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Bronze in Negative Space

Rodger Mack
Paul Archambault

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Rodger Mack with Paul Archambault

I have been interested in drawing since early childhood. But in my youth I was trained as a professional custom meatcutter by my parents, who had a business they had been running for years. When I turned fifteen or sixteen, in middle Ohio, everyone was building his own automobile or fixing up old pieces of junk. I became the manager of a Shell gas station while I was still going to high school, and then I really got into mechanical things, fixing cars. Once in a while there were a few fenders left about, and I would play around and weld some things together. I really hadn't seen that much welded contemporary art. I guess it was my interest in machines that made me go to art school, because that's what I was seriously involved with—trying to design my own cars. I wanted to be an industrial designer.

I did other odd jobs. One summer I worked as a shakeout crew man in an aluminum foundry. I'd go at one o'clock in the morning and work until seven or eight. I'd just dump over the molds that had been poured that day, shake all the sand off, throw the molds into the pile, and shovel another ton of sand.

When I was seventeen I was accepted at the Cleveland Institute of Art. By my second or third year I started to develop a pretty recognizable form concept. At the time I thought this might have come from my early training as a meatcutter because most of the forms I was interested in, and was able to excel in, seemed to be animal or natural forms. I started taking sculpture and ceramics courses. During the summer between my fourth and fifth years—it takes five years to get a B.F.A. at the Cleveland Institute—I was invited to take part in an experimental program at the General Motors Styling Division at Warren, Michigan. I was hired as a sculptor, having fun and getting paid for it at the same time. The problem with the system at G.M. was that the sculptors hired to carve the designs or present them three-dimensionally never got to design their own work; they were, in essence, an extension of the designer's hand. The designer created a car on the board and the sculptor then...
developed it. There were only one or two people I met in that whole place who started as sculptors and ended up high enough on the ladder to design their own work. The rest of them were just laborers. That cured me of wanting to become a car designer. At the end of the summer I returned to school to finish my formal education.

My five years of training at the Cleveland Institute of Art dealt mostly with the formal study of the figure. We did clay modeling several days a week and worked a little bit with welding; but it was mostly figures and portrait heads day after day. At the time I was getting pretty bored, so I used to do other work on my own. I now realize that this was a good training period for me. I developed a great deal of self-discipline. My present work still has some characteristics of that figurative training—maybe not so much in the representational sense but in the way I control proportion and in the way some of the forms I use can be derived from a relatively abstract sense of the figure.

At the end of the fifth year at Cleveland I applied to the Cranbrook Academy of Art for a master's program. That was a good period in my life, a good two years. It was very productive and gave me a chance to pull together my ideas about sculpture. I had the benefit of being taught by a sculpture professor whose name was Tex Scheewitz. My education with him was pretty formal. Then a new person came in named Julius Schmidt, a product of Cranbrook, who had been teaching in schools all over the United States for about fifteen years. Schmidt's main goal had been to build foundries and introduce metal casting into these schools; up until then, this had not been heard of. Schmidt

Rodger Mack and assistant pouring bronze in the 300-pound-capacity university foundry.

All photographs are by Patrick Dolan, except for the photograph on page 60 by Ed Kashi.
devised many different ways of building foundries inexpensively, using junk, old firebrick, and vacuum cleaners.

I learned a lot from Julius, although we didn’t agree all the time on what my work was about. He was very upset, as I was heavy into wood carving and construction and, of course, his big push was metal casting. Although I was his assistant, I didn’t really get into metal casting until a couple of months before school was out. During that final year, 1963, I received a Fulbright grant to study in Italy. I went to Florence and had a studio and then worked in a foundry that was solely for art bronze casting.

I learned quite a bit there, and I enjoyed the atmosphere of Florence. All the Renaissance and baroque works affected me deeply, and I especially appreciated the textural qualities of some of the façades. If you squint your eyes you can see a great richness. I have tried to put that into some of my work.

In Florence, I was attracted to the idea of working negatively. It’s a system I discovered while doing ceramics. You throw a pot on a wheel and use a lot of pressure from the inside to push a form out. So in Florence I decided to try putting all the texture on the inside, then washing layers of wax into the clay. After that I removed the clay and had a wax shell to work with. I was buying huge wastebaskets at the open market. I lined the whole inside of these shapes with clay and then worked on the form in reverse, in the negative. Then I cast wax shells, since there was no way for me to use the bonded sand available to me in the States; I had to work with wax in the very classical tradition. I took these wax shells and forms and then built sculpture with them, using the traditional lost-wax process. The process has many steps in which it can fail and never come out. It’s a big gamble.

But when I returned to the States, I found that the forms I was after could not be achieved in wax. If I had an idea about surrounding a form with a cage or developing its own given space—a space you could see, with a form happening on the inside—wax would always collapse on me. I definitely felt the need to go back to sand. Working with forms in sand, one idea leads to another. If I finish a piece in sand or begin to work with a sand mold, I get ten other ideas by different ways of manipulating the piece molds. New ways to put all these molds together come to me. It’s still the same today, even after fifteen years in this medium.

Many people see my work as abstract, but I don’t feel that it is completely so; nor do I feel it is representational. It’s a hybrid of forms that include figurative parts and proportions. But these forms also include some of the things I enjoy about machinery—for example, the repetition of cooling fins on a cylinder head. I play that type of systematic quality against the very natural, more volumetric forms. I enjoy making those counterpoints.

My drawings are sketches of ideas, working drawings. When I’m making a single piece I don’t usually work from a drawing. I
use ideas that I have developed through drawings and conceive of a piece that hasn’t been drawn yet. Once I draw the piece, I feel that it’s too boring to make three-dimensionally.

The photographs of the bronze castings reproduced in this issue are of a series of reliefs made in negative sand molds. I call them my Egyptian Series, although the reason for this may not be obvious to the viewer. The ideas came from my last visit to the Egyptian section of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. I have always enjoyed the work of the Egyptians, their early years especially: their simplicity, their sheer . . . guts. I tried to think of how the Egyptians became so . . . damned smart; how they developed their ideas of form, their sensitivity to form. The way they worked their material really intrigued me. Some of the reliefs in those giant lumps of limestone are both negative and positive. I thought I would like to try a similar system in sand.

As to major changes of forms once the rough bronze castings are exposed—no, that is not possible. Minor changes can be introduced after the piece is rough-cast, but altering major forms and still maintaining what I would call an original, unique cast piece without too much welding is not possible to do. I can modify the surface by grinding or polishing, and I can use acids for patinas; that’s about as far as I can go. But I’ve been working with this negative-mold idea for long enough to know how it’s going to look when it comes out.
"Corrican" is a neologism coined by Rodger Mack, combining "corrugated" and "Continental Can" (former owner of the foundry site).

Left, "Corrigan IV," 20 by 39 inches. Right, drawings from Rodger Mack’s sketchbook.
"Portrait III," 6 by 19 inches.