

Michele Oka Doner Back Then (1990)

By Elisa Turner



Wave and Shell Obelisks, 1992. Accreted coral and copper mesh. 18 in. dia. x 13.5 ft. each. Ocean Park Beach, Santa Monica, California. Commissioned by the Santa Monica Arts Commission.

Editor's Note: This article by Elisa Turner was originally published in the Miami Herald in September, 1990. It highlights both the consistency of Oka Doner's vision, and her endless need to experiment with new materials.

As a child in Miami Beach, where her father, Kenneth Oka, was mayor in the late 1950s and early '60s, Michele Oka spent hours playing in the wet sand, sifting for the fragments of shell and coral that still fascinate her.

"I'd always look for forms on the beach," she remembers. "I'd pick up coral rock that looked like trees, or looked like a buffalo with a hump, or a face."

When she left South Florida to attend the University of Michigan, Oka Doner discovered she was not far from another sort of ocean. Ann Arbor, where she also met her husband, Fred, and stayed to raise a family, had been covered with water 350 million years ago.

"The geological remains were ... ancient shells . . . even ancient starfish," she says. So during 18 years in Michigan, Oka Doner produced ceramic objects that pay homage to marine forms, fossils and primitive artifacts.

In the early 1980s she moved with her family to Manhattan and began working on larger-scale sculpture, often in bronze. The ocean still haunts her. A slim, elegant woman, Oka Doner is given to wearing loose, flowing clothes that recall the whirling patterns she so admires in nature. Her 3,600-square-foot loft in Soho, where she lives with her husband and two sons, is filled with pre-Columbian artifacts, fossils, shells, bird skulls and what she describes as the "flotsam and jetsam of animal and mineral life."

It's not hard to see how this collection has nourished her work – the small ceramic forms with which she began her career; the furniture, such as the cast bronze table owned by Chicago's Art Institute; and the public commissions, especially Celestial Plaza, at the Hayden Planetarium in New York. For this piece, Oka Doner embedded 230 cast bronze forms, evoking cosmic patterns like spiraling galaxies and Saturn's rings, in the concrete plaza outside the planetarium.

After spending years making art that echoes organic forms, Oka Doner started working directly with nature to make art – creating sculpture from spiraling columns of coral.

In Key Largo, Oka Doner "grew" coral sculpture in a private saltwater lagoon. Two 13 1/2-foot obelisks and a life-size figure shape are being made through a new technology called mineral accretion, which mimics the growth of a coral reef.

The obelisks were a public commission, *Wave and Shell Obelisks*, for the beachfront Ocean Park in Santa Monica, Calif. The pieces remained under water for about three years.

In her proposal for the piece, Oka Doner wrote that the two obelisks derived from her "reverence" for their site on the beach:

"One appears 'wrapped' by a continuous wave-like spiral, while the other seems 'twisted' like the interior caverns of a univalve shell. They visually speak of the ocean before them, its life and texture, ebb and flow."

She had help on the project from Ian Koblick, a marine biologist and president of the Marine Resources Development Foundation. Koblick, who once spent three months in an underwater research station partially funded by NASA, has devoted his life to studying the ocean, but this was the first time he had put his scientific knowledge to the service of art.

So how does the coral grow? "Calcium carbonate is the bony substance with which sea animals create reefs," he explained. "This substance is dissolved in seawater throughout the world. An electric current can take the calcium carbonate out of solution and deposit it on a metal screen." The process was originally developed to create a concrete-strength structure for underwater building.

Oka Doner's figures, which are made of wire mesh and wrapped with copper tubing, received between 1.5 and 20 amps of electric current, which flowed to them, like nutrients in an intravenous tube, through wires connected to an onshore battery charger. When the obelisks were immersed in the lagoon back in March 1988, they each weighed 275 pounds. When they were completely covered with the accreted coral, Koblick and Oka Doner projected the weight of each obelisk should be around 600 pounds.

To look at Oka Doner's sculpture from the dock, you must peer into the lagoon's dark green depths, attempting to make sense of knobby, yellowish shapes. Mostly what you'll see are trails of bubbles floating about, as if the statues were swimming. The bubbles are formed by hydrogen, which is given off during the chemical reaction that causes the metal forms to calcify underwater.

To get a really good look at this work, you need to don snorkel mask and fins. Under water, the pieces emerge as massive, primordial forms, catching the rays of sunlight piercing the water. One was a headless figure with knobby limbs, a life-size but upside down echo of Oka Doner's ceramic forms. The figure and the obelisks, recalling Oka Doner's much smaller ceramic staffs, suggest relics of an underwater archaeological dig. They loom with a ghostly presence, as brilliant tropical fish playfully dart among them. Their surface is pocked and whorled, like brain coral. Koblick says the whorling is created by tube worms that latch onto the structures.

Oka Doner and Koblick are using the same process to grow much smaller pieces in a lagoon in Venice, Italy. Supported by a grant from the Kress Foundation, which funds the preservation of artistic monuments, they hope these test pieces will show how the new technology could create indestructible barriers to shore up the city's rotting pilings.

Lisa Ackerman, the foundation's chief administrative officer, finds Oka Doner and Koblick's work in Venice "very humanistic" because it can "bridge the gap between utility and art."

Oka Doner described her role in the efforts to preserve Venice as that of an "illustrator," using her sculpture to illustrate how mineral accretion works. But she also believes these efforts parallel the role of art in prehistoric times.

"Originally, the artist was an extension of the community, of the tribe. The people who did the cave paintings of Lascaux were dealing with the collective desires and fears of their band of people. And the piece I'm doing in Venice is really about dealing with a community problem, which is the deterioration of a city that's been called the most spectacular and ideal city ever built."

It's typical that Oka Doner should view her work in these terms.

"A lot of art today, including pop, comes out of the commercial art world, and that's not my pop," she says. "My sources are the same that inspired early man, like stars in the sky and shells on the beach and the great forces of nature."

Looking to the ocean for yet another source, Oka Doner hopes she and Koblick can one day apply the secrets of growing mother-of-pearl to art. She would like to cover coral-rock sculptures with a pearly surface, making luminous columns that can catch and reflect light. That technology has eluded her so far, so she has turned once again to ceramics for another public commission.

Her *Radiant Site*, for New York's Metropolitan Transportation Authority, opened in the sooty depths of the Herald Square subway station.

The piece, spanning 165 feet, is a wall of 11,000 tiles, glazed with a reflective gold. Though *Radiant Site* does not possess any of Oka Doner's organic imagery, it surely recalls a natural source – light itself.