

FLIP Featured Artist
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Disney Animator Turns to Stone

I worked at Walt Disney Feature Animation for 20 years and brought many well-known characters to life, including Zazu the bird in "The Lion King" and Pegasus the flying horse in "Hercules." I resigned from Disney in October, 2005, to re-invent myself as a sculptor.

So how DID I turn to stone? Around January, 2004, after several years of re-learning how to animate on a computer, I became fairly comfortable with the new technology and felt I needed to do something artistic with my hands to compliment and off-set all the technology. I started going to [Ron Pekar's](#) lunchtime drawing class every week and had a great time drawing. One week Ron brought in some clay and encouraged us to take a small piece home and make something. I took home some clay and eventually made a small figure playing a guitar. Other artists in the class made small figures, and Ron took the clay sculptures to a foundry to be cast in bronze. I had never done anything like that before and I really enjoyed the process of making the clay figure and the surprise and fun of seeing it in bronze.

I started doing more clay figures and having them cast in bronze. Ron told me about two big sculpture shows in Loveland, Colorado, held on the same weekend in August across the street from each other. One is a juried show called [Sculpture in the Park](#), and the other is an un-juried show called the [Loveland Sculpture Invitational](#). Together these two shows host over 500 exhibiting sculptors and attract up to 25,000 visitors. I attended as a tourist in August, 2004. The show was fantastic, and I was inspired to do more figures in bronze.

I decided to see if either show would take me as an exhibiting sculptor. I spent every 3-day weekend in 2004 and the first part of 2005



"A Matter of Opinion" Cottonwood Limestone 20 x 15 x 13 inches
This piece took over 500 hours to make. April '08

making clay figures and having them cast in bronze. In August I exhibited my bronze in the un-juried Sculpture Invitational show. That same weekend my husband and I bought a house in Loveland. We moved there in November, 2005, and my intention was to be a bronze sculptor.

Loveland, CO, is Bronze Town. The city has three foundries, and 800 artists and craftsmen working in the bronze industry. There are two major sculpture gardens in the town as well: Benson Park Sculpture Garden with over 100 monumental sculptures, and [Chapungu](#), contains over 80 monumental stone sculptures by Zimbabwe master sculptors.

In January, 2006, I took a 5-day course in stone carving taught by a Zimbabwe master sculptor and sponsored by the Loveland Museum. I learned how to use a hammer and chisel along with files, rasps, and sandpaper to make a small stone sculpture of two horses. It was an amazing to see the forms emerge from the stone. It was an enormous challenge as well. My left arm was aching from 5 days of wielding a 1 ½ pound hammer. My right thumb was battered from multiple strikes when the hammer missed the chisel. My knuckles were raw and bloody from learning (the hard way) how to handle the stone. But I made a nice little stone sculpture, I made a lot of friends in the class, I learned an enormous amount, and I wanted to learn and carve more stone.

The Zimbabwe stone sculptors are a prominent part of the Loveland sculpture community and have a huge sculpture park and cultural center. They also have a big warehouse where more stone sculpture is kept, along with raw stone and tools. After the carving class at the museum, I went to the warehouse and bought raw stone from Zimbabwe and my own set of hand tools. I also joined the Colorado Stone Sculptors, a group of sculptors who meet once a month to discuss, demonstrate, and teach some aspect of stone sculpture. After that, I began carving more and more stone and doing less and less



"A Kiss to the Wind" Colorado Yule marble 25 x 13 x 8 inches Won an Industry Award in Sculptural Pursuit magazine's 2008 competition. Oct. '07

bronze.

There is something compelling about stone that strikes a responsive chord with me. Coaxing a form out of a piece of the earth that took millions and millions of years to create is a profound thought and an awesome experience. I like the colors and textures of stone. I like the risk that the stone could break while I am carving it, or it could just fall apart sitting there due to the stresses built up inside the stone from the process of carving.

Every aspect of working with stone is a challenge. For instance, how does one move a 250-pound block? The first time I had to do this I used the Egyptian method--I rolled the stone over dowels on the floor to move it around; and I used fulcrum, pry bar, 2 x 4's, 4 x 4's, and concrete blocks to raise it up. Then I discovered a hydraulic table on wheels which can raise and lower up to 700 pounds. However you must first raise the stone up 16 inches to get it on the table. The engine hoist can raise, lower, and roll around up to a 2-ton stone, and is the easy way to get a stone on the hydraulic table. The next step up is the fork lift . . .

The more stone I carve, the more I use the skills I had as an animator. As an animator, I was an avid thumb-nailer. Planning was key to my animation and it is essential to my stone sculpture as well. I carve stylized animals -- I love animals and I loved animating animals. I like a strong silhouette in my sculpture and a clear line of action through the pose. Attitudes need to read at a glance. The play of light and shadow over the form is new for me. Cuts must be deep and well-placed to accentuate the forms and increase the interest and drama of the pose. I carve the full body in my "characters," some with faces and some without -- the body attitude is primary to the feel I want to convey in the piece.

Other artistic ideas that cross over from Animation are pose-related: squash and stretch, working straights against curves (flats against rounds), caricature and exaggeration



"Pounce" Colorado Grey Alabaster 14 x 7 x 7 inches made with hand tools, ears done with dremel May '06

in everything (like the deep cuts). Animation skills like self-discipline and sustaining the “performance” over long periods of time are essential to sculpting in stone. Nearly all my sculptures took over 100 hours of carving and finishing time to make, one took over 500 hours to make. Besides animation, I also learned how to micro-manage myself (keep track of my hours) at Disney -- an annoying but useful skill when pricing my sculpture.

Inspiration for my sculpture come from everywhere -- from a beautiful raw stone, a piece of music, a conversation, something I read, an unrelated piece of art that acts as a springboard to a new idea, some thing or experience that strikes me as significant. Then again, some sculpture ideas come out of nowhere and I never understand what the sculpture is about until months after it is finished.

So, first I get the idea, and then I draw. Sometimes I draw for several days or more than a week. Sometimes I do research on the animal that is the subject of my sculpture. Sometimes I read books about the history of sculpture, art aesthetics, or look at design work by other artists. I do a lot of thinking and drawing and gathering of information and inspiration. When this process is going well, I do what I did in animation and trade off being the artist and then the critic until I can no longer make the design any better or stronger.

At times I have a particular kind of stone in mind for a particular idea, and sometimes I need to find the right stone for an idea -- it works both ways. When stone shopping, I will often buy stones that seem really neat to me even though I have no idea what I will make out of them. I love colored stone and stone with interesting textures. As I gain more experience, I am moving toward harder stones like marble, travertine, and calcite because they will hold a crisper edge, and crisp edges produce interesting and dramatic forms and shadows.

I like to work with at least one formal element in my sculptures. [Jules Engel](#) was my mentor



"Curly Bird" Purple Wonderstone 11 1/2 x 8 1/2 x 6 inches extensive use of spirals July '06



"Frankie and Mancho" Chlorite 7 x 8 x 5 inches This is my first stone sculpture, made in the class at the museum. Jan. '06

at Cal Arts and he influenced me to think in simple geometric shapes both as a starting point and as an integral element of the design. Right now I am interested in spirals and triangles, and try to incorporate these elements of form in my designs. Sometimes I start with a spiral or triangle and draw until it becomes an animal design.

In sculpting stone, you have to do things in order--the first thing must be done first, the second thing second, and so on. It simply won't work if you try to do the third thing first. The key is to figure out what the first thing is. I always ask myself if a particular mass of stone is needed, and try to determine the consequences if I cut it away. If I am doing a complex composition I will make a small clay maquette of my design before laying blade to stone.

I work from the top down, go for the silhouette first, and draw on the stone. Excess stone comes off the top and then I work my way down because gravity can cause a top-heavy piece of stone to crack and fall off. An analogy might be to start with an entire baseball field and gradually work your way in from all directions to home plate. Or start with a big blob of dough and take away and refine until the forms come into focus.

I began carving stone with hand tools and made quite a few sculptures that way. Now I use power tools for the most part. My designs tend to be "dangerous," i.e. arms, noses, ears stick out away from the mass and can break off if I am not careful. Using a hammer and chisel is very percussive, and it is easy to strike the chisel just a bit too hard or at the wrong angle and lop off an ear. Power tools, aside from the air hammer, are not percussive. However, they do create a lot of vibration in the stone and chunks can just fall off anywhere depending on how the interior stresses in the stone are set up. Unfortunately, this is unknowable and you must be careful and take your chances. I have had chunks of stone fall off the block as I am carving, but so far it has all been stone that needed to come off anyway. My colleagues tell me if the



"Magic Lesson" Red Travertine 15 x 15 x 14 inches This is my first private commission. Feb '08

stone breaks, you then have the opportunity to make two sculptures.

For blocking I use a 7-inch diamond blade on a big grinder to take off big pieces of stone. I use a 5-inch blade to take off smaller pieces until I am left with my sculpture idea made out of cube-ish shapes and looking very blocky. Then I have to leave the “security of the block” and begin to ruff in the real forms in the locations (on x, y, and z) where they are supposed to be. As the forms become more and more refined I progress to smaller and smaller tools. I use diamond burs with a pneumatic die grinder, then smaller burs, then hand rasps, files, and diamond jewelers’ files. Then I go to diamond sanding pads and ultimately to sandpaper--where I go up through the grits to 1800 if appropriate for the sculpture. You get different effects from the stone depending on how you finish it.

It takes a long time to become good at any artistic endeavor. Once you are good in one medium there are a lot of principles and skills that can carry over into another medium. As with animation, I think a successful sculpture guides the eye through the piece via the forms just as good staging, timing, and path of action of the character guides the viewer through a scene. Technically good volumes and edges in sculpture is like good drawing. Appeal is the same in both mediums.

The business side of stone sculpture is another intense endeavor. Because stone is one-of-a-kind, when you sell it, it is gone. I always have my sculptures professionally photographed because the photos are all I will have to keep. At first it was difficult to adjust to selling my work and saying good-bye to the sculpture. Now I understand that it is the **process** of sculpting, as with animation, that is the real fun. All of my sculptures are for sale and many in my portfolio have been sold already.

I have done one show with another sculptor (“Two Women Who Rock”) and one Featured-Artist-of-the-Month display in a

gallery show. I have an up-coming show at the Loveland Museum early next year. Currently, my income comes from the juried Sculpture in the Park show in Loveland which I have done for the past two summers, and private commissions. This year I will start applying for and competing for public commissions.

Stone sculpture is a lot like animation was for me -- always new, always demanding more knowledge and a greater sensitivity to what I want to say. There are always more techniques to master, more situations to figure out. Each different kind of stone I carve involves learning how to deal with a new hardness and texture, sort of like learning the personality of a new character. Animation is the illusion of three dimensions, stone sculpture is the reality of three dimensions. To me, they are not such different mediums at all.

Photos in this article are the property of Ellen Woodbury.