-tat machine gun cadence. Still, from years of vacationing in the Tuscan region, to owning a home in Camaiore, Italy, with hundreds of olive and fruit trees of every variety on his property, making friends with local artists and artisans there, building two work studios, and finding foundries to cast his work, more than qualifies Fireman as an honorary Italian.

*Right: Family Tree (2013), Bronze, 97 x 28 x 20"*

"Though I've been to Italy a number of times when my wife and I were involved in fashion design, Fireman explains, " years later when I was already in the restaurant business, I saw an ad in the Economist offering a villa in northern Tuscany for rent and my wife and I jumped at the chance. While it wasn't exactly a villa—as we found out when we got there—we loved the area's artistic community, and so the following year we returned. Loving adventure, we even joined an Italian mountain hiking club. During our visits we met numerous friends, expats, and native Italians, many of whom I still work with today."



"After seven years of renting, my wife got tired of schlepping clothes back and forth, so I bought her a 300-year-old house overlooking the Mediterranean. We loved the idea that it was six minutes from Pietrasanta, which since the fifteenth-century has been an active artists' commune. It is near the marble quarries of Carrara, where Michelangelo, Henry Moore and Jacques Lipchitz worked. I now spend several months a year there making art.



Coincidentally, both Botero and I use Fonderia d'Arte Massimo Del Chiaro and Fonderia Artistica Mariani s.r.l. to cast our work.

*Left: Shelly Fireman at work in his Italian studio ('It's Tough to be without a Man').*

While our beginnings rarely know our endings, in Fireman's case his interest in the arts—a foreshadowing—started at the age of six with frequent visits to NYU's Hall of Fame (now located on the grounds of Bronx Community College). Designed by Stanford White, the nearly one hundred busts of famous

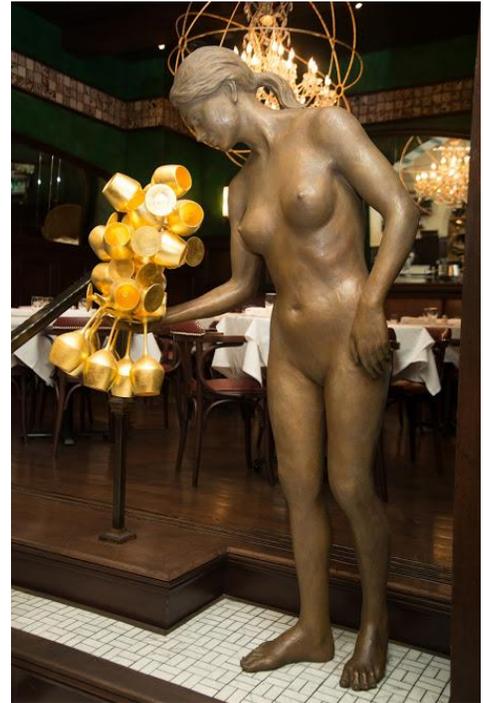
Americans captured Fireman's attention. "We lived up by NYU and had access to the NYU campus and the Hall of Fame with its wonderful sculptures. All of these heads just fascinated me. The area was actually our playground until the campus police chased us out."

During his teens, Fireman took to frequenting the library – a voracious reader, he owns some 10,000 books – attending concerts at Carnegie Hall, and visiting museums to see art, as well as to meet, as he laughingly claims, a smart, sophisticated girl not from the Bronx. “I was especially mesmerized by a Kokoschka painting at the Museum of Modern Art of old people holding hands. I just stood there and stared. I am staring at it right now in my head.” In addition to playing on the football team in high school and college—a subject he recently returned to in his work—he also began to hang out with artists and musicians in Greenwich Village. At the time “Anything to leave the Bronx,” was Fireman’s mantra.

Though Fireman didn’t particularly like to draw (he now takes lessons, both here and in Italy), “I just didn’t have the patience to sit for six hours and draw a cup,” he says giving me a wry smile. Like his father who enjoyed carving in wood, he also liked working with his hands. The act of sculpting fascinated him enough to get him to buy *Anyone Can Sculpt* (1952), Arthur Zaidenberg’s book of sculpture techniques for amateurs and students at the local Five and Ten Cent store, a book he used – and still owns – to teach himself how to sculpt at home.

*Right: Golden Goblets (2014), Bronze, 67 x 29 x 27”*

Though mostly self-taught, Fireman briefly attended classes at the Art Students League, as well as the Sculpture Center. “I felt good at art school, a lot closer to my true self. But deep down I sensed that I did not want to be poor, so I quit. I knew that I didn’t want to live in Forest Hills’ Co-op City, or have a house with a picket fence on Long Island; and I wanted to make money. I wanted to be married, have children, and take care of them and not my soul, and being a sculptor was not going to take me there anytime soon.”



Fireman’s first serious encounter with the visual arts had him collaborating with underground filmmaker Jonas Mekas, whom he’d met at the *Hip Bagel*, the first of Fireman’s soon to be restaurant empire. Being young and naïve that project went belly-up. Still interested in film however, his next project involved friend and actress Colleen Dewhurst. “I optioned a script from one of my restaurant’s customers. Colleen was going to star in it. Being an interracial story the problem I ran into was finding a black male actor willing to take on such a controversial role. Remember, this was the early ‘60s.”

“My first choice at the times was Bill Cosby, but somebody at Columbia pictures did not want him. James Earl Jones—he was the nicest guy—took a pass. My next choice was Sidney Poitier, so I flew to Paris to meet with him. Poitier liked the script, but the subject of miscegenation frightened him. Arthur Penn and Dory Schary were both interested in working on the film. But, being twenty and having no experience, I couldn’t get the project off the ground. I learned that I was not going to Hollywood and that ended of my film career. Still, I had a lot of fun.”

The next few decades, with an exploratory turn here and there—six months living in Los Angeles was one, another, owning a company that designed American Indian clothing and bags—Fireman’s focus turned to getting married, raising a family - he fathered one son - and building his company, *Fireman Hospitality Group* which today employees some 1600 people in nine restaurants (seven in Manhattan and two at Maryland’s National Harbor, on the Potomac). Here, he get to ‘play three roles,’ director, producer, and writer.



“It’s a triple threat,” Fireman laughs. “Thank God I have wonderful ‘actors’ working for me. It’s a harder job to go on the restaurant’s ‘stage’ every evening and make sure the patrons leave happy.” Not coincidentally, though his business acumen plays a large part, his love of theater being in his blood led him to situate more than half of his New York City restaurants near Lincoln Center, Carnegie Hall, and the Theater District.

*Left: May I Help You (2014), Bronze, 21 x 8 x 7”*

Business may have reared its head early on, but Fireman’s grip on the world of art, both as a collector—Warhol, Lichtenstein, Lucien Freud, Schnabel, and Grooms, to name but a few —coupled with his artistically-driven entrepreneurship, continue to occupy his thoughts. From his imaginative menu planning, to the overall décor of his restaurants which incorporate original art, Fireman’s, hand, if not mind, is always on display.

At the *Redeye Grill*, across from Carnegie Hall, Fireman commissioned two large Red Groom murals to enliven the bar and lounge area. Working with the New York Academy of Arts, he also sponsored graduate art students to decorate ten of the restaurant’s ceiling-tall columns with New York City scenes. Also on display is Ron Mehlman’s motorized and slowly-turning *Dancing Shrimp* sculpture and five of his friend, Mark Kostabi’s paintings, from the mid 90’s.

Other of Fireman’s eateries also feature the work of contemporary artists. At the *Trattoria Dell’Arte*, the work of graphic designer Milton Glaser, who worked hand-in-hand with Fireman on the restaurant’s interior design, is on view with several of Jordan Steckel’s fiberglass body part sculptures. At the *Brooklyn Diner*, on West 57th Street vintage photographs, along with T. Duncan’s tribute to Jackie Robinson, a large mural of Ebbetts Field, the Dodger’s old stadium picturing Robinson wearing his famous ‘Number 42’ baseball uniform, is prominently displayed on the back wall. A similar mural adorns a wall at *Brooklyn Diner’s* West 43rd Street location. More Kostabi paintings make an appearance at Fiorello’s across from Lincoln Center.

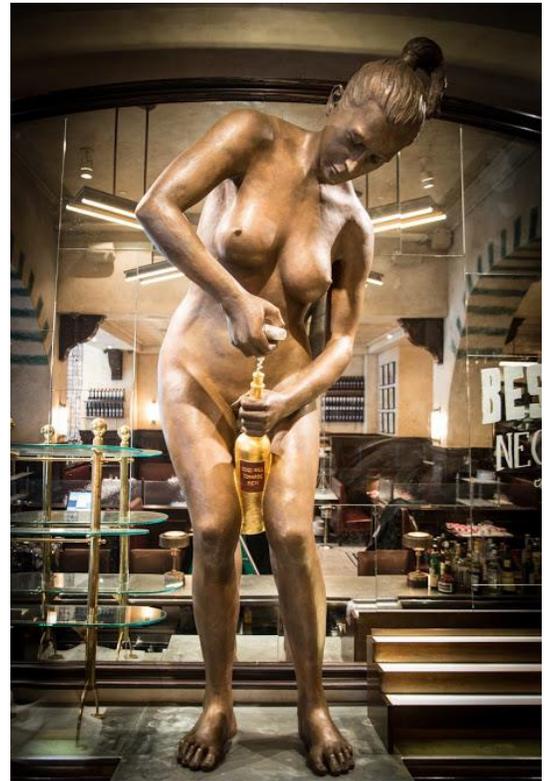
At *Florian on Park Avenue*, Fireman’s newest restaurant, he turned to award-winning Broadway theatrical designers to achieve what one could call “The Wow Effect.” To this end he enlisted David Korins whose company designed the sets of *Motown*, *Annie*, *Godspell*, and Broadway’s current hit, *Hamilton*, and Don Holder, winner of a Tony for lighting *The Lion King*, to work with him on interior design. Dramatically enhancing Florian’s décor—a first for the artist who is somewhat shy at displaying his own work—Fireman peopled the restaurant, to critical

acclaim, with a number of his bronze female nudes, each specifically created for the restaurant by the artist in 2014.

Here, commanding the bar area, doing a star-turn actually, is Floriana, a dazzling seven foot goddess looking a lot like a classical Greek sculpture. Standing in front of a mirror which allows a view of her shapely backside, she holds a bottle of champagne tightly between her legs. About to pop the cork, provocatively so, all kinds of sexual fantasies come bubbling up. The installation, highly reminiscent of Manet's *A Bar at the Folies Bergère*, is a show-stopper.

*Right: Floriana (2014), Bronze, 84 x 36 x 42"*

Situated aside the steps' leading up to a private dining area, another of Fireman's bronze nudes is seen delicately balancing a clutch of shimmering golden goblets. Entertaining the patrons in the front room is a bevy of small nude female bronzes, each involved in their own story-telling moment. One figure holds a shirt that she might be getting ready to help you into. Another, seemingly lost in thought, cups her breasts. While one pair of figures is embracing, another appear to be casually walking together.



Inhabiting a narrow passageway is *I Whine, You Whine, We All Whine* (2014), a jocular installation of 120 bottles of wine housed in three contiguous cabinets. On close examination, one notices that many of the labels on the bottles, all Fireman designed, feature the logos of familiar household products. Some announce the wine's effect, some tell a story, and others are just plain funny: here a bottle of Malbec, with the Trojan logo front and center, promises that it is "the wine that protects." A 1924 bottle Rosé sporting a Kleenex label, lets us know that it is "the wine that wipes away yours tears;" while a 1991 bottle of Kosher Pinot Noir laughingly reads "Italians are just Jews with muscles." A 1942 bottle of Cabernet Franc, complete with an image of a Pollack painting, further highlights Fireman's sense of humor, with a label unabashedly announcing "It was a great night. My bedspread looked like a Pollack painting by the end of it."

A relative new comer, as far as the creation and production of his sculptural work - Fireman's first sculpture, *Colosso*, a simple Bernard Buffett-like weight-lifting figure cast in 2010 - is installed outdoors at his home in Bedford Hills. Considering the totality of his sculptural *oeuvre* his technical expertise, working hand in hand with modelers, painters, armature, resin, marble, and gold leaf experts, and several foundries, has increased tenfold in the ensuing five years.

The diversity of subjects Fireman dares to tackle in his art is simply mindboggling. The same can be said about the number of sculptures realized in the last few years, as well as the unfinished works that occupy his time

when in Italy. “Right now I have 25 or 30 works in progress and a lot more in my mind. I never run out of ideas. They just seem to come, one after another. I am always thinking that the next one can be better, more interesting and more exciting.”



*Left: Fireman in his studio with several of his project ideas*

It is no wonder that a portrait of former president, Theodore Roosevelt, given to him by a knowing friend, hangs in his study. Though Fireman minimizes

his connection to the picture, it seems right at home on his wall, as both men, gifted overachievers—each with ever-flowing ideas and endless pursuits—took to fishing, hunting, collecting guns, and perhaps more tellingly, successfully overcoming childhood disabilities: Roosevelt, his crippling asthma; Fireman, a struggle with a stubborn stutter.

Personal experiences, acute observations, and clever spoofs on artists like Yves Klein, Botero, and Fontana, inform a major part of Fireman’s work. Among his earliest works, Fireman’s tributes to the great outdoors are bronze castings of olive branches, multi-colored tree trunks, and a lively *Family Tree* (2013), a kind of familial Mount Rushmore, in which the faces of Fireman, his wife and son are deeply embedded.

*Right: It’s a Boy! (2015), Bronze, terracotta, 17 x 12 x 10”*

While Fireman appears to have a ‘damn the torpedoes full steam ahead’ side to him, so let it be said, so let it be done—he sees himself as “calmly assertive”—the other side is that of a sensitive man who loves to laugh, and still tears up when speaking of his mother, his father who is still living, and the love he has for his family. This sensitivity shows up most prominently in work that features his wife, Marilyn.



Three of the artist’s sculptures, all clay works in progress waiting to be cast in bronze, feature his pregnant wife, with a wide-faced smile, sitting in what appears to be a leather Club chair. Recreated from early Fireman photographs, the artist is re-documenting one of the happiest times in their life. In one edition, an ecstatic Marilyn is seen clasping her hands to her head. In another, with arms uplifted, she is running her hands through her hair. Having just been told by Fireman, who received a call from the doctor while she was out that they are going to have a healthy baby boy, accounts for her overwhelming joy.

In *True Love* (2015), also waiting to be bronzed, Fireman turns reflective. Here we see two faces, both his and his wife's, each seemingly growing out of a glove. She's smiling and he's reeling from one of her punches. "When you love a person a long time, as we have, we do hit each other, not physically but mentally. That's what life's about. That's what I wanted to show. We don't even realize the pain and discomfort and the happiness that we



could give each other at times. Every marriage has some of this. I took life and I tried to show the pain when you hit somebody and the joy when you don't. That's why I put our faces outside the gloves." In Fireman's original version, the contorted face of his wife, indicating that he, too, was jabbing her, was replaced with a smile at her request. It pained her to see it otherwise, Fireman said.

*Left: Fireman in front of a portion of True Love, with his wife's countenance on the face of the boxing glove.*

In a lighter vein, but no less personal, are two of Fireman's eight-foot long aluminum bow sculptures, testaments to the couple's love for each other. A string of recurring phrases written in script decorates the ribbon of each bow. In the blue-painted *Dear Husband*—an enlarged replica of a bow that Fireman found while shopping—he wishes his wife Marilyn, happy birthday. *Dear Husband*, a yellow version of this same bow, reads, over and over again, dear husband, happy birthday to you. Both works, created in 2015, currently sit on his lawn at his home in Italy. In another simple, charming and free-standing work—again written in script—Fireman spells out their first names. Using the square knot that he mastered during his Cub Scout years, Shelly and Marilyn are joined at the hip.

*Right: Dear Husband (2015), Aluminum, 60 x 120 x 72"*

Loving the female form, two of Fireman's bronzes pay special attention to the well-shaped derriere. In *Tattooed Tush* (2015) a thinly veiled take on women and tattoos, Fireman placed ads from mental institutions that he found in the back pages of the *New Yorker* magazine across the cheeks of the buttocks. "I'm not overly in



favor of a lot of tattoos on women's bodies. I don't really object to one or two, but I feel a number of women that I know are overdoing this tattoo stuff. Not that I would ever tell them so, but they end up disfiguring themselves. If I was to say something," he laughs, "I would suggest that they tattoo their butt. This way they can moon the guy they are with and I don't have to look at it every day. In *Grab my Tush*, "an homage to my wife,"



on whose bottom it was modeled,” Fireman playfully adds, a ‘Kilroy Was Here’ moment, by leaving his gold-leafed hand prints on her bum, one on each cheek.

*Left: Clay maquette for bronze, It's Tough without a Man (2015) 30 x 22 x 15”*

Other Fireman works are social commentaries on culture, as well as historical moments. Here, using a live model, in each of the artist’s three varying versions, we see a young woman happily ‘stoned out’ on pot. Having just put down a book, now resting on a comfortable chair, she is already in dreamland. Another work, *It's Tough Without A Man* (2015) speaks to the travails of women in the workplace, finding themselves up against a wall and having to stand on the back of a man in order to achieve greater success—the type usually meted out to men first, and women last, if ever.

In *Dots*, a work based on a popular candy from his youth and *Tribute to Our Fallen Soldiers*, a nod to Jasper John’s American Flag, the artist uses six foot tall squared columns on which to tell his story. “The stoned out woman was created in response to Colorado legalizing marijuana,” Fireman says, “ And I think that my tribute to our soldiers, in which I put gold stars down the side to represent those men and women who died, must have been triggered by having read the paper and seeing all of the Americans being killed. I really felt something.”

A lot more freewheeling are Fireman’s humorous spoofs on the work of artists Yves Klein and Botero. His first bout, a wakeup call-cum-challenge, was brought about by the work of Yves Klein (1928-1962). Like his bow sculptures, it was inspired while window shopping. Walking into a gallery, he spied an Yves Klein Plexiglas coffee table, one from an edition of 50 begun in 1963, after Klein’s death. Inside the table was a plastic box containing Klein’s famous blue color in powder form, which the purchaser would have to put back into the table itself. The price: 25,000 Euros.

*Right: The Tackle (Botero spoof), 2015*

It was at this very juncture that his oft held realization, “I can do that,” when seeing various artworks, flared up. Loving the blue and doing the math, Fireman tracked down the color’s original manufacturer and created a number of works: from blue bras hanging on a clothes line; to a small wooden artist’s table with paintbrushes and a rag; and a set of automobile tire sculptures, all using Yves Klein’s distinctive blue.



*Right: Dancing with the Elephant (2015), Bronze, 22 x18 x 9"*

In his ambitious Botero spoof, still very much in progress, Fireman uses one of the artist's corpulent dancing women as his jumping-off point. Again, we have a back story. It seems that a friend of his, primarily a collector of eighteenth and nineteenth century art, surprisingly so, told Fireman that he was interested in acquiring a Botero. Not missing a beat, Fireman said, "I'm going to make you a Botero at half price and give it to you as a gift."



"For this work I decided I was going to use a figure of Botero's that I saw in a book. So I went up to Frank's Sporting Goods in the Bronx, which I knew as a kid, and bought an entire football uniform, from helmets to cleats, all in my size and with my old high school number on it. I decided that I am going to tackle or dance with her in my uniform. I am also going to have her dance with an elephant and a snowman. Right now she's nude, but I might put clothes on her."

*Left: Blue Table (2013), Wood, pigment, 40 x 24 x 24"*

As Fireman frequently reiterates, [He] loves what he is doing and is "having a good time doing it." But, he still thinks about having an immediately recognizable signature, not unlike that of Giacometti, Botero, Yves Klein, and Morandi—one that says Shelly Fireman. Of course, he is of several minds about having such an identifiable signature. "It does help one to remember the artist's name, but "do I really want to be that boring?" he asks himself.

Fireman's next project is a still-gestating series with the working title, *Cross Training with Jesus*. It sounds like his most audacious to date, and dare I say it, his most controversial. It might even put him on the map; move him to the front of the line. In this series he will be working in resin, terracotta and wood.

*Right: Working model, Cross-training with Jesus (2015), Resin, terracotta, 30 x 12 x 19"*

"Did you ever see the abs on Jesus?" Fireman asks. He always looks beautiful. His hair looks good. They always make his body look perfect. True? Not an ounce of fat. He



is the last Jew that ever really worked hard on his abs.”

“I may have him doing pushups with the wooden cross on his back, and sit-ups too. If you want to have abs like Jesus’ you need to do a thousand sit-ups every day. It’s going to be very ‘today.’ Good abs, good abs, good abs. I might even turn it into a coffee table book,” he jokes, “with tips on how to get your Jesus’ abs and body in shape for Christmas.” For the record, Fireman manages to execute four-hundred sit-ups every morning.

With his own mortality weighing on his mind, Fireman, relegating his restaurant prowess to a back seat, wants



to be remembered most for his art. Perhaps this all started with a conversation he had with his friend the late artist, Leroy Neiman, who said something to the effect “My paintings will be around for hundreds of years. Who will remember your restaurants?”

Left: Shelly Fireman with his alter ego friends

Regarding the topic of recognition, he says, “Who doesn’t want recognition for their art? Of

course I want recognition. I want it a lot. I don’t need to have it. That’s a big difference. I want it, but I don’t need it. I don’t go to bed at night saying, they won’t love me as an artist. I go to bed saying, I’m having a fucking good time and I can afford it.”