

Published Feb 20, 2011
Published Sunday February 20, 2011

Lively still

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WORLD-HERALD STAFF WRITER



REBECCA S. GRATZ/THE WORLD-HERALD

Photographic artist Vera Mercer sits in the Boiler Room, a restaurant she co-owns, amid some of her striking, large-scale still life photographs.

A petite woman with strawberry blonde hair and smart tortoise-shell glasses enters the Boiler Room restaurant.

She unwinds a pale blue scarf, requests a bottle of wine (“anything, anything”) and then, a little perturbed, asks if someone will open it.

With a slight flush in her cheeks, a fire in her blue eyes, and a soft German edge to her words, she leans close to the woman waiting to take her portrait and says: “I am not happy about this. I will be difficult.”

Vera Mercer is clearly more comfortable on the other side of the lens.

On this sunny, slushy January afternoon, her words come across not as a threat or a pout but as fact and fair warning. Moments later, with a glass of smooth white Burgundy in hand, she inspects the photographer's camera and recalls her own experiences photographing artists, writers, movie stars and cultural icons such as Marcel Duchamp, Norman Mailer and Andy Warhol.

Her name is familiar in Omaha mostly because she is part of the Mercer family and a co-developer — with second husband, Mark, and father-in-law, Sam — of the Old Market district and some of its most indelible restaurants and galleries.

But she also is an artist celebrated on three continents, a German-born Swiss dancer who ran with the Nouveau Réalistes and first took up the camera to document their avant-garde art in Paris in the 1960s. Now in Omaha, at age 74, she is leaning ever so slightly into the frame with her first solo American exhibition. Called “Still Lives,” it's a series of large-format food-related photographs on display at the Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts through April. Like her, it is full of surprises.

The 11 photographs in the Bemis gallery are large, some 10 feet wide, most taken in her Paris and Omaha studios over the past six years.

All are composed images of ingredients — and not just the usual fruit, vegetables, herbs, bread and cheese. Hers is an omnivore's pantry: whole chicken, just-de-feathered guinea hens, deer and sheep heads, skinned rabbits, trout, crabs. Antique bistro glasses, vases, cake stands, candles, flowers in various states of decay and fresh herbs play supporting roles.

Printed on watercolor paper, the photos are lushly colored and incredibly detailed: You can see the hair on a pig's foot and almost smell the singed feathers on a plucked bird.

They are beautiful and surprising — in part because some involve ingredients American diners seldom see, but also because of how they are arranged and lit and because they are so large.

“There are other still life or food photographers, of course, but I could not imagine to see their works in such sizes,” says Matthias Harder, who curated a show of her work at the Kommunale Galerie in Berlin last spring. “(She) does it very sensual. It's not advertisement nor editorial work; it's art.”

The approach is direct, curious and often witty: A whole trout propped up in a vase — literally a fish out of water. A sinewy skinned rabbit, stretched out like a Parisian nude on a chaise longue. A sheep's head wagging its tongue at outsized images of fruit in the background.

Bemis chief curator Hesse McGraw says Vera's work references Dutch and Flemish still-life painting and modern large-format tableau photography.

“But for me, this work has greater authenticity because of its direct relationship to Vera's life.”

She was born Vera Mertz in Berlin in 1936 — a few years before World War II. She remembers being carried up from the basement after a bombing when she was small: “Everything, the whole street, was on fire.”

When she was about 5, she moved with her mother and three siblings to Kiel, a rural area in northern Germany that was considered safer than Berlin. Her father, a prominent theater set designer, stayed behind.

She said growing up during and after the war was “very free.” Her parents had other things to worry about. And schools were forgiving. So much was in chaos; families often moved. When students did show up, no one knew what grade they were supposed to be in.

“So I picked the class that my friend was in,” she says.

Vera wanted to be a professional gardener, but a horticulture school turned her down. She got a diploma in modern dance and gymnastics instead and taught briefly.

In 1958, she married Daniel Spoerri, a Romanian Swiss who was assistant to the director at the theater where her father worked in Darmstadt, Germany. Shortly thereafter, they moved to Paris, where she fell in love with the food and the open-air markets. “I practically never remember anything I ate in Germany,” she says.

They lived in a small hotel room vacated by a prostitute, complete with a wardrobe they once filled with fragrant cheeses. They were part of a group of avant-garde artists, called the Nouveau Réalistes, whose ranks included Swiss painter and sculptor Jean Tinguely and French artist and filmmaker Niki de Saint Phalle.

Spoerri became known for a sort of found-collage art. A popular example involves the remains of a meal, affixed to a tabletop and hung vertically. Vera took up the camera to photograph the artists' works and, eventually, the artists. The couple's room doubled as darkroom at night. She remembers hearing vermin scurry when the lights went out.

“We had not much money,” she recalls. “Nobody worked, really. All the artists just lived on what they did. We lived very poorly — but very happily. It was a good time, very alive.”

By the mid-1960s, she and Spoerri had divorced. She stayed in Paris and continued commissioned photography work for Scandinavian and European art magazines, photographing Warhol, Mailer and the like. She also assisted a photographer for Elle and Vogue magazines, learning as she tagged along on fashion assignments.

The photos in the Bemis exhibit represent a fraction of Vera's food still lifes.

Most of the ingredients featured are things she ultimately prepared and ate.

Vera says friends who hunt or raise chickens or gardens — and who know her as a good cook and an adventurous eater — supplied everything from an unusually robust kohlrabi to the head of a field-dressed deer.

“They just bring me these things.”

Some she stumbles across on her own: a sheep's head at a south Omaha market, a dead red-headed woodpecker on a Parisian street.

Images of dead animals or their parts might strike some as macabre or extreme. But Vera's photographs, McGraw notes, are often incredibly tender and respectful. There's a sweetness in the details: the soft fur on the deer's head, the calm in its expression, the stillness of the captured moment. Even the head's position on a cake stand seems fitting: a place of honor.

The images invite commentary on mortality, decay and the passage of time. Looking at them, it's hard not to think about what happened just before and just after the photos were taken, about the sacrifice of life for food and the making of art on the way to dinner.

Humberto Chávez Mayol, joint general academic director of Mexico's National Center for the Arts, met Vera more than 16 years ago when he was a resident artist at the Bemis Center in Omaha. He is curating a major retrospective of her work that will be displayed at the Centro de la Imagen gallery in Mexico City in June.

He describes her as “a fascinating artist, sometimes of great tenderness, sometimes obsessive and sometimes eccentric.” He says he prefers to call her recent works *still morte* (calm death) rather than still life, because the death in her images is “never melancholic.”

Vera doesn't think about her images in terms of life or death. And she doesn't set out to make them controversial, political or intentionally witty. She says she simply uses the animals and produce as form and color. “You buy rabbit like this in Paris,” she says, noting the exposed organs.

She arranges them to suit her eye, using very old bistro glasses and other dining room accoutrements. The props aren't meant to be funny, she says. "It's just to lift it up."

Vera never wanted to go to America. And she still spends part of each year in Paris. But she has lived in Omaha for most of four decades.

A Swiss sculptor and painter named Eva Aeppli was her connection to Omaha and the Mercer family. Vera and Aeppli met in Paris and became lifelong friends. Aeppli wed Sam Mercer, who had moved from Omaha to Paris after divorcing Mark's mother.

Vera met Mark when she was 31 and he was 24. By 1968, they were living together near Paris.

When she first visited Omaha in the late 1960s, Sam was already working on the Old Market. He'd saved the French Cafe building from the wrecking ball. He opened the cafe there in 1969 with lamp designer Cedric Hartman.

Aeppli suggested, while sitting in a cafe in Paris, that Vera should create a photo wall for Sam's cafe. And she did: a montage of large black-and-white candid photos taken at Parisian marketplace Les Halles just before its demolition.

"I had no right to do it," Vera says now, looking back on the boldness of those photos, which included cow's heads and viscera from the butcher's shops. But they hung for years in the French Cafe, eventually replaced by photos she took in other markets and cafes.

Vera and Mark married in 1970 and moved to Omaha to help operate the French Cafe. "But the money never went in the right account," Vera says, one reason the family sold it. "Also, we were not restaurant people then."

Though she always took photographs, of flowers in particular, Vera spent much of the next two decades focused on the Mercer family enterprises: cleaning pigeon droppings from vacant buildings, finding tenants, keeping the books, encouraging art and establishing restaurants in the Old Market properties they owned.

Using her maiden name as its business name, the Mercers launched V. Mertz in 1977. They sold it in 1980. They opened La Buvette, which they still own, as a neighborhood wine and cheese shop in 1991.

Mercer family property and lease donations in the 1980s also encouraged the emerging Bemis artist residency program, the Bemis Center for Contemporary Art and the Artists Cooperative Gallery.

Vera helped execute Sam's design for the Garden of the Zodiac, a gallery on the north end of the Old Market Passageway building. Opened in 1987, it features sculptures and other works by Aeppli. She planted the wisteria that still grows there. She also helped organize the Moving Gallery, using vacant Old Market properties as gallery space for local and visiting artists between tenants, in 1989. It continues to this day.

But she is modest about her contributions to the art scene or the Old Market: "We work very well, all together, all the Mercers, so it's hard to tell who did what," she says. "But the photos, the photos have always been my own thing."

In the early 1990s, Vera was hired to create photo murals for the Park Hyatt Hotel in Tokyo. And she bought her first large-format camera for a spa project in Hong Kong. She went on to develop photo walls for two Hong Kong restaurants and began showing some of her earlier work in galleries in Mexico City and Veracruz, Mexico.

For a while, she tried photographing prepared food, but she says it usually looked more "like a cookbook" than art.

By 2004, she'd begun working on food-related still lifes with dead animals and whole foods.

"In these ones, you can put your fantasy in the color."

When she and Mark opened the Boiler Room restaurant with chef Paul Kulik in 2009, some of her most striking recent work nestled in its hollows. One, involving a purple hyacinth and a pink pig's head with hollowed-out eyes, is frequently mistaken for a painting.

Vera wrings rich paint-like colors from her subjects with a cocktail of lighting — natural, artificial, candles — as well as long film exposures and careful editing.

Here, too, she is modest. "People think I do it, but it's the film," she says. "The film is made for a certain light, and when the light goes dimmer and dimmer, the color changes."

Most of her works are captured with large-format film cameras, then transferred to computer and refined for printing on a giant printer.

She prints them herself. She's not nostalgic for the old black-and-white days.

"I still have a very beautiful darkroom. But it's so much more interesting, what you can do with digital," she says. "I think one should try every new technique."

McGraw calls the resulting works ambitious, surprising and mature — a singular show for the Bemis from a singular Omaha artist.

Vera makes pronouncements as curious, lively and confident as her work.

She loves cafes: “Restaurants are like theater, so many people working on one thing.”

She does not “see the faces” in Omaha that she finds in cafes in Italy and France.

Though she worked to get her parents back together, she doesn't oppose divorce generally. She did not have children, by choice.

She likes “the one who has no hair” — Andrew Zimmern of “Bizarre Foods” — on the Travel Channel: “He eats everything.”

She is seldom idle: “What does it matter if it's cleaning pigeon stuff, as long as it's what you love?”

She likes to change things up. She recently swapped one of the food photos at the Boiler Room for a brilliantly colored image of flowers: “I tried to make spring.”

And she shows little sign of slowing down. Even as she recovers from a Jan. 31 hip surgery, she is working with the La Buvette and Boiler Room chefs to stage a March 16 dinner in the Bemis gallery — a live, edible three-dimensional still life of a dinner to be served among the photographed ones. She's finalizing details of the Mexico show in June. And she's editing some photographs for a book she and Mark and Kulik are writing about the Boiler Room.

“I am not bored for a minute.”

With her photography, she continues to experiment. She has recently begun adding another ingredient to the mix.

“I try now to go off the route a little bit. I want to put the person back — because in reality I am a people photographer. So I try to bring the person back in the still life, along with the food.”

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