

# A Concrete Career

Danielle Swift on the art of life as a sculptor

+ WORDS BY SHERI RADFORD  
+ PHOTOS BY ALFONSO ARNOLD

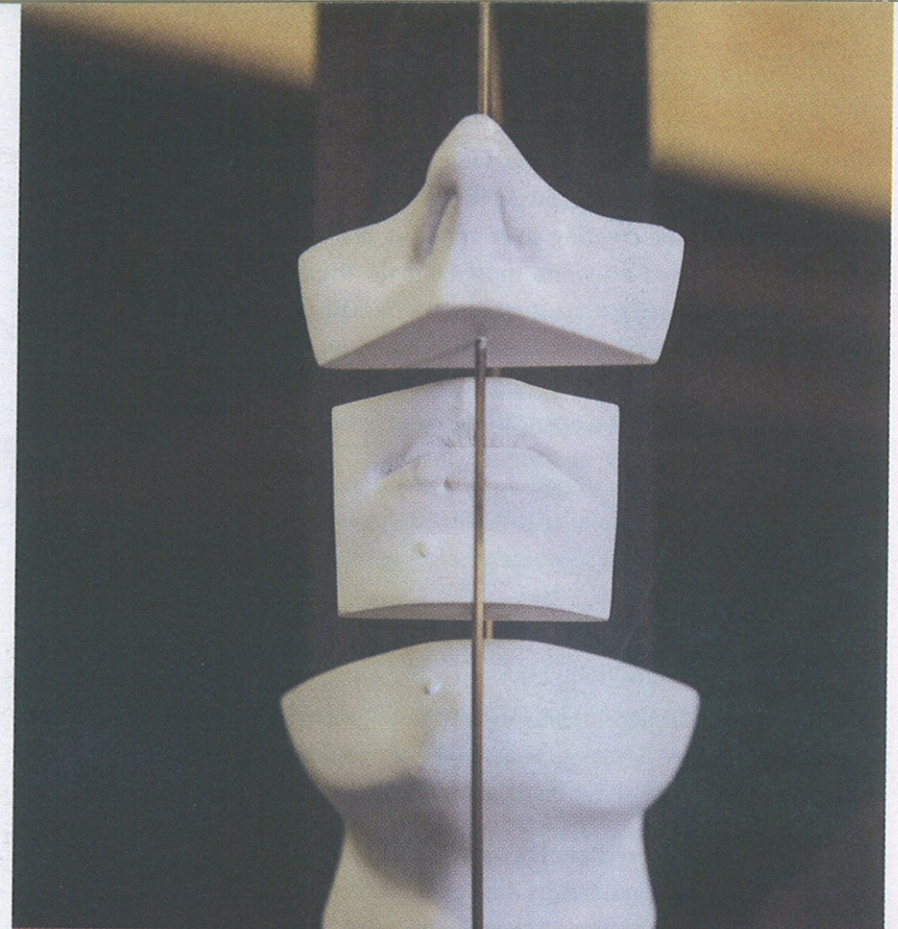
Danielle Swift didn't know what she wanted to be. Growing up in Maple Ridge, she'd always enjoyed creating art, but she chose to study English literature at university.

"I think there was a fear of actually pursuing something that I was so passionate about," she says now.

It wasn't until she was in her 20s that she found the courage to follow her dreams. She enrolled in art school and assumed she would become a painter. But after getting the chance "to dabble in a little bit of everything," she "absolutely fell in love with sculpting." Swift now works full-time as sculptor, and her pieces have been shown in places such as The ACT Art Gallery in Maple Ridge and the Art Vancouver annual art fair.

At first, Swift used concrete in her sculptures primarily because it was cheap. But as she learned about it and used it more, she grew to love how it could be solid and strong but at the same time show cracks.

She explains, "You've got the weight and the industrialness of it, but it's got this really beautiful fragility to it as well."



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After people see her huge concrete sculptures of the female form, they are often surprised to meet Swift. They assume that anyone creating such imposing pieces in the male-dominated art world must be male. In particular, one of her series that shows bound female figures always provokes different reactions based on the viewer's assumptions about gender. Swift enjoys playing with notions of how women "feel bound to certain stereotypes or certain expectations."

Asked why she was initially attracted to sculpture over painting, Swift ponders for a moment before praising her chosen medium.

"It's so tactile," she says. "There's so many possibilities."

She feels the two-dimensional aspect of painting is limiting, while sculpture is freeing. That feeling of freedom is what Swift likes best about being an artist.

"The possibilities are endless. I can make anything," she says, admitting that in the early days of her career, having so many options seemed overwhelming at times.

Now, however, after 13 years as an artist, she finds the freedom "an exciting idea more than anything."

Less exciting are some of the day-to-day realities of being an artist: locating an affordable studio to rent, finding reputable galleries to exhibit the art, fielding the inevitable questions from friends and family about plans to get a "real" job.

Swift has definitely lucked out with her studio at 1000 Parker in East Vancouver. For one thing, the rent is reasonable. More importantly, the building houses a thriving community of artists.

"It's a huge hub. There's over 200 studios in the building, and everybody does something different. You've got jewellery-makers. You've got shoemakers, hat-makers, people doing furniture. You've got painters. You've got sculptors, printmakers, photographers." Being surrounded by so many like-minded creatives is inspiring. "We all help each other out," she says.

Swift's strong sense of community makes her want to give back in different ways. Over the years, she's taught



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several art classes for children in Maple Ridge. Although it was sometimes apparent that not all of the students wanted to be there, the one or two budding artists in each class made it worthwhile. Swift enjoyed nurturing that spark.

Recently, she built a chair for a charity auction in Maple Ridge. The chair had deer antlers coming out of the top, deer hooves on the bottoms of the legs and a fake-fur pillow on the seat. It was auctioned off at The Love of Youth fundraiser for the Youth Wellness Centre, which offers services for substance abuse, mental health and more. Swift calls it "one of those programs that is so important to have in every community."

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The deer chair inspired Swift to start working on more chairs inspired by different animals. She's also doing "a series of figures on big fir planks."

In addition to sculpting, she dabbles with printmaking and has other things she wants to try, such as mixing videos in with her sculptures. She's also working on some smaller pieces, such as "little plants with little spines in test tubes"— and, unlike her huge sculptures, they don't require a U-Haul to move them around.

Asked if she has hobbies outside of her work in the studio, Swift at first says "no," admitting to spending long hours on each piece.

"I sometimes end up getting hyper-focused on a really small thing or area, and I can spend two days just working on some small [detail] that nobody's going to notice except me."

But after thinking about it for a moment, she says she recently started trail running in places like Golden Ears Provincial Park.

"I didn't expect to love it, but I became kind of addicted to it."

And she can pinpoint exactly what she loves about running through a forest: the feeling of freedom—the same feeling she gets in her studio as she dreams of her next creation. 💛



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