

# Know Your Art: Sculptor Claire McArdle

By: [Alison Gwinn](#)



Claire McArdle in her studio. Photo by Paul Miller

Sculptures—some barely roughed out, some as polished as cue balls—stand guard outside the cavernous

artist's barn on [Claire McArdle's](#) 10-acre farm in Longmont. The figures gaze out over a wild meadow where two horses are grazing, Mount Meeker and Longs Peak looming in the distance and McArdle's dog, Maggie, exploring close by. "This is my fantasy. I watched a lot of 'Bonanza' growing up," says the sculptor, who has been in Colorado since 2003 and likes to get out on her mare daily for a ride.

Inside, the two-story loft space is stuffed with McArdle's figure work: tiny clay faces laid out in rows on benches, bronzed bison scapula that look vaguely nautical, travertine or marble angels, "Equipeans" (half man/half horse) and massive marble figures that need a gantry crane to move from one place to another. (Fortunately, McArdle's husband, a geologist and part-time rancher, is good at the lifting part, too.)

"I'm inspired by ancient work and mythology," McArdle says, and indeed there's something classical about her work, like stepping back in time; over the years, she has done many public commissions, from a stone gateway at a Jesuit college in Mobile, Alabama, to sculptures for Japanese parks, to marble pieces that flank a window wall to a rehab home for women in Baltimore. Here, she talks about her work.

**How early did you realize you wanted to be an artist?** Even as a child, I knew. I grew up in D.C. and Maryland. My dad worked for The Washington Post, in the marketing and advertising department, and on weekends I would often go into his office with him and play on the drafting tables of the graphic artists. They had all these pencils and other art supplies, and I could use whatever I wanted; several of them were painters who were trying to support their families by working at the paper. One of them was my first mentor; he later became an animation artist, and I would paint cels for him. I had really good art teachers in high school, and I could go into the art room whenever I wanted. That was my place, the way my studio here is now.

**You work a lot in Carrara marble. How did you discover it?** After getting a degree in art education at Virginia Commonwealth, I was teaching art in Seattle, and I spent the summer of 1989 in Rutland, Vermont, where I met a female sculptor of Italian descent, Bernadette Amore, who was taking a group over to Carrara. I said, 'Can I come, too?' I went in August, stayed through September, came back to the U.S., quit everything and moved to Italy. They've been quarrying the marble in Carrara since before the Romans. I actually climbed above the quarries to look down in, and everything about the experience—the smells, the sounds, the fact that they were creating work from a material in the mountains—totally drew me in. All the marble you see in my studio is from there.

**How does a piece you are chiseling from stone come to life?** Imagine you have a large block. Then you remove everything that's not the shape that you want, and in the process cut here, or here, or here, and then big pieces come off. Those breaks are what I'm after, to have it look like it's come from the earth. You end up with a juxtaposition between the rough and the smooth. It's so amazing the connection I feel with my material, whether it's stone or clay. I like making something from ... not nothing, but from bulk material. I like knowing that clay geologically has been compressed with other minerals and then over millions of years has become travertine or marble.

**It's interesting how the veining often ends up fitting into the figure you are doing, like clothes draped across a torso. Is that purposeful?** I can look for years for a block of marble that has just the right kind of veining, but often it's a nice surprise and I won't know until I am grinding it and polishing it at the end that there are, say, browns and golds in there, along with the grays and whites. And then I create texture with my tools.

**How do clients find your work?** I display in galleries around the country—one in Naples, Florida; one in Charleston, South Carolina; one in D.C. and another in Maryland. I don't show anywhere in Denver, but I have a show coming up at the Ellsworth Gallery in Santa Fe starting June 16. In the ancient ways of indigenous peoples, art was made for a purpose, some sort of ritual. I feel like it completes my creative cycle to be able to present my work and have another human resonate with it. I'm not just doing this for me.