



Public Opinion

What You See Is Not Always What You Get

written by Debra Usher

Making the decision to devote your life's work to art is a difficult choice – after all, who knows what the future will bring? Some make the commitment from the get-go and never look back; some make the decision in the midst of their career, while others wait until retirement. For Canadian sculptor and painter Andrew Benyei, that challenging decision came at the age of 40 during his corporate career.

Andrew Benyei is best known for his figurative sculptures; his work is expressive and contemporary, capturing human dynamics, and displaying empathy with his subjects. His interpretation is excitingly fresh and new.

Born in Hungary in 1949, Benyei and his family came to Canada in 1956 during the abortive

uprising against Soviet rule. As a child of immigrants, there was always an expectation to succeed, usually as a professional in the disciplines of law, medicine, or engineering. With a talent for math and science, he chose engineering and went on to receive an MBA in 1974, carrying a briefcase around downtown Toronto for the next sixteen years.

Then it happened: "It became evident to me that life was too short and had more to offer than working to retire," he says. "It was no fun and very stressful, so I started taking art courses at the Ontario College of Art and Design as a stress reliever." Having experienced art at an early age through sketching and carving, Andrew learned about colour as a child by painting "Paint by Numbers" pictures. In high school, he was the cartoonist for the school paper and created posters for candidates running for school council. He also taught at the ROM and various summer camps at the time. Watercolour and acrylic followed but his preference is for oil paint.

Carving came to him as a child, first with soap and a butter knife, then in wood with an X-Acto knife, which taught him to understand three-dimensional shapes. "I've changed my approach," he explains. "I now sculpt in clay. The difference is that carving is a subtractive process, i.e. you

Insider Trading





left, Common Interest

below, Another Pensionable Day

Andrew's inspirations come from many sources: "I paint and I sculpt. Generally I paint what I see and sculpt what I feel. I love large vistas and seeing the horizon and this shows up in many of my paintings. My sculptures tend to reflect my life experiences or others that I have observed. All my sculptures are figurative. I try to capture their emotional responses and interrelationships. Many of my sculptures reflect aspects of my past business life." In his anecdotal sculpture, Benyei displays an endearing empathy with his subjects, who often reflect the ups and downs of life in the kinds of organizations where he spent much of his career.

His expressive contemporary sculptures are, in an art critic's words, "personal emotional responses to the intricate and complex interactions of people whose expectations have been tempered by life."

Within or Without

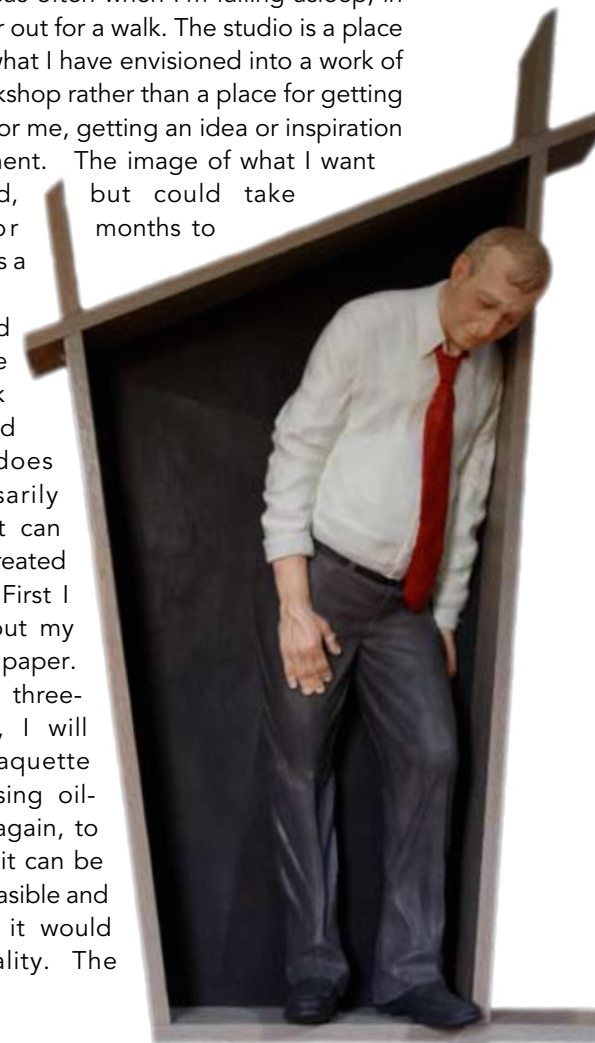
"My inspiration comes from within," he reveals. "I get my ideas often when I'm falling asleep, in the shower or out for a walk. The studio is a place to translate what I have envisioned into a work of art; it's a workshop rather than a place for getting inspiration. For me, getting an idea or inspiration takes a moment. The image of what I want is in my head, but could take weeks or months to accomplish as a work of art."

"I tend to see the finished work in my mind but that does not necessarily mean that it can be actually created in that way. First I will sketch out my thoughts on paper. If it is to be three-dimensional, I will make a maquette or model using oil-based clay, again, to determine if it can be technically feasible and to see how it would look in reality. The

start with a block of material, such as wood or stone, and you remove unnecessary material. My sculptures are figurative and I focus on body language, which is subtle gestures, and I tend to make changes as I go along, so carving would leave me with toothpicks by the time I finish. Therefore I use an additive process with clay, which is starting with nothing and adding to it until the sculpture is complete. Of course, modelling clay is temporary so it needs to be converted into a more permanent form such as bronze, fibreglass or other hard material."

Taking It to the Streets

Once he committed to make art his vocation, Benyei started painting, like many other artists have done, on the streets of Kensington, a colourful marketplace in Toronto. "It took me about seven years to feel comfortable to say I am an artist rather than an engineer who is an artist," he states. The change in surroundings was stark to say the least, as he thought to himself, "What have I done? Last week I was in a gleaming granite washroom on the 20th floor of a glass office building; now the only place was a public washroom in a park that was filthy and foul smelling."



sketches and models also allow me to explore variations before I settle on what will be the final creation." Determining what material Benyei will use for any given work is "whatever allows me to achieve the results I want," so he is not wedded to any specific material such as the perfect stone to carve. He also uses animals such as cows and pigs as metaphors for people by putting them into themes that people would experience.

Is What You See, What You Get?

For Benyei, good creative art has to provide an opportunity for the viewer to fill in missing parts and apply their own interpretation based on their own life experience. He feels that in a painting

boardroom in front of the office staff. When it was unveiled, the staff said 'Wow! What a fabulous painting. Look at how the background colour matches the carpet.' I've learned not to take these comments personally."

Is It You or Is It Me?

While a full eighty percent of Benyei's works are his own inspirations, he thoroughly enjoys commissioned work. Although stressful at times, he finds it satisfying and inspirational, since they allow him to explore different artistic directions. He doesn't bid on large public competitions, only those that come to him because the client likes his work, and he sees his role as understanding



Gossip

that has all the detail painted in, what you see is what you get, and soon the work may become boring. "The Impressionists recognize this human characteristic," he notes. "I often have people comment about how much detail I have in some of my works, where in actuality, I don't. It's just that viewers have filled in the details in their own mind. It's one of the reasons that to me, Rodin was a great sculptor – his work had little detail, yet it is all there for the viewer."

He also feels that different people interpret art differently – some view it as a reminder of life experiences or events, and still others see it as a means for eliciting an emotional response. Some see art as decorative. As he explains, "For example, I completed a portrait of a retiring CEO of a company. It was being presented in the

what their vision is. Still, some commissions can be challenging. "I was sculpting a bust of the Chairman of a corporation, and he commented that I made his nose too big. I made it smaller and he said, 'It doesn't look like me.' So I recreated his nose as before and thought this was it. His children came to look at the sculpture and his daughter said, 'You made his nose too big.' I pointed out his nose and the one on the sculpture and she realized that they were the same. We went through the same thing with his ears and jowls and that's when I realized that his children had known him for half a century, yet had no idea what he looked like, even though they know him. They saw their father's face in a holistic way – they recognized the whole, not the sum of the parts. After a while, they realized that it was indeed an



Speakers' Corner



Prima Donna

Lifeguard House



Segwun



Upwind Leg



Dinghy





Pirouette, garden



Perfect Marriage

accurate version of their father.”

A similar effect occurs on occasion when Andrew puts on a show: while most of the feedback is overwhelmingly positive many reactions he receives are in the mindset of the viewer. For example, “In the sculpture ‘Perfect Marriage,’ I was trying to say that in a good relationship one person provides support and balance to the other who is exploring new opportunities. This reflects my own relationship with my wife. One woman who saw the sculpture asked me ‘Why is he holding her back?’ I have to assume she had just come away from a bad relationship.”

Back to School

Academically, Benyei is often asked whether his formal education and former work experience was a waste, and wouldn’t he have been better off going to art school right from the beginning? His answer is a resounding, “No.” The reason, he says, is that “Engineering allowed me to understand materials, structures and how to problem solve. My business training and experience taught me how to be able to make a living as an artist and how to be able to deal with clients, since most of my clients have life experiences not too dissimilar from mine, so I understand what is important to them, such as being reliable, being on time, returning phone calls and emails, looking presentable and of course, being able to deliver great work.”

Although people generally choose to pursue a fine art career right after high school by attending an art program, Andrew categorizes

artists according to their experiences: Those that start young can have the technical skills but not necessarily the life experiences available to express through their art (he points out that there are no child prodigies in the visual art area); at the other end, retirees may treat art as an avocation rather than a vocation. Those like himself who garnered life experiences before learning the technical skills to express them in an artistic form, making art their vocation. So he puts artists into four categories: those that have good technical skills but little creativity; those that have good creativity but little technical skill; those that have both; and those that have neither.

To Work or Not to Work

A condition in life that Andrew has obviously thought about is retirement, a state that means different things to different people, especially when it comes to employment vs. self-employment, and artisans in particular. “I often meet people, of a variety of ages, who were looking forward to retirement,” he states. “This does not seem right. There is no retirement age for what I do. Thank goodness.” Being self-employed affords him the flexibility to work his 100 hours a week any time he desires – weekdays and weekends tend to flow together.

Now he wakes up on a Sunday morning and thinks, “This is great, I have nothing to do so I can go down to my studio and create. Now all my time is my own.” When he’s not “working,” Benyei skis, cycles, works out, sings in a choir and likes to socialize with his friends. Just don’t hand him a nice glass of Australian Cabernet Sauvignon and a sweet treat; he might actually forget about work!

Andrew’s award-winning work has earned accolades from critics and art enthusiasts. His work is bought and commissioned by both corporate and private collectors around the world. He has been invited to exhibit his sculpture worldwide including New Zealand, Spain, Asia and the United States where his work is in corporate, public and private collections.

He is a member of a number of art organizations including Ontario Society of Artists, Society of Canadian Artists, Sculpture Society of Canada, and the Arts and Letters Club, and served on the boards of these organizations. To see more about Andrew and his creations, and to see where his art is available, visit www.benyei.com or drop him a message at andrew@benyei.com.