Muriel Castanis, 80, Sculptor of Fluidly Draped Forms, Dies

By Roja Heydarpour

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Muriel Castanis, a sculptor whose fluidly draped figures are displayed in public places and galleries around the United States, died on Wednesday in Manhattan. She was 80 and lived in Greenwich Village.

The cause was lung failure, her husband, George Castanis, said.

A self-taught artist, Ms. Castanis was known in particular for her method of laying an epoxy-soaked cloth over a mannequin built of plastic foam. She would then remove the foam, leaving empty, faceless figures that were reminiscent of Greek sculpture.

In a 1990 review of her work in a joint show by nine sculptors, Vivien Raynor of The New York Times wrote, "Just as the Invisible Man was defined by his bandages, Muriel Castanis's figures are the sum of their classical draperies."

In 1984 Ms. Castanis made three caryatids to adorn the top of 580 California Street in San Francisco, a skyscraper and architectural landmark of the city designed by Philip Johnson and John Burgee.

Muriel Castanis's subway-station sculpture "Flatbush Floogies."Credit...Metropolitan Transportation Authority

The youngest of six children, Ms. Castanis, born Muriel Brunner, grew up in Greenwich Village and discovered her love for art at Greenwich House, the settlement house where she would go to escape her family's hectic, crowded cold-water apartment. She attended New York's High School of Music and Art but did not start working as an artist until 1964, after 10 years as a full-time wife and mother of four.

She began by painting over subtle designs on fabric. She would smear Elmer's glue on a board with a washcloth and paste the fabric onto it. But eventually she became more intrigued by the shapes formed by the dried washcloths, and turned to sculpture.

Her sculpturing career took off after a sold-out show in 1980 at OK Harris Works of Art in Manhattan, which represented her from then on.

In addition to her husband, Ms. Castanis is survived by her four children: Thaddeus, of New York; Claudius and Augustus, of Los Angeles; and Phoebe Coombs, of Schwenksville, Pa.; and two grandchildren.

Ms. Castanis's works are featured in the Detroit Institute of Arts, Norton Museum of Art in West Palm Beach, Fla.; the library at Mount Holyoke College in South Hadley, Mass.; and the I.B.M. Corporation Atrium in Atlanta. One of her notable public artworks in New York is "Flatbush Floogies," cast-bronze reliefs embedded in the walls of the Flatbush Avenue-Brooklyn College subway station.