

# Mara Sfara



## About the artist:

PROFILE BY PULITZER PRIZE WINNER, ARTIST AND WRITER STEVEN NAIFEH

The accomplished artist, Mara Sfara, creates worlds of whimsy that extend from the bottom of the ocean floor to the top of Mount Olympus.

She is part of a long tradition in which artists have used the tools of traditional artistic realism to create realities that are entirely her own. From Hieronymus Bosch to Salvador Dali, artists have dreamed their own worlds, from the nightmarish to the enchanted. Sfara draws upon a wide array of technical skills to present a world that is innocent and full of wonder, and playful, too, that reminds one more of Red Grooms than of Rene Magritte.

The technical skills come from years of training at some of the best art departments in the country, from the University of Rochester to the University of Pennsylvania, from Rutgers University to NYU, from Columbia University to the Art Students League. From all of these sources, she developed painterly skills that range from the feathery brushwork of the Impressionists to the hard-edge precision of Photorealism, while also learning to work in three dimensions and in a multitude of media, from wood to acrylic.

Sfara's imagination comes from another source entirely, from growing up in the family of a holocaust survivor. Her father Myron Mehlman was six years old when the Nazis took over the Ukraine, where his father was a neurosurgeon. When the Nazis began rounding up Jewish boys, Sfara's father jumped out of a window and into the neighboring woods, where he managed to hide out for years, under horrifying conditions, until the war's end.

"Some people who survived the holocaust," Sfara says, "were broken by it. Others, like my father, emerged with gratitude for life and a sense of wonderment. Some people were shut down by their horrendous experience; their senses were gone; they went into body failure. Others came out of the experience with an increased sensitivity to sights and sounds and to the goodness of life.

"My father wanted to make sure the world we grew up in was happier than the one he grew up in. And he did. It says something that the most intense memory I have from my childhood is of riding horses with my father one day in Nebraska, where we lived, and getting off and lying in a field, with the sun beating down on me. It was pure joy."

For Sfara, that experience was a talisman of things to come – of a life in which she sees all of life through a filter of gratitude and wonderment.

A common theme through Sfara's work is a love affair with the sea, a romance that began when she took her daughter Caroline to the beach when she was a small child. For Sfara's daughter, and then for Sfara herself, and then for her audience, she began depicting fish, fish of all kinds, fish in aquariums, fish in the sea. But they were never just fish, never a lesser species, they were humanized portraits of sensitive beings.

Among the most touching are a series of seahorses cast in acrylic that have a streamlined Art Deco elegance but a sense of whimsy that is altogether Sfara's own. As in all of her best work, the technical skill, which is extraordinary, is entirely at the service of her idealized vision.

Among the most beautiful of Sfara's paintings are a series of golden fish, swimming in a sea of heavenly blue, staring out at the viewer as if caught by surprise. These creatures are depicted in a manner that is utterly realistic, yet purified of the messiness of our reality, in order to let us enter Sfara's playful reality of light and happiness.

Perhaps even more interesting is a series of three-dimensional works that Sfara has created, culminating in a major kinetic sculpture called The Gardens of Olympus, in which sculpted and mechanized figures of the ancient Greek gods cavort in a frolicsome model of Mount Olympus. But in Sfara's magical imagination, the gods are reimagined not as superhuman beings looking down on our world and our humanity, but brought into our world and humanized into playful versions of us. Her Mount Olympus is as much about puppets as paragons, as much fairy tale as it is myth, as much modern Muppet Show as it is the distant Mount Olympus.

Of course, the Greeks also gave their gods given human characteristics in order to bridge the divide between the human and the divine, but rarely so lightheartedly, as in Sfara's wonderfully imagined panorama. Alexandra, says Sfara, "the protector of mankind, is innocent, and a bit shell-shocked." Hemera, the goddess of Daytime, is caught in the middle of a dance. Nyx, the Goddess of Night, emerges from the darkness of myth into the full light of whimsy and charm. And of course, given Sfara's devotion to the ocean and the sea, all of the figures hover across an aquatic arena of mermaids and seahorses, a world of her own devising, a world she generously invites us to inhabit along with her.



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