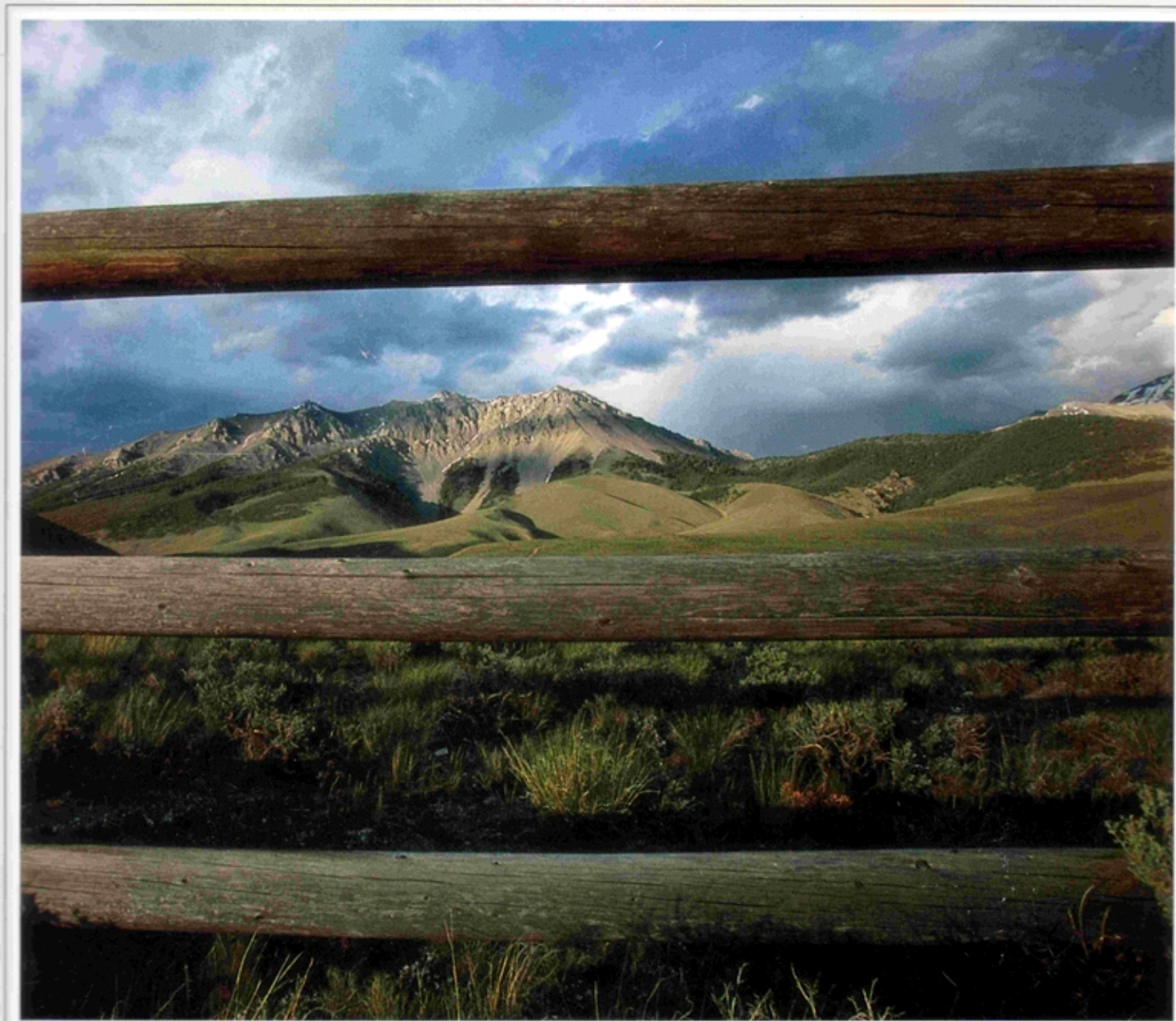


TEN YEARS

BIG SKY JOURNAL

SUMMER 2003



LEWIS AND CLARK HISTORIAN DON NELL

LEARNING FROM THE WORKS OF SCULPTOR FLOYD DEWITT

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No Patience for Quick Studies

The Art of Floyd DeWitt can strike you like a fist then embrace you with subtle persuasion.



FLOYD DEWITT was drinking in a bar in Livingston, Mont., the kind of place where the television is almost always on. War was erupting in the Middle East, tanks were rolling and American troops were gearing up to join the mess. Horrors were afoot.

On the other hand, there was a ballgame on.

Floyd wanted to watch the news but first he had to make a deal with the bartender. Two minutes of war coverage, then two minutes of baseball.

"We're facing World War III and 30 million people are watching baseball," he recalled of that evening more than a decade ago. "How ludicrous we are."

Apocalypse was dodged, of course, but of that moment came a remarkable sculpture, one that Floyd calls *Demise of the Mighty Casey*. The bronze is a study of lightness and tension, of incredible energy, strength and self-confidence.

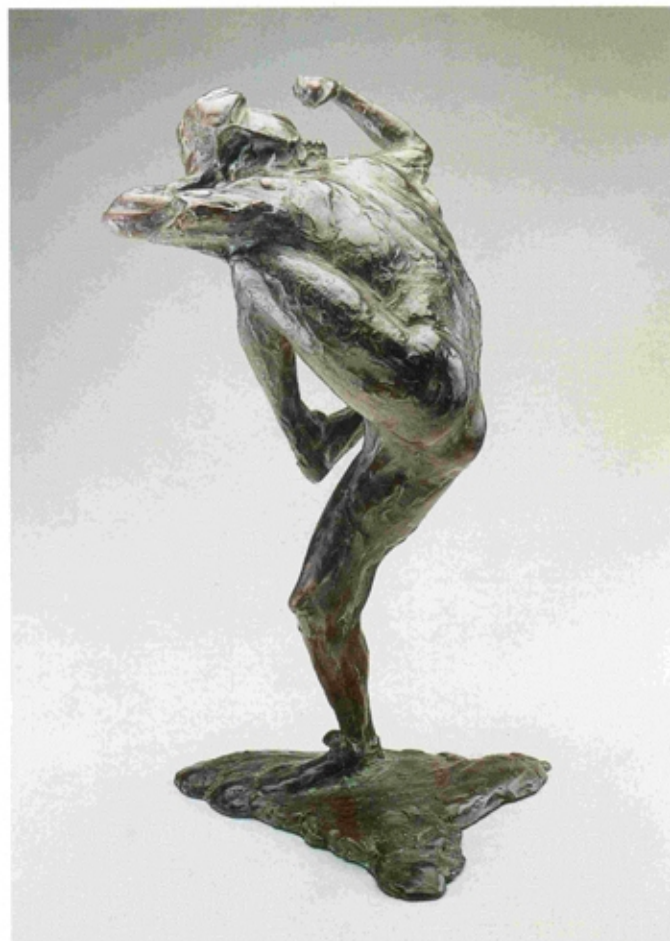
It portrays a baseball player, a pitcher, a man of steel and sinew, all gonads and barbed wire, captured at the peak of his windup, perfectly balanced on one flat foot and ready to funnel every ounce of power into his arm, his wrist, his fingertips. Watch this, he's saying. Watch this ball. Watch it if you can.

And so we watched. We watched baseball, while the country marched to war.

This sculpture, like all of Floyd's work, has a message.

"It's about arrogance," he said of *Mighty Casey*. Watch him.

My friend Floyd Tennison DeWitt was born in Wolf Point, a scruffy little burg on the prairies of eastern Montana, in 1934, while the Great Depression was doing its best to smother the life out of America's farm country. Sandwiched between the Missouri River and the Fort Peck Indian Reservation, Wolf Point was named for the trappers who



Left: Sculptor Floyd DeWitt in his studio. Above: *Demise of the Mighty Casey*, a bronze sculpture of a baseball pitcher winding up, which is a study of lightness and tension, of energy, strength and self-confidence. DeWitt says this piece is about arrogance.



Pegasus in Flight looks down on several works by DeWitt including *Mother of the Ram*.

stacked wolf pelts on a sandbar there, waiting for the steamboats to bring gunpowder and whiskey.

One time maybe a dozen years ago, I made Floyd take me there. He didn't much want to go, but I talked him into it, offered to drive him to that place of harsh weather and tough people, of real cowboys and real Indians. We arrived on one of those afternoons when heat waves warped the horizon and the handful of pedestrians on the street were shuffling along in a funny way, like they were in a hurry but still didn't want to lift their feet. It was only July, but the wheat crop was already shot. Drought. Killer drought.

We stayed with some old friends of Floyd's, a Sioux family named Smith, and I learned some things about him. I

learned that young "Tenny," as they called him, had always been a horse-crazy kid. He'd walk after school every day the mile or two out to their place and he got to be a pretty good hand. He learned to break and train horses and once helped round up 3,000 of the wild mustangs that ran the reservation, still mostly virgin prairie.

His mother was a nurse and his father was a barber who also owned a piece of bottomland that he farmed, which meant that everybody stayed busy.

It's the kind of country that makes you wonder whether people are meant to live there, at least in our modern way with all our cars and machines and aspirations for even more stuff. But as hard as the country is now, with our gas motors



In front of his studio's north wall, DeWitt massages the clay of *The Joy*, a sculpture of a symphony conductor. He'll likely spend years on this piece, deconstructing and recreating it over and over. Studies of the piece are on display on the back wall.

and air conditioners, imagine showing up a hundred years ago with a wagon and a team and a shovel.

Floyd imagined exactly that, and he built a monument to those pioneers. It stands on Main Street today, among the dented Lincolns and dusty pickups of modern ranch country. But the monument isn't what you might expect. It's an elegant and understated horseman holding his hat over his heart, reverent. A man neither Indian nor white, or maybe both, he's generally ignored by the descendants of the hard-scrabble sodbusters he represents. In lots of places, this monument would be on tourist maps and guide books. In Wolf Point, people mostly just leave it alone.

Floyd didn't quite graduate high school in Wolf Point, partly because if he wasn't on a horse he was painting or drawing one. Charlie Russell was the only artist he knew anything about and so he became a role model. While still a teenager, Floyd moved to Missoula and took some art classes but it wasn't until he joined the Army that he had the ironic experience of learning something about classical art. Uncle Sam sent him to Europe, the same base in Germany where Elvis Presley would go, and Floyd hit every museum he could find, soaking himself in them.

His tour complete, Floyd spent a couple lost years back in Wolf Point. He busted some horses as a cowboy and he busted



Top: *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*, an oil painting. Above: Two silver medallions lie on Dewitt's sketchbook.

some drunks as a city cop. Eager to put some direction in his life, he became a reluctant refugee to the Minneapolis School of Art in 1957, where the focus was on avant garde art. Some of his work there was intriguing—sinuous abstractions of the human torso, giant copper masks, distorted busts—and it was well received, with shows in two of the city's major galleries. But it gave him little satisfaction.

Disgusted after a couple of years, one day he hauled everything into an empty field, dug a big hole and buried the lot of it. Like Gauguin chucking everything and moving to Tahiti, that's when Floyd's life started to get interesting.

"I wanted to get back to Europe, where I could learn basic

things and where I could see the best of the best, spend some time with it," Floyd said recently, taking a break and drinking tiny cup after tiny cup of coffee in his Bozeman studio, a room he had designed to bathe itself in light. "Of course, I was young, so I thought I would be doing all the teaching."

He found a home in the Royal Academy of Fine Art, in Amsterdam, Holland, a place that decided to take a chance on the brash young Montanan.

"They said come on over, if you think you're good enough," is the way Floyd described the Academy's offer of a full 6-year scholarship.

The Academy where Floyd studied isn't really there



Above: *Weightlessness*. Right: DeWitt, in 1962, in his studio in Amsterdam, Holland. He studied there at the Royal Academy of Fine Art and had several major exhibits while still a student in the early 1960s. From Holland he moved back to Montana.

anymore. Like most art schools, it now focuses on the avant garde, the movement he left America to avoid. But when Floyd studied there, it retained its centuries-old traditions.

"By definition, the old art academies are no longer in existence. They existed to teach you how to study, how to look at nature, remember what you saw and draw truths from it. Now the emphasis is not on subtlety, but on the regurgitating of some notion of creativity."

Floyd can be a little acerbic.

He had several major exhibits in Holland while still a student in the early '60s, and he won his first contest when a jury of sculptors and artists selected his small study of a horse and jockey for the Academy's collection.

The piece contains a subtle surprise, which is characteristic of Floyd's work. It shows both horse and jockey, not racing but at rest. It comments, in an abstract way, on life's frenetic pace.

"We all start out running in the same spot. And then we come back to it."

But it was after the Academy, as an independent artist, that his reputation really began to spread. Members of the Danish royal family collected his work. Cities commissioned him to build large public monuments, private individuals,

museums and European corporations snapped up his work for their collections. His bust of composer Gustave Mahler—seven years in the making—is one of 60 in the performing arts center in Utrecht, and the only one by an American artist.

Floyd stayed in Holland "as long as I kept learning," and when he felt he'd hit an impasse, he returned to America in 1984 with his wife and daughter, settling first in Livingston and later in Bozeman, where he lives today.

Back in America, where everything, even "the deal," is called art, where most people think of art as a profession, a career path you can choose, like dentistry, Floyd frequently finds things irksome. Labeling everything as art denigrates true art, he maintains.

"It's like saying you love everything. You love your shirt. You love your car," Floyd explained. "It means you love nothing."

Most people in this country don't know quite what to think of a man like that.

So who is he?

"I'm just a guy trying to fit himself into a show of good work. Every artist should add his own little two bits to the history of art."

Others are more generous.



There are all those European collectors, of course, and artists in particular are drawn to his work. At the Legends Gallery in Livingston, Floyd's only Montana gallery, Betsy Swartz says only about 20 percent of gallery visitors spend much time with Floyd's work. But those who do often are artists. They are immediately compelled. They zoom in on it.

The National Sculpture Society, the equivalent of a Pulitzer Committee for sculptors, has granted him all its top awards and he even got a medal from the National Academy

of Western Art, but here in his native country he remains relatively unknown.

Floyd knows his work isn't for everybody and he makes no apologies. Art, he has told me a million times, is rigorous mental work. He has no patience for "found materials" projects, for the university art school emphasis on creativity over labor and intellectual rigor, for "people who think art is something you...belch up."

His criticism of other artists' work is unflinching and he knows he has alienated people, sometimes important people. But if he's tough on others, he's even tougher on himself. All serious artists solve puzzles of their own creation, but Floyd's are more difficult than most. He'll spend years, sometimes decades, working and reworking a piece as seemingly simple as a line drawing of a cat. Appreciating his work also takes time and effort and most people lack the patience. It's their loss.

Take, for example, *Legend of the Bull*, a one-horned sack of anvils and snake venom, a rodeo athlete ready to make a mess out of you. "It's the essence of what we males are," Floyd said. "We are bulls and we're full of bull."

The city of Amsterdam owns one casting and a collector offered to buy another, if Floyd would add the second horn. He refused.

It took him three years to get the sculpture right and in the early stages he had to hire a rodeo bullfighter to stand guard while he sketched, the animal was so testy.

And besides, leaving something out can add a great deal. "If you put up two horns," Floyd explained, "you eliminate the question: Where's the other one?"

A rodeo bull obviously qualifies as Western art, as does some of his other work. But Floyd likes to pop bubbles. Witness the piece that he calls *PRCA* (Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association) *Cowboy*, but one I always think of as the gay caballero. This is a dude so fey you can almost hear his affected lisp. Floyd says he's a monument to the rednecks and wastrels who gave him bum advice back in Wolf Point, who told him to quit school and go bust horses.

Floyd's work is always serious, but it's seldom somber.

For an outright belly laugh, there is *How the West was Won*, a bronze portrait of three fat whores lined up on a couch.

That's pretty Western. But Western themes are just the tip of the iceberg for this horse-crazy kid from Wolf Point who spent 25 years immersed in European classicism.

Step into his studio for the first time and, chances are, you'll gasp. There are medallions in the Greek style, horses ready to buck, nudes, busts of men and bison. There are belly dancers, sprinters, infants, the elderly and one of my personal favorites, a colt chewing its hind foot. Its title is self explanatory: *Innocence*.

There is laughter here and joy. There is awe and mystery and a multicolored patina of intense mental sweat.

Among the hundreds of pieces, Jacob wrestles an angel, a centaur skips rope, and the four horsemen of the Apocalypse thunder by. That's a topic of horror to many people, but Floyd has taken these riders of death and pestilence, of famine and disease and, through a remarkable piece of artistic engineering, balanced their headlong rush on four incredibly slender equine ankles.

He thinks of the piece as a study in weightlessness, taking a topic of incredible gravity and somehow making it float.

Overhead, an enraged Pegasus hangs from the ceiling, an animal that, like a Phoenix, has suffered abuse and indignity and has returned to claim its own. There is a whimsical miniature of Saint Nicholas—not the “ho ho ho” fat man of America but the slightly scary one of Holland, a rangy horseman who makes a list and takes it seriously.

One of his current pieces is of a symphony conductor, a man on his toes, both arms raised, exultant and focused and energized, as alive as a man can be and ready to start the music.

Floyd likely will spend years on this piece. He'll probably take it apart and put it back together a few times. Right now, he's got a particular problem that's giving him fits.

“I'm having a hell of a time with the anatomy of the tuxedo,” he grouched, just before he tore into the maestro's left arm with a pipe wrench, twisting the armature beneath the clay.

But he'll figure it out. He knows exactly where he wants to go.

“It's an exclamation point.”

Across the room stands a life-sized ewe, an animal both calm and alert. Most artists would have sculpted a ram, if only for the masculine drama, but Floyd took things a step farther.

His title? *Mother of the Ram*.

The point?

We all come from somewhere, even the most cocksure among us.

And Floyd comes from Wolf Point. His artistic peers are the European masters, men like Rodin and Bourdelle, which is all the more remarkable because his roots are in the dust and wind and heat of the Montana prairie.

That time we drove there, drifting east for 400 miles in my land barge of a yellow Cadillac, Floyd talked all the way, telling me about Rodin and Mahler and bucking horses he had known, cowboys who sent him down the wrong path and some who did the right thing, his adventures on both sides of the law in Wolf Point, a professor at the Academy who could write in German with his left hand and in French with his right hand, how to pick out a good horse. And he pointed to things. His eye catches shapes and lines and the way the light falls to the ground. He taught me how to look at the prairies in a new way, to see the sensual, feminine curves shaped by a million years of wind, to see something new and big in places where I had always trained

DeWitt says *Mother of the Ram*, a life-sized ewe, sends the message that everyone and everything come from somewhere.



Nearly 70 years old, long past retirement age for people with "jobs," he still pushes himself every day to get better and sometimes, it makes him sad.

my eye to find specifics like deer and antelope and birds. Where I'd always looked for landmarks, he showed me the landscape.

He was trying to teach me to see.

I doubt that anybody in America has Floyd's combination of intellect, training and talent. He said he owes much of who he is to the Academy, where he learned to think in monumental terms, to set up challenges for himself. And this pursuit of the difficult pervades his life. For the past couple years, he's been in a running argument with Marcus Aurelius, whose dog-eared work he keeps next to his recliner.

"Too much of a rationalist," Floyd said of the old Roman. "Not enough respect for the imagination."

But he keeps going back to him.

Spend an afternoon with Floyd and he'll quote Kant and Robert Frost on the nature of men, the Greek philosopher Xenophon and an Assiniboine cowhand on the nature of horses. If he likes you, he'll probably ask you some incredibly hard questions about yourself. That's his curiosity at work.

Being who he is, I think, gives him a freedom most artists never experience. He thinks always about the art, never about its marketability, though he sells enough that he's never had to chase grants or take a teaching job. He's never fallen into that seductive trap of discovering something that sells—that resonates with the public—and then repeating it over and over.

But being Floyd is also a burden.

He cannot stop creating, improving, concentrating. Nearly 70 years old, long past retirement age for people with "jobs," he still pushes himself every day to get better and sometimes, it makes him sad.

"Sometimes it's just a horrible place to be. I'm always competing with myself and you can't outdo yourself every time," he says.

I feel a little bad for my friend when he talks like that. But I'm also glad he's still stubborn enough to be himself.

His dark eyes often twinkle, especially when he makes fun of my appetites and my thirsts, when he gives me nicknames in Dutch and Latin. He can be demanding and difficult, at times as blunt as his art is subtle.

But after almost 20 years, he's still trying to teach me to see, still showing me how the light falls. Sometimes, he'll actually grab me by the head, point me at something and raise his voice a little. "Look," he'll say.

So I look. I listen to Floyd and I try to pay attention. He's kind of like his sculpture *Demise of the Mighty Casey*. He demands that I watch.

And if I watch carefully, sometimes I see.

That's Floyd's job, to help people see, and I'm glad he takes it seriously.

It makes my life bigger. **BSJ**



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