

Jose and Judy Chora

Artists Bio

If you didn't know better, you might think Jose and Judy Chora were three artists. They are both accomplished in their own right. Jose in metal sculpture, Judy in mosaic and ceramics. Some of their most dramatic work fills the third category – created in collaboration.

Work and life partners for over 15 years, they live in Egg Harbor Township. Jose's studio is in Absecon. Judy's is atop their Chora-Leone Gallery in Somers Point. (Judy went by Leone until recently.)

They make quite the yin-yang couple. Born in Lisbon, Portugal, Jose is a true romantic – tall, dark and striking with flashing eyes and smile. Judy anchors his frenetic personality with fair visage, blond locks – and a quiet, methodical and deliberate style. Judy's work is delicate and complex. Working in glass, ceramics and found objects, she often makes her own tesserae, the individual elements that build her bright and colorful mosaics. Carefully crafted ceramic medallions, molded and glazed, become fish scales, flower petals or blades of grass. She prefers that approach over pique assiette, the style of building mosaics with randomly broken bits of glass, ceramic and other material.

Lately, Judy has poured herself into exquisite creations of many small, dimensional ceramic pieces hand-formed by the hundred and mounted in mosaic style. She has become very interested in patterns, formed by random construction in nature – for example, the way coral arrange themselves on the seabed. The result, an abstract expression that somehow seems familiar and figurative. They are mostly all one color. But with so much dimension, they are vibrant with shadow, light and color – even when the piece is plain white. It's a brilliant effect.

"I think I have OCD" she quips. "I can't just sit and watch TV or a movie without doing something. Making jewelry, doing ceramics. He'll tell you, I drive him crazy.

It's an overstatement, Jose may playfully tease his wife about her method, but he is completely stoked over the end result. "The first one she did blew me away. You could see the color and movement and you walk around the piece and it changes from every angle." Jose says.

Spoken like a sculptor.

Her foray into more dimensional work happened organically over the years. "I wanted more. What could I do with even more texture?" she ponders. Bringing Jose in to create elements in metal was part of that. But still she wanted more. So, she made the leap into the newer pieces – best described as mosaics that are anything, but flat. Each individual piece, growing out of its mooring. "I wanted to stick to the same medium, but do it totally different, transforming it."

Jose's role in the newer works is in exquisite, simply designed framing in brushed stainless. They set them off elegantly without competing for attention. It's an example of their maturity as artists – knowing when restraint is the best plan.

For the most part, Jose and his work are anything but restrained. His process is physical, grimy and more than a little dangerous. A muscular dance of fire, muscle and sweat – he puts his heart and soul into it. In his Absecon studio, he and assistant Erik Nash use no computers or CNC machines. They trace, cut shape, hammer and weld by hand. It's a tradition born of Jose's pipefitting experience, working with his father, Jose "Zuca" Chora.

He wanted to be an artist practically from day one, but Zuca had another plan. "Dad couldn't see me making money with art," he recalls. Out of respect for the man he loved, he played the role of obedient son and learned his father's trade. And he deftly cultivated skills that would serve his art, years later.

It was a great job for a young man. He learned all about metal, going out of his way to get special certifications in various materials and techniques. The money was good. And with pipefitters in demand everywhere, it was an opportunity to see a lot of real estate. He worked in Canada, California, New York, New England and many places in between.

But he was always an artist at heart, tenaciously pursuing creative side work. And one day he bade farewell to his pipefitter comrades. He hasn't looked back. And he has embraced the all-encompassing sensibility that keeps him sharp. His credo, if it's creative, do it.

Together, they have conceived design plans, sculpture and mosaics for restaurants, offices and homes around the country. And Jose puts his technical and construction knowledge to work in functional art – one-off railings, stairs and other structural elements that make a statement for builders, homeowners, designers and architects.

His sculpture runs the emotional gamut. At AtlantiCare's Cancer Center in Egg Harbor Township, large seeds and flowers represent life and hope to buoy the spirits of those battling cancer. He had recently lost his Dad during that project and considers them a memorial to his friend and mentor. On Ocean City's bike path, a speeding cyclist seems poised to zip from his mount – spirited motion in cold, hard steel.

At Ocean City's public safety building, a jangle of stainless rods jut skyward, forming a protective cage around a relic of tragedy, a section of I-beam salvaged from the 9/11 World Trade Center attack. "To me, it represents the chaos of the day. But the way the metal catches the light, it's hopeful, like rising spirits."

And at the Arts Center, a representation of pure emotion in a sculpture called "Joy." Eyes flashing, Jose exuberantly carves the air with his hands to mimic the feel of the piece. "It means you're happy. Like you were trapped in a box, then you're out."

Jose says every piece feels like a risk. “Your heart flutters, every time,” he says. “Even though you have a certain style and signature, it changes. You adapt to events and new environments. Every piece has your soul and your essence. You have to have that. But you can’t say “this is what I’m going to do from now on.” That would be stupid. You don’t know how you’re going to feel tomorrow. “If you’re confident, you’re being repetitious. You have to step outside challenge yourself, question yourself,” he says.

That’s when Judy chimes in: “The art business is never boring.”

In collaboration, their work takes on another dimension. Judy’s mosaics provide color and splash, with Jose’s metal work forming texture, heft and sometimes whimsy. For a restaurant for example, they crafted a large mosaic fish made chiefly of salvaged flatware. An entrée formed from implements used to consume as it were.

“She always pushes me,” says Jose. “Her creativity is out there It’s fun. She’ll get a quirky idea and we’ll build from there.”

Judy describes her husband as a “you can make it better” kind of guy. “I push him in design. He pushes me toward perfection,” she says.

Amazingly, the whole experiment started with a chance meeting. Judy followed her ex-husband to the Jersey shore from Buffalo, NY. Jose arrived by a more circuitous route. Lisbon to Montreal and Toronto – then traipsing around the U.S. through the 80s. On his way to a project in Florida, he stopped in South Jersey to work on the Salem nuclear plant.

One Monday, they both ended up at the Crab Trap in Somers point to nosh and watch the game. And a spark was kindled. Considering the depth and effervescent beauty of their work, it’s easy to conclude that chance probably had nothing to do with it.

Jose and Judy Chora are endorsed by ArtC – promoting arts in Southern New Jersey.