



CLASSICAL ALLUSIONS



Michael MacLeod married his love of sculpture to the restoration needs of architecture's greatest eccentricities: griffins, gargoyles, and winged dogs. He is recognized as the very best at what he does: preserving the character of the golden age of architecture.

The call comes from a hand-wringing member of the museum staff. The sculpture has cracks.

Michael MacLeod, architectural sculptor and ace restorer, jumps into his red Ford Explorer, glides over Jersey City's Pulaski Skyway and through the Holland Tunnel, dives into traffic-choked Manhattan, and buzzes uptown to the regal Cooper-Hewitt Museum to inspect the damage.

"Shrinkage factor on the bones," he says, taking one glance at the piece, a doghouse sitting in the courtyard. Hefting an orange milk crate full of repair materials, MacLeod hunkers down to the task of fixing the imposing, copper-colored concrete hut.

The museum officials are relieved; the master of preservation is on the job.

More at home with buildings than doghouses, MacLeod created Fido's mansion in a competition with top architects. Predictably, other entrants submitted egopuffed, precious models resembling Upper East Side penthouse apartments. MacLeod took a more logical approach: How would a dog craft his own abode? With mud and bones, of course. His primitive entry enchanted judges and was selected to sit in the courtyard among the other winners.

This victory explains what Michael

BY JAY BLOTCHER

MacLeod is all about: an architectural rebel among his overpolished peers, reaching into the past to create designs for our future. MacLeod specializes in refurbishing exotic period detail in aging architectural façades and, when the opportunity comes along, creating new sculptural embellishments for buildings just now going up. He is a purist of architectural design, changing the way people think about late-20th-century building design.

The patch job is simple: fill the cracks where the concrete shrank from the bones. The husky, 6-foot 3-inch artist, dressed in dungaree jacket and jeans, makes repairs with adroit, sensitive hands. His black boots tread on half-opened spiny chestnut shells, scattered on the ground this late September morning. His boyish face, offset by slightly flushed cheeks, is a study in concentration. There are no wasted movements, down to the paint brush used to whisk away accumulating dust. MacLeod stands back, satisfied. The 700-pound doghouse, titled "Guard Dog House," is now ready for the auction block at Sotheby's next March, to the benefit of Guiding Eyes for the Blind.

New York City is a living museum of architecture, and Michael MacLeod's work is on exhibit everywhere you look. In the 11 years since he began MJM Studios, the 1977 graduate of SU's College of Visual and Performing Arts has helped restore the most esteemed ornamental detail in the country.

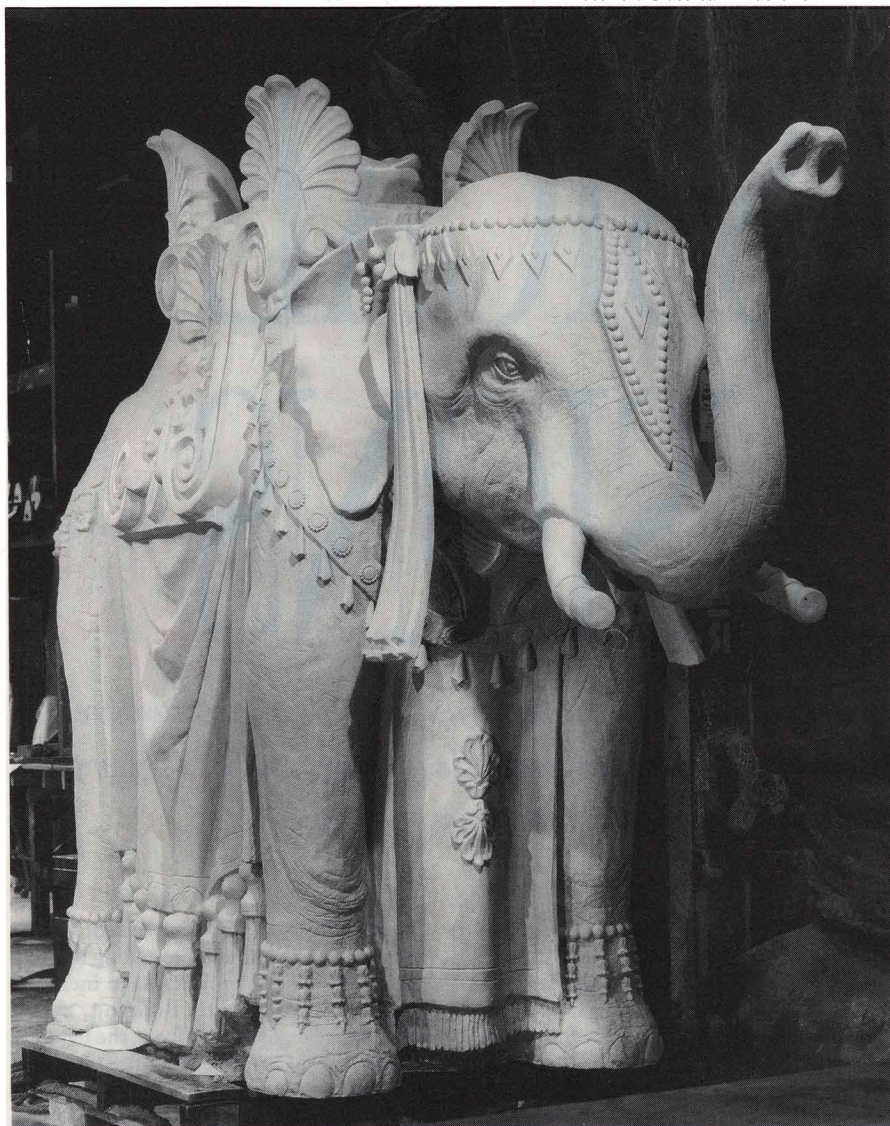
Metropolises are suddenly frantic to preserve their past. And they're calling for help from MJM, whose projects have included Manhattan's Woolworth Building, edged with Gothic gargoyles and frogs; the baroque balustrades of Carnegie Hall; the Georgian marble of the New York Stock Exchange; and the celebrated restoration of Ellis Island. In Chicago, MJM Studios saved the Museum of Science and Industry. MJM Studios has rescued crumbling buildings in San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Philadelphia.

Every job increases MacLeod's cachet in a field he now dominates. Recently, Disney World requested his services to complete buildings for its Universal Studio tour. Contractors seek out the MJM atelier to embellish new structures with elegant old-style designs. New commissions allow MacLeod the chance to champion the cause of architectural sculpture. "My whole premise in sculpture has to do with the synergy of architecture and sculpture, the way things were done before this century," he says with a careless drawl as we drive.

"We're not stuck to the two dimensions of paper. We can certainly contribute a lot to architecture, and that is ultimately my goal. I'm trying to bring back that phase in architecture when the sculptor played an important role. Look at the city we're in," he says, gesturing toward the windshield. "Architectural sculpture is all over."

His gaze takes in cornices, balconies, and pediments. "The trend is going back to those details," he says. "Craftsmanship is important. With the market the way it is now, owners have to do something unique with their

JAY BLOTCHER, a 1982 graduate of the Newhouse School, recently cofounded Public Impact, a media consultant firm. He has served as media coordinator for ACT UP and Queer Nation, two activist groups based in New York City.



Above: *One of the nine life-size Indian elephants created for Donald Trump's Taj Mahal Casino.* • Above right: *Close-up of a grotesque, a style of decorative art characterized by its fanciful human or animal forms.* • Opposite: *When invited by the Cooper-Hewitt Museum to design a better doghouse, MacLeod came up with this imaginative solution—a doghouse constructed of mud and bones.* • Opposite, below: *Two of MacLeod's staff of sculptors prepare a piece for mold production at MJM.*

buildings; they can't just throw one of these glass-and-steel structures up and think they're going to attract [buyers]. . . .

"One of the dilemmas of sculpture in our time is that it's becoming a bit too dissociated with architecture. You can take any section of any of these buildings, and the form, the shapes, the volume—it's all so beautiful. It just happens to be attached to a building."

Hank Williams is warbling on the tape deck as the Explorer traces the roads through Central Park, emerging at Central Park West and 86th. MacLeod gestures toward a building at the corner of the street. The elegant cornice restoration on top is an MJM creation. MacLeod beams. "It's a good feeling to know you're keeping the city close to what it was originally." The Municipal Art Society, a city organization that champions urban architectural preservation, has honored two of the restoration

projects MJM worked on.

MacLeod is both an artist concerned with faithful reproduction and an engineer concerned with durability. When MJM Studios arrives to replace a crumbling decorative façade, a combination of traditional materials and modern hybrids are used. The miracle material is glass fiber-reinforced concrete (known in builder's shorthand as GFRC). Used to replicate stone, terra cotta, and cast iron, GFRC is pliable enough to mimic intricacies of the original design. In-kind replacement is favored where possible, but when the project is a 120-year-old tower, the original stone quarry may have disappeared decades ago.

"Look, it's better to put something up there than nothing," MacLeod explains. "That's our attitude toward replacement materials." Still, there is an abiding reverence for the past. MJM workers begin a



STEVE SARTORE

project at the library. A building may be so ravaged by acid rain and time that the only record of its once-majestic façade lies buried in a dusty old volume. Ancient books also hold the secret of forgotten building processes. "If somebody has already made all the mistakes," MacLeod reasons, "why reinvent the wheel and make all the mistakes they made? We treasure those books."

After graduating from Syracuse, MacLeod came to New York City to be a sculptor. He found work as a mason tender during the day, preparing work sites and mixing the mortar for bricks. He devoted spare time to his own creations, as the burgeoning East Village art scene grew around him. While fellow artisans were making art and talking themselves up over wine and cheese at Soho loft parties, MacLeod had little time for the fame game.

"I've never been one to run around," he says. "I always worked too hard. I'm still an early-to-bed, early-to-rise person." He held an occasional sculpture show in one of the storefront galleries that dotted the area.

MacLeod proved his expertise on his day job. During one project, he was asked to replace some pieces of architectural sculpture: a row of facial profiles that doubled as balcony supports. The finished product pleased the restoration company. Few people were capable of such work. Soon MacLeod was receiving more offers. His reputation grew and MJM Studios opened its doors in the quiet Italian working-class neighborhood of Hoboken, New Jersey.

The St. Louis native is a paradox. He delights in it. While at Syracuse, the artist with the athlete's body baffled fellow art students by applying for and receiving a full football scholarship. It made for a sometimes strange balance. His friends in the art school considered him a jock; the athletes called him a "weird artist."

"By getting the scholarship I had the opportunity to perform on the playing field and perform in the studio," he says. He made the Orangemen's traveling squad, lettering in his sophomore year. An injury ended his football career that year (though he still designed the covers of the team's scouting reports).

In Manhattan, he seems to relish the

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outsider’s role. “The art community has a difficult time coming to grips with what I do, because I’m as much a businessman as I am a sculptor.

“For what my ultimate intent is, I have to be that way. There’s no doubt that if I didn’t follow the road I follow—which is to develop this studio with all of its technical capabilities—I wouldn’t be able to put my sculptures up on buildings. I developed myself as a sculptor who has the ability within his studio to actually create, engineer, erect, and complete an architectural sculpture project from start to finish.”

“There’s not a big demarcation between what I do for the business and what my sculpture is,” he says later. “I look at it as all being the same thing.” MacLeod points out that his idol, Michelangelo, created the greatest architectural wonders of the world, but did not separate himself from the industry of architectural sculpture.

The 35-year-old, a B.F.A. *cum laude*, juggles the roles of artisan and businessman in true MacLeodian style: silently and competently. His studio, now located in South Kearney, New Jersey, employs 35 people and handles several major projects simultaneously. And he is realistic about the limits of his craft. “Aside from being able to achieve aesthetic results, we have to bring these things in at a reasonable price. Otherwise it defeats the purpose. If it’s too expen-

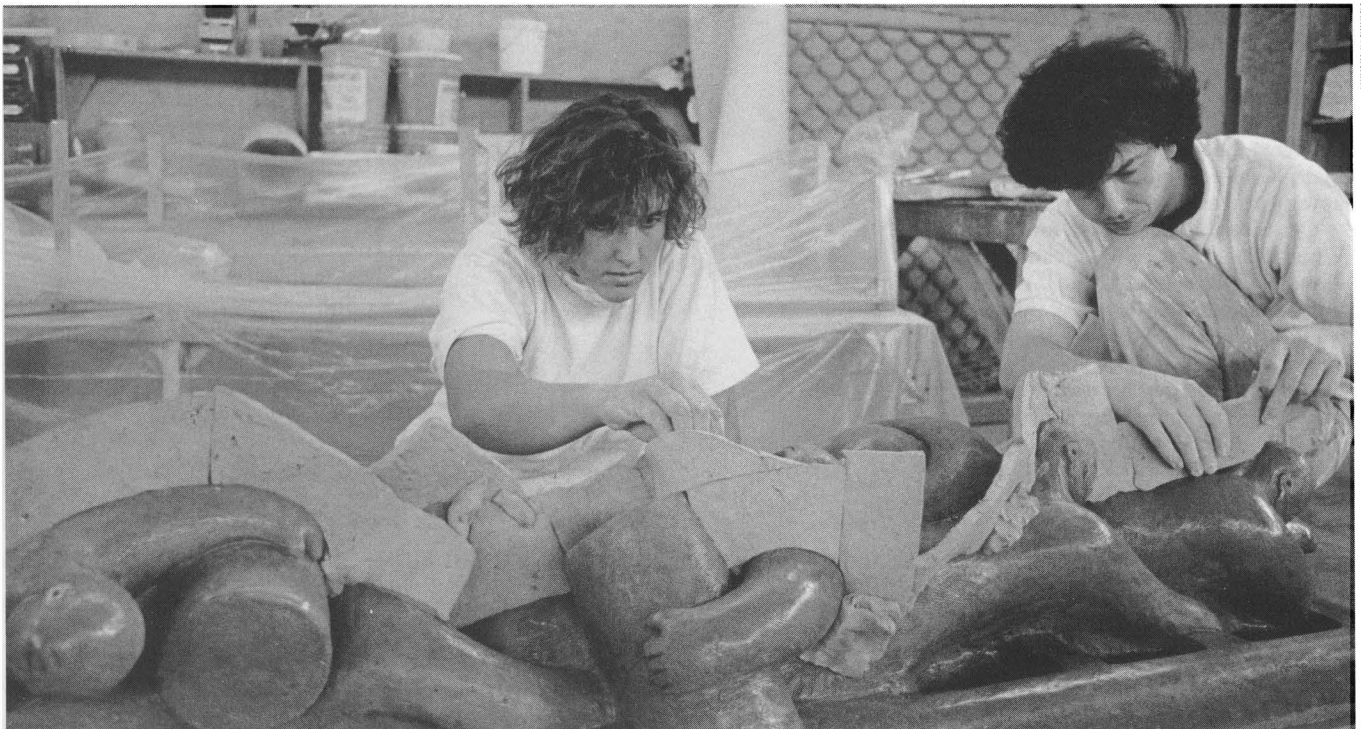
sive, it just won’t get built.”

MacLeod drives up to the Coronado, a massive brick building at 70th Street and Broadway. The ornate canopy of fabricated steel is his. So are the pair of guardian dogs on the wall, fiercely considering passersby. In a buyer’s market gone soft, the owner of the Coronado attributes the condo’s appeal to the impressive entrance. MacLeod chuckles at the intimidating sentries, crafted in the tradition of gargoyles and griffins. Cheery canines wouldn’t have worked. To fulfill the original purpose of keeping away evil spirits, “you’d have to be a pretty bad dude.”

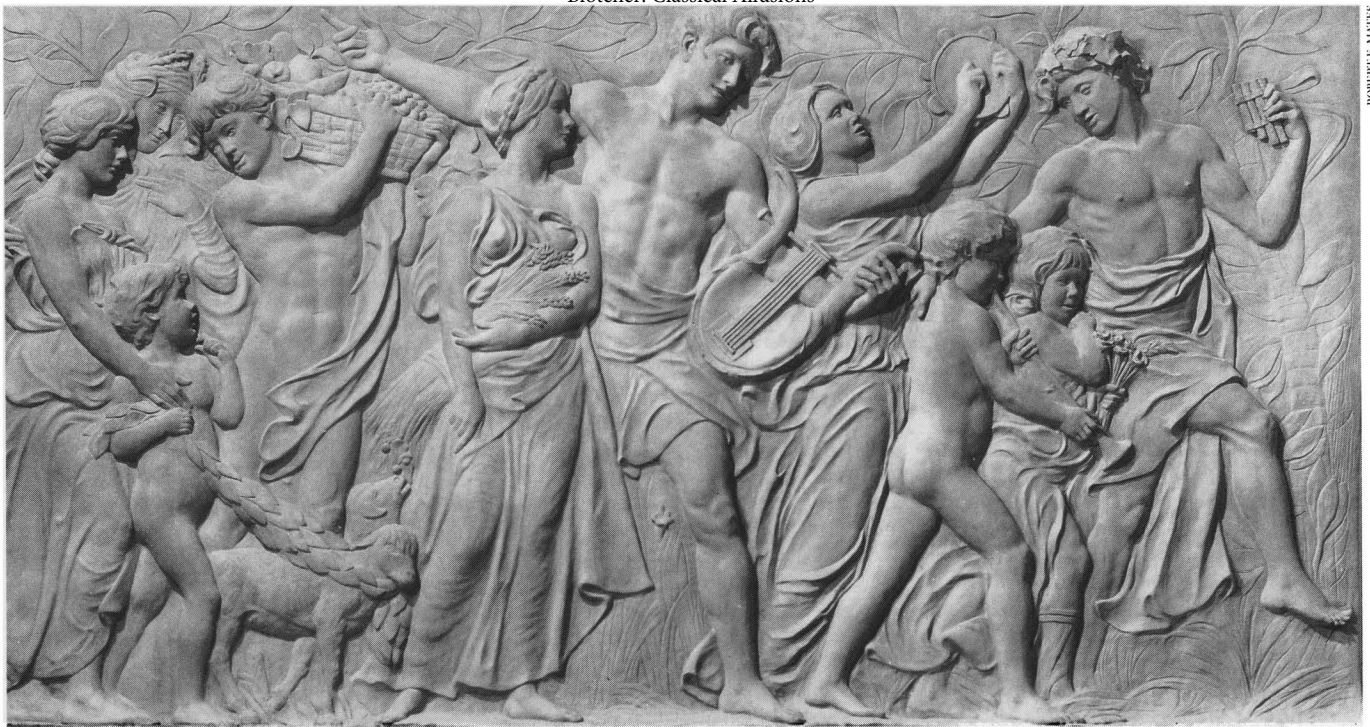
Working with archetypal images, the artisan is hard-pressed to describe the source of his inspiration. He stumbles over the particulars of what scholars would call Jungian psychology. “[These images] represent something not of this earth,” he offers. “Mesopotamian times, great entrance gates—all the great societies are influences in



STEVE SARTORI



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ROBERT E. MATES

what I do. I use animal imagery a lot, because deep down in all of our psyches, just from growing as human beings, we have a repertoire of images that represent things each of us [relates to]."

The success of the Coronado typifies MacLeod's dream. "This is great," he bubbles. "This is exactly what I work for: sculptural images up on a building, servicing my aesthetic needs as well as the owner's needs—because it certainly made him money."

That kind of attitude is making money for MacLeod, too. He has an easier time coaxing building owners to shell out bucks for a pragmatic combination of function and form. "People are willing to pay for detail. They want to be in a building with prestige." For the moment, the tug-of-war between preservationists and real estate czars has stopped. "None of the developers has enough money left. Everybody got into that phony economy of the eighties, and now they're paying for it."

Occasionally, MJM pays for it, as well. When Donald Trump was creating Atlantic City's Taj Mahal, he asked MJM to join the team. MacLeod was excited; this contract would provide the ideal showcase for his studio's talents. MacLeod and company would create nine life-size Indian elephants for the entrances, a 150-foot-long fountain, and enormous urns. In addition, Trump had dreams of a Zen meditation garden, created with 170 fake boulders. MJM created the artificial rocks.

But toward the end of the project, the Donald's financial headaches became headline news. The garden was abandoned, and MJM was stuck with the boulders. MacLeod shrugs away his own peevishness. "I hope he makes it; that means we'll get paid. If he doesn't, then it means we did a lot of work for very little money."



ROBERT E. MATES

Above: MJM recreated Isadore Konti's friezes for the Gainsborough Studios on Central Park South. Shown here are bas reliefs celebrating the arts. • Opposite, from left: A miscast of Thomas Gainsborough is a vigilant sentry for the South Kearney studio and the surrounding yard. • The restored bust of the English painter presides over the entryway to the Gainsborough Studios. MJM technicians removed the weathered pieces, recreated them, and returned them to their place on the entablature of the building.

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MacLeod eases into a parking space near the First Presbyterian Church, which looms over lower Fifth Avenue. MJM is replacing the brownstone spires, decaying in the harsh Northeastern climate since they were erected in 1845. The landmark building, modeled after a church in Bath, England, is undergoing a \$2.54-million renovation. In total, 400 new pieces will be installed. New spires, created at the South Kearney workshop, are already in place, resembling young shoots growing from an older plant. MacLeod doesn't worry about the contrast. "There's enough carbon in the air that in a year or two they will be black," he says ruefully.

In the churchyard, MacLeod's crew is chipping away at excess stone to achieve a snug fit. Joey, a man with dirt-caked hands, comes to the gate. He speaks in rough tones about the hassle of working with those who don't understand the process. MacLeod nods in empathy. "Engineers and architects don't have a clue as to how this work is done," he fumes. "They're always sticking their noses into our business, trying to be participants. It'd be better if they left the artist's work up to the artist."

The urban scenery now gives way to grimy oil tanks and steel skeletons. Welcome to South Kearney. MJM Studios transplanted its growing business here in 1987, when it outgrew its Hoboken headquarters. The area is expansive and quiet, an industrial park located on the end of a peninsula, with the Passaic and Hackensack rivers flanking the strip of land.

Operations are divided between two buildings. The Pre-Product Department mixes the concrete, terra cotta, and GFRC. The Product Department oversees the creation of sculpture and moldmaking. The division is logical. Each task requires a different mindset, MacLeod says. "When you're sculpting and moldmaking, it's a quiet, cre-

ative endeavor. When you're pouring concrete and pressing terra cotta, it's a very laborious, noisy, slam-bam routine."

The Product building, formerly a generating plant for ships, is "a studio in the Rodin sense," MacLeod says with pride. The place is large, white, and clean. Artisans jog back and forth across its 20,000-square-foot area to attend to various projects. Many workers are graduates from sculpture schools, others in industrial design. Finished sculptures are stacked against the wall, which climbs 60 feet to the ceiling. The piercing sound of a buzzsaw shatters the quiet. MacLeod's own studio is in the back, with grand pieces of sculpture on its shelves. Stacked on a palette near the entrance lay large sacks of Lehigh White Cement, each weighing 94 pounds.

MacLeod strides through the place, greeting workers and inspecting projects. The boss's requirements are simple: he looks for artists who can make a contribution to the shop. In exchange, he shares his experience. He feels the deal is more than fair. "I teach these guys more than they ever learned in any college or university."

Hiring the ideal worker means reconciling the constant struggle between art and business. MacLeod simply demands both. "It's taking people who are artists and turning them into production-oriented people, hoping they don't lose their ability to create while they're becoming efficient."

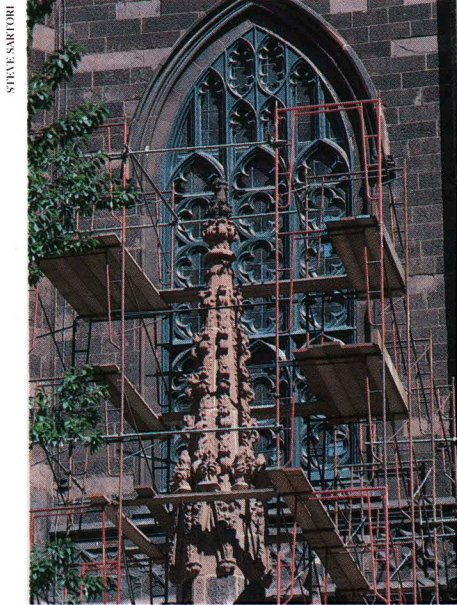
Peter Barry, MJM's project manager, approaches and explains an ongoing project in an unpolished, straightforward manner. Barry is a 1976 graduate of SU, with a B.F.A.



STEVE SARTORI



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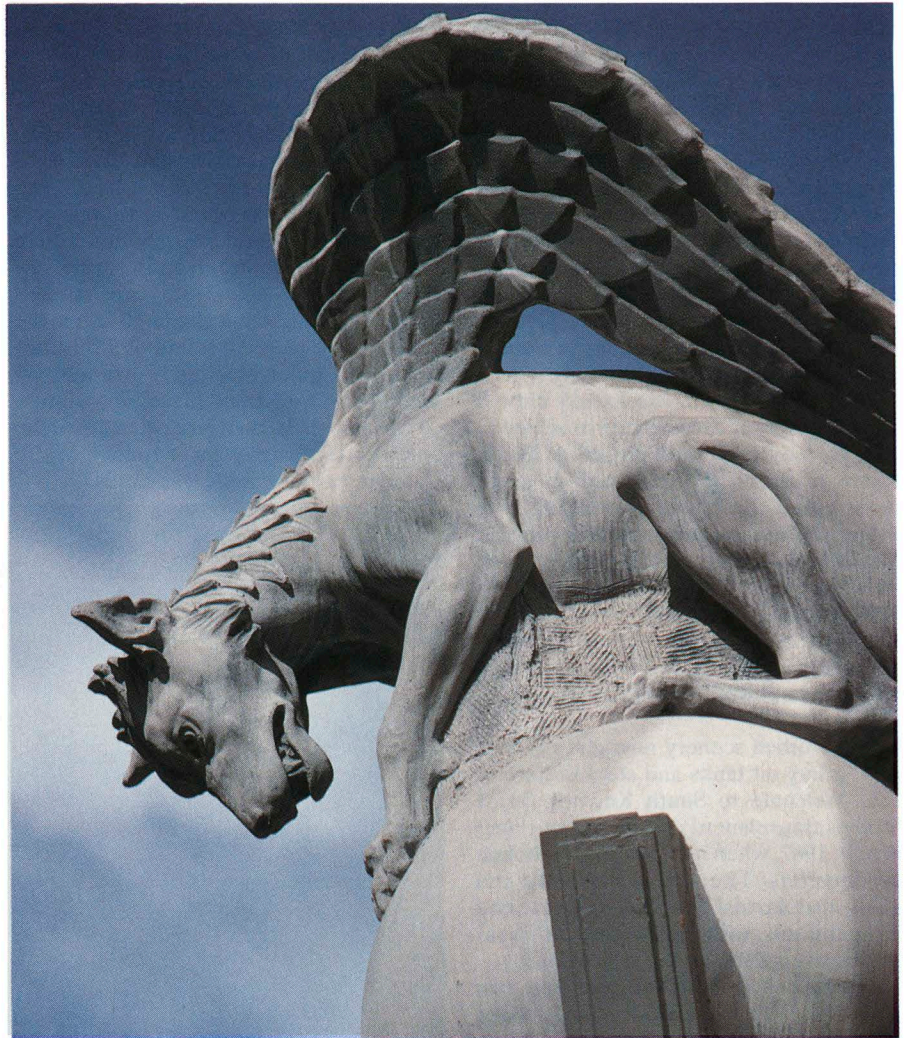
STEVE SARTORI

not in sculpture, but painting. MacLeod ribs his pal, saying, "We don't paint jackshit around here, so don't ask me what he's doing here." Actually, the two knew each other on the Hill. Both headed for New York City after school, and had an unexpected reunion at an upper-East Side apartment-building renovation last year. One day, the pair was coming down on the outside elevator, Barry recalls. "I was the iron worker. I was all dirty. He was holding blueprints. I recognized his face." Barry introduced himself, apologizing for the rust on his hands. After they swapped business stories for a while, MacLeod had one request: "Drop whatever you're working on now and come work for me."

"My wife had a baby on a Thursday. I went to work for Mike on a Monday," Barry says. "My life's never been the same since."

The Pre-Product building is a short drive around the corner. The 20,000-square-foot building sits on two acres of land. The front yard is beautiful chaos, resembling ancient civilization's Last Yard Sale, covered with scores of sculptures. An ancient all-seeing eye, a large snake with a flying dog in its mouth, and other figures are juxtaposed without concern for style or time period. A crop of Taj Mahal boulders lines the road. A bust of the painter Gainsborough sits forlornly atop a modern pyramid, obscured by a patch of high grass. Some pieces await installation, others are miscasts exiled to the yard for months until MacLeod gets around to throwing them away.

In the front yard, a horse head grotesquely peers from a water tank up above. Cement



pieces dry in the air. The remnants of an abandoned railroad run through the yard, milkweeds and other foliage nearly obscuring the rails. A Roman frieze of a family dancing lies against wooden scaffolding.

MacLeod surveys the area, pointing out the two-ton mixer and mini-forklifts tooling around the yard. An offhand arrogance creeps into his voice. "It's not like I got a little studio on East Tenth Street to do this. This is what I had to create in order to fulfill my vision as far as sculpture goes."

Jasmine, a black labrador and the model for MacLeod's canine sculptures, sprints out to greet her master. The artist grins and brushes off her insistent hand-lickings.

As quiet as the Product Department is, the Pre-Product Department is a confusion of loud noises and constant activity. A mixer that spins molds, invented by MacLeod, rattles your back molars. A

pair of men sweep mountains of shredded wheat, which turns out to be excess GFRC. A winged dog sitting atop a globe surveys the whole situation from a corner. Oblivious to the chaos, a grey-and-black cat snoozes in a dusty swivel chair.

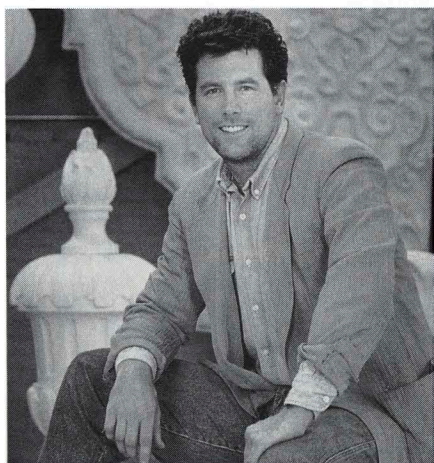
On a small radio, Steely Dan is competing in vain for airspace, singing, "I'm a fool to do your dirty work, oh yeah." The irony is lost on the women hunched over stacks of tiles and terra cotta pieces. They are working on a repair destined for Charlotte, North Carolina, in the wake of Hurricane Hugo. Nearby are the plans for a finished mosaic design, the renovation of an old New York City subway sign, involving 12,000 tile pieces. Jasmine pads into the area, carrying a rock she's grown fond of.

While the activity around him is frantic, MacLeod seems unfazed. "I take a slow Missouri attitude. I don't get shaken up by anything, because I put out as much as I

DAVID L. BARKSKY



STEVE SARTORI



can on any given day." But he admits to an urgency in his art. A deadline missed means expenses to builders and contractors. "The pressure to complete things on time is very, very intense."

Upstairs is the drafting room. MacLeod greets its supervisor, Tom Bentley, a gnomish man with a fleshy chin and worried eyes. MacLeod mentions that the entire process entails "time, effort, and frustration." At the last word, Bentley takes his cue and tells about a problem downstairs. A corps of workers, he says haltingly, has been spraying panels for which they don't have the correct frames. He finishes the anecdote and looks at his boss apologetically, a reluctant tattletale. "Ooops," MacLeod responds wryly, and muses that he's passed the group about six times today and they haven't said a word about the problem.

As lord of the castle, MacLeod is diplomatic with his work force. "All I really ever

Opposite, from left: MJM Studios began an on-site restoration of the spires on the First Presbyterian Church on Fifth Avenue this summer. ♣ A pair of MacLeod's "hounds," created specifically for the Coronado, lord over the building's entranceway. ♣ Above: MJM's Cleopatra, sculpted in 1988, now serves as an ornament for Caesar's Palace in Atlantic City. ♣ Left: The artist himself, among plaster casts from various MJM projects.

expect is a genuine effort. Nobody gets in trouble for trying hard around here if a project goes wrong." He leaves to attend to paperwork and phone calls.

Bentley lays out blueprints of the current project, a renovation of Manhattan's Bellevue Hospital and its terra cotta cornices. He takes off his wire-framed glasses and cleans them on his black apron. A Mozart quartet tinkles from a radio on his drafting table.

"We're interested in the structural integrity of the building," he explains. "We want to make sure whatever we add to it is not going to cause it to collapse. The other part is aesthetic. We want to be sure the appearance we add will match the original intent of the people who built the building in the first place."

In an age when employee allegiance is in short supply, MacLeod is realistic about keeping people on. But what irks him most are defectors who come back to steal trade secrets. "People who left here and are competing against me realize they forgot more than they remember." So they show up on a Friday under the pretense of having a beer with the old gang.

MacLeod's composure breaks for the first time today, his face tightens, and he curses under his breath.

"It gets to be an annoyance more than anything else. It barely pays me to even pay attention to that. I know what it took for me

to get here. I don't think that a lot of people out there are willing to put in the time and effort that I have. Certainly nobody has the kind of facilities that I've put together."

Watching MacLeod operate with the focus and quiet intensity he has, one gets the impression he's waging a one-man campaign to restore architectural sculpture to its former glory. He explains, without irony, "If I don't concentrate on those aspects of architectural sculpture, it's never going to move into being a big-time process like it used to be."

Such dedication has its drawbacks. "I don't always get to enjoy those minor victories of seeing something go up," he says. Most likely, MacLeod is on to the next project. His personal life also is siphoned off. He doesn't recall the last time he took a vacation.

Still, MacLeod shows no sign of slowing down. He welcomes business expansion. And with the stream of contracts that keep coming in, the guardian of the New York City skyline should keep his workshop humming. An unrelenting work ethic, offset by a laidback Missouri attitude, seem to be his key to success.

Speaking of the future, Michael MacLeod shrugs, "We're in the building trade. If the bottom drops out of that, there goes my dream. But I've worked hard, so I'll just work hard again." ■