

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Area sculptor allows nature to guide her chisel

By Fran Vaughan

LEDGER DISPATCH CORRESPONDENT

ANTIOCH — Amana Johnson's journeys as an artist have taken her from San Francisco to Africa and back.

Beginning Saturday, this accomplished sculptor will display 17 sculptures, along with half a dozen prints, at Antioch's Lynn House Gallery. The exhibit is a wonderful chance for East County residents to view some magnificent works of art.

The works, like their creator, have undergone a dramatic transformation to become the moving inspirations they are today.

Johnson's prints are quite impressive. A sculptor creates a print by etching a drawing's mirror image into stone. Ink is then applied to the stone and it's pressed onto fabric and appears almost like a painting. Johnson's prints feature fine detail and excellent use of color.

Johnson's most noticeable and attractive works are her stone sculptures. The works are carved from pieces of a total of 10 tons of alabaster and serpentine she had shipped to America from Zimbabwe in 1993. She has sculpted and polished some pieces to such a high sheen that they have an almost bronze-like appearance; others are virtually untouched. This results in a wonderful blend of beauty and strength.

The works have a traditional African sculptural style and feature soft hues of brown and black. Contrary to European styles, in which little of the stone's original shape is left intact, Johnson's style blends the stone's natural rough appearance with softer sculpting.

One particularly stunning bust features a smooth, elegant, chocolate-brown face accented with rough, flowing natural rock that serves as hair. The symmetry and line of the piece depicts a proud and strong woman who has graceful inner strength.

Each of Johnson's pieces has a uniqueness of theme and purpose. Finely detailed busts stand next to stones that have entire figures set into them. Life-like heads give way to a tall abstract bronze. She clearly has sought out the individuality in each stone she has touched.

Johnson says she lets the stones speak to her and guide her through the process.

"The stones have been around for centuries," she says. "I want to combine that experience with my own."

She also lets her feelings guide her in deciding which stones she'll work on and what the stone ultimately will become.

"I surround myself with my stones in my studio and wait for one of them to speak to me," she says.

Only after she feels how the stone is communicating with her does Johnson start chipping away. When she starts working, she relies on her own emotion to guide her through the often long and laborious process of creating a masterpiece.

Many artists use sketches or clay models to flesh out their ideas be-

IF YOU GO

WHAT: "Greater Than Stone" exhibit

WHO: Sculptor Amana Johnson

WHEN: The exhibit will be on display Saturday through March 2; the gallery is open from noon to 3 p.m. Tuesdays through Thursdays and from 1 to 4 p.m. on Saturdays

WHERE: Lynn House Gallery, 809 First St., Antioch

COST: Free

FOR MORE INFO: Call the gallery at 779-7018

fore they start altering the stone. Johnson uses no models and works free-form. Her technique doesn't lead to abstract works as one might expect; most of her pieces have great detail and proportion. This free-form type of technique is appropriate for an artist like Johnson, who has spent the past eight years letting herself be guided by her dreams.

As an up-and-coming sculptor, Johnson was working in San Francisco's financial district in the early 1990s. She began having nightmares about a terrible earthquake tearing down the tall buildings of the city and leaving only stone rubble in their place. She soon realized that these nightmares were actually dreams telling her to escape the confines of her career and pursue her art full-time.

Johnson, who has almost no formal training in sculpture, traveled to Zimbabwe in 1993. The country was going through an artistic renaissance at the time and Johnson wanted to be part of it. She spent six months there studying and working in an environment she found to be both spiritual and educational. She returned with the beautiful stones she later turned into art and a spirituality that would guide her work.

Johnson, who recently completed a 4,600-pound sculpture for the Oakland Zoo, spends anywhere from four to six days a week in her studio working on various pieces. She also teaches aspiring artists in West County.