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**Sebastian
Martorana**

Sebastianworks.com

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Artist: Sebastian Martorana



When Sebastian replied to my interview request, he mentioned he had watched my TED talk and might have a story that relates. I was intrigued and we set up the time to meet while I was in Baltimore.

He gave me a tour at his studio which is nested in the back of a 150 year old natural stone company where we stood around chatting. At one point he mentioned that people say it must take steady hands to do his work. He laughed and said he also had a little tremor but the rock steadies his

hands. "Once you put the chisel on the rock it's not going anywhere." I loved the idea of a rock holding onto the carver and wondered if this was what he was referring to in his email.

As we began to finish our conversation I took out my phone and asked if I could take a few pictures. He said sure, so I stopped my recording and snapped some photos. I began to head for the door and say my farewells when Sebastian said "I told you in my email I have a story to share with you." I paused, as I felt the vulnerability wrapped in his words. Then he began to tell me about his childhood.

When Sebastian was in elementary school he was constantly getting in trouble for not sitting still. His performance in school was terrible. He struggled to keep up with any written assignment and was in a nearly constant state of motion, including bursts of movement and noise that would catch people off guard.

His parents, determined to figure out the root of the problem, turned to professionals for help. Ultimately, Sebastian's struggles with writing were diagnosed as dysgraphia, a term describing a group of problems with the process of transcription, effecting writing and spelling. Sebastian said it used to actually make his brain and hand hurt to form letters.

So based on this diagnosis, he was permitted to print in all-caps, something he could do much faster comfortably than writing in cursive, which was giving him a lot of trouble at the time. Curiously, he could draw—and draw well.

At that same time, he was also diagnosed with Tourette Syndrome, a condition that presents as sudden, involuntary physical movements as well than the more well-known bursts of language or sound. It was discovered that one of the few things that could keep him still, quiet and focused was his favorite activity: drawing.

Based on the doctors' recommendations Sebastian was allowed to draw during class, at times when he would have otherwise been expected to quietly sit still and just listen. His academic performance immediately improved. Sebastian expressed his luck at having a mother who was dogged in fighting for him. She continued to ask his teachers to let him draw in class. His academic improvement continued.

Sebastian drew constantly. It was his first tool in developing some kind of control over his own body's actions. He became the kid that was always making people giggle and marvel at his drawings.

His earlier words, 'the rock steadies me,' now held new meaning. As Sebastian talked, he shared that he never wanted to be known as that Tourette's-Artist for a number of reasons and just wanted his work to stand on its own. He didn't want his struggles to define him, but he also reluctantly expressed that without those struggles he might not be the artist that he is now.

As we stood in the studio, he leaned against a carving commission that was in progress from the United States Federal Reserve. He told me he really wanted teachers to hear his story to help them

imagine the potential futures of their students. He didn't want to be recorded and he didn't want to write the story himself. In fact, he said he hadn't willingly talked to anyone about this experience in over 20 years. Basically, up until now very few have known this part of his story. But now you do. He wanted educators to know because it was his teachers' willingness to let him draw, to adapt to him rather than push back, that had allowed him time and space to flourish.

You'll often see veins of color in the marble that Sebastian uses. This coloring is not usually preferred by sculptors using white marble. It's seen as imperfect. But Sebastian prefers this stone and says the variation adds to the stone's beauty rather than diminishing it. The stones' story is our story too.



Topic: Selfish?

Phil - A few minutes ago you used the word selfish. Do you actually feel selfish when creating?

Sebastian - Yah, yah, I do.

Phil - Was that always there or did it creep in as you got older?

Sebastian - I think it crept in as I had more responsibility. It used to be that I had gaps in between commission work. And I could fill that time with personal projects. Now, I don't have those gaps anymore, so I have to create them. And it's hard to put off certain clients. Certain governments don't want to wait for anybody, certain churches don't want to wait for anybody, certain colleges don't want to wait.

When I work on personal sculpture I'm essentially telling my family that I'm taking an unpaid vacation. 'Sorry guys. Daddy's going to take time to not make you any money and just focus on what he wants to focus on'. That's like the most selfish thing I could possibly do.



Topic: Making it

Phil - When you were younger how would you have defined success? Like, if I get my work in this place or am doing this, then I've made it.

Sebastian - Hmm... I still don't know. I don't know if there's a 'making it' thing. I guess down the road if I had more freedom to make the work that I want to make, there's that. And I think I might be close to that place. I have a little bit of freedom to turn down stuff or pursue it if I know it's not for me. But I still have to focus on which jobs will be feasible practically speaking or financially speaking. And sometimes that overpowers the 'is it going to be creatively fulfilling' because I just can't be that selfish all the time. But again, I'm pretty lucky that there are people who say 'we like this piece that you did' and if it's sold they say 'well can you make something else like it?' and of course the answer is YES because I want to work in series, I just never have the time. So now, to get the opportunity to make a follow up and get paid for it. That's something.

Topic: Unknown impressions

Phil - How much did you draw when you were younger? Were you kinda into art or really into art?

Sebastian - Yaknow how most classes have that kid that can draw? I was that kid.

Phil - I was jealous of that kid!
Hahaha

Sebastian - It's funny you say that because I got a message on Instagram from someone who I knew as a child in Elementary School. And this guy said he is now a craftsman. He had been in graphic design, as his day job, but he had this side gig as a wood turner. But it blew up for him and he was in the process of pivoting to that as his full time gig. He wrote me and said 'As a young kid I wanted to draw like you. And I want to let you know that my interest in art sprung out of watching you draw stuff in class as a little kid.' And I was like, you gotta be kidding me! It's those little things, the teachers we have going through school, the experiences we have like being allowed to draw, it has a butterfly effect on our lives and other people's lives.

Phil - It's amazing that he could pinpoint where his interest started. I feel like many of us don't know the origin of our fascinations with art.

Sebastian - Yah, it's wild. And I've kept up with him on Instagram and he has a whole studio now. It's so cool.





If you can't be good,
be rare.

- Sebastian Martorana





Topic: Picking an idea

Phil - So how do you pick what you are going to create? You said you have enough stone for a lifetime, do you have enough ideas for a lifetime?

Sebastian - I do have a running list of ideas in my head but sometimes something will hit me and jump the list. In this case [he motioned to the piece shown on the next page] it seemed like the thing for me to do because no one is going to commission a sculpture that is antithetical to the subject of the sculpture. But it mattered to me in the sense that memory matters. How we remember is almost more important than how it's experienced. Because we are essentially trading memories. So that is why I picked and focused on this in lieu of some other things. It's important.



Topic: Discarded Material

Phil - I read that you use a lot of discarded material in your work. Is this out of necessity or is it a choice?

Sebastian - Now it's part of the narrative but at first it was definitely a necessity. Like these pieces [shown here]. It was significant to the concept of the piece that the pieces themselves had been thrown away. Like the tombstone, it was already broken and discarded by the time I found it.

The idea behind the artwork is the idea of striking or beating something that was itself already discarded or dismantled. Being cast off is significant to the work. But for years the idea of upcycling wasn't present, it was really a matter of necessity. This is the stone I could afford because I could pull it off of the side of the street or out of a construction site. And at first I felt self-conscious because I can't afford the fancy statuario stuff that the other carvers are using. But I pretty quickly realized that it wasn't the kind of stone I wanted to work with. Now, it's important that the stone has its own personal history, it has a story.



