

COMPLIMENTARY

BIG SKY

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WINTER 2005

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BIG SKY ARTS: Breaking the mold with sculptor Floyd Dewitt



Thomas Lee

Eyes of a Master

Montana sculptor Floyd DeWitt captures international acclaim for his fierce and imaginative work

BY MICHELE CORRIEL

Floyd DeWitt's sculptures, in varying degrees of completion and contemplation, disrupt and invade, accompany and direct, every conceivable surface in his studio. His constant exploration of sculpture, his drive for philosophical questioning, creates a constant flow of dialog about art and its significance in his work.

"Rational thought is preconceived," he says. As he speaks his hands work the words, molding his thoughts. "I try to find the abstract relationship with the figure, the things that subconsciously control the eye."



"Weightlessness"

He explains the theory of automatic thinking was designed to override preconceived thoughts and get to the essence of the creative process.

"That way of thinking just explodes," DeWitt says. A sculpture lies across his lap as he dips his brush and spreads on a patina. "So automatic thinking and art came into existence. Which is legitimate."

But DeWitt likes to take his time on his projects. He enjoys the long process, the thoughts, the ideas, the notions of the abstract. He points to a piece that took 40 years to evolve. The piece is called "Weightlessness," and is sometimes called The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse — riding to perhaps foretell the end of the world. The four horses symbolize war, strife, hunger and death and stand only on one leg each. The massive sculpture rides upon an unseen layer of the world, the dark structures that carry us toward the end, as the story goes.

The evolution of DeWitt's interpretation of the Four Horsemen was fraught with the nuts and bolts of making the piece, turning an idea into a bronze sculpture. The process itself — the foundry, the logistics of putting it together — is what takes this art form to another level.

"The problem with sculpture is that it's associated with heavy, massive things — stable like a mountain," he says, getting up. Walking around, touching each sculpture he talks about in turn. "However, I work with a sense of lightness. It's a paradox."

If God is in the details, then the sculpture nears divinity. Each aspect of the horsemen — the faces blank with hidden intent, the horses struggling to keep up, and the perfectly balanced legs — delicate and tenuous. How can so much disaster be heralded by these horses, whose very existence seems to teeter within its own deterioration.

"We live in verbal world and I'm a visual guy," DeWitt says. "The problem with art today is that it's talked about. How do you define the color red?"

Probably one of the more interesting and unique aspects of DeWitt's life and work is where he came from and where he's been. Born in the small Montana town of Wolf Point, he cowboied a bit and learned to respect horses. After a stint in the military he attended the Minneapolis School of art and from there got a six-year scholarship to the Royal Academy of Fine Art in Amsterdam, Holland.

"For me, it was a kind of dare," he says. "So I went. I was going to show them."

But instead they showed him. How to study. How to create art. How to learn.

When he was stationed in Europe, DeWitt felt compelled to go to every museum he could find, discovering the power of classical art.

"He was drawn to that old world sensibility," explains Brandon Reintjes, curator at the Holter Museum in Helena, where DeWitt's latest show was held. "He ended up in a traditional academy in Holland and began a sculptural apprenticeship that lasted six years. He sought out that rigorous training."

DeWitt took European classical philosophy and made it uniquely his own.

"I think he's committed to his own individual vision," Reintjes says. "He's not interested in ceaselessly looking for new materials to work with, he's more interested in the old materials and tries to work with them in a new way."

And perhaps that's why he's more widely known in Europe than he is in his own backyard. His work is collected internationally, by the Danish royal family, by the city of Amsterdam, and by private European collectors.

"One of the things he's done is experiment with different patinas," Reintjes says. "He does them in a great way, sometimes leaving the casting skin on, and he creates this beautiful ghost white patina, or maybe a rich, nutty patina. He has that individual vision and won't prescribe to any one way of doing things. He's experimenting for himself."

Caught between the paradigms of western art and contemporary art, DeWitt defies labels. He can't be contained by either of those.

"He overflows on any type of label you can give him," Reintjes says. "He does what he wants. He's certainly a contemporary artist. And he appeals to western art with the form of the horse,



"The Joy"

but not in any western way. He walks a line between those things. He's more akin to that old world aesthetic."

DeWitt has a tendency to explore similar themes.

These recurring themes, with slight variations on a particular figure are spread around the studio. One of these is the head of the Minotaur of Greek mythology, the monster held captive in a maze, born of a snow-white bull and the queen of Crete, when King Minos refused to sacrifice the bull to the god Poseidon. The minotaur's story is one of blame, misconceptions, love, fear and jealousy — all the ingredients for a good yarn.

"One of the duties of the artist is to create his or her own mythology," DeWitt says, pointing to a bronze head of a bull. "So I make minotaurs — who for me are a lot like the bison. The bison go way back; there were cave drawings of bison. I wanted to include that aspect of the bison/minotaur."

Stories, good stories, stories with endings that make you think, are retold again and again. In this vein, DeWitt retells his stories, as well. In different sizes, in varying mediums, the heads of the minotaur remind us

to listen to our gods or deal with the consequences. Wander the maze.

"At my age, I want to tell my story, rather than take in information," DeWitt, 70, says. "For me life is very philosophical. I think it's important for an artist to make what he wants to make, not what's required. I've been called inconsistent because I like to do all sorts of things. The subject isn't important, it's the metaphor. To create is the thing — this power that you can create.

"I was told at one point that sculpture is very limited," he says. "That a sculpture can only do a few things, the foremost being a monument — and when you look at it, what else can you really make? The medium lends itself towards that. And you've still got worlds to wander here, even with that definition."

Suspended overhead is a horse-like figure originally intended for the city of Amsterdam, a Pegasus, whose wings are so sparsely feathered, it would seem impossible for it to take flight. The bronze is stressed and its wings damaged. But the horses' presence emits an angelic destiny.



"The Minotaur"

"That is a ravaged Pegasus," DeWitt says. "A 20th Century Pegasus. A Pegasus that has seen the Holocaust." DeWitt sits in the diffuse afternoon light, applying a heated tool to the wax figure of a horse, getting it ready for the foundry. Beside him are his other tools, brushes, and open containers, a heat gun, a hair dryer, wadded up paper towels, and yellowed newspapers. DeWitt moves from project to project, uncovering his own myths.

"I have a huge amount of respect for him," said Chaucer Silverson, art director for the Red Raven Gallery in Big Sky, one of several galleries around the country that represent DeWitt. "His work is the best work you can find around, and compares to the work of the masters."

From a collector's point of view, DeWitt's work has stood the test of time.

"Floyd's work, the bronze itself, stands on its own," Silverson said. "He has a huge amount of experience and quality of intention. His work is likable, he captures something in his figures that people immediately respond to, they get an impression from it, that he knows what's he's doing."

According to Silverson, there are three criteria for good artwork: does it stand up to art criticism; does it

stand up to subjective interpretation; and can it be substantiated in value over time.

"Floyd's work has elements that a typical audience may not recognize — but it sustains objective critique," he said. "It's appealing to the client, and he's a living artist that has stood up to the test of time, which is quite rare."

On a podium in DeWitt's studio, separated from the other works with a white sheeted frame, stands a sculpture of a conductor in mid-process — small wads of clay pushed into the form — hands high, hands that are only pieces of wire at the moment. The face, a temporary guise; the stance moves, sways with the force of the music inherent within the figure.

"I went to hear this conductor in town," DeWitt says. "And I went to their practice sessions for about two years. I'm musically illiterate, and I wanted to get a feel for what they're really doing. I tried to draw, but it was going on too fast. If you're studying the conductor, you can't listen to the music. The music takes over. So I just let it digest."

This is not the first figure of the conductor DeWitt has done. No. The one on his lap was a smaller one, in a different version.

"Gustav Mahler — I did a bust for a commission I worked on in Europe; I worked on that for years," DeWitt says. That piece, called *The Titan*, sits in the Palace of Peace, a performing arts center, in Utrecht. "Again, the only way I could finish the head was to listen again and again to his first symphony. I had to let the music influence me, because the photographs that were taken of him, none of them were consistent with who he was. That's from my training."

DeWitt's energy surges throughout his space. So much to be done.

"We learned to look and to see in such a way as to remember," DeWitt says. "You have to get something from the subject — namely inspiration. It doesn't have to look like what you're doing, but it should be based on what has inspired you."



"The Titan"



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