

BY JOSHUA SHERMAN, M.D.

DON GUMMER

AN INSIGHTFUL CONVERSATION
WITH THE
CELEBRATED SCULPTOR

THE ARTIST BOOK FOUNDATION (TABF) recently released a gorgeous hardcover art book in collaboration with Don Gummer, which brings his works to life in richly illustrated detail. During a recent trip to TABF's headquarters at MASS MoCA, *Berkshire Magazine's* publisher, Dr. Joshua Sherman, had the opportunity to sit down with Gummer and discuss his life, his new book, his artistic process, and the stories behind his most iconic works.

SHERMAN: Thanks for joining me, Don! The new book is absolutely beautiful, and I thought that it was really wonderful how you started off your artist statement by talking about your high school teacher. You also talk about the "Discipline of Starting" in your artist statement. I think that a lot of creative people not only don't know where to start, but they also have a fear of starting. Have there been any notable moments in your life when the mantra of "Start by starting" has helped you when you're feeling less-than-inspired?

GUMMER: There are a couple of different ways of starting to make art. The teacher that I mentioned in the artist statement, Elva Strouse, was a believer in having an idea, making a small drawing of it, and then enlarging it to its full size. In one of my processes, if I want to make something with a lot of pieces, I first decide its size and height, and then put two pieces together when I have a very vague



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idea. When I add a third piece, I start to have kind of a conversation. Then I put a fourth one, and I'll find different places to put a fifth one and go from there. That's one of the ways that I build. I can build up some things using that process and cut out the elements that I don't need after a while. I build up scaffolding around them as I make them bigger. After a certain height, I have a pretty good understanding of how it's going to end. It's not exact, but I have a general idea of what I'm going to do. At that point, patterns start repeating. It may change into a totally different thing as it progresses, but it's mostly within the original vision. Another way of working is just to think about what it is that I want to do and sketch it out. I can make little drawings of the ideas and then develop them into bigger drawings so that I can start building from there.

SHERMAN: I'm a big believer in environmental influence on artistic inspiration. Can you tell us about your studio and the physical spaces that you prefer to work in?

GUMMER: I've been lucky that I've always had access to big studios. I like big studios, I like quiet, and I also like skylights and window walls. I have a building in Long Island City that has two floors and a roof. A contractor bought it for his company, but he didn't finish it. He had all of the steel and cinderblock in the floor, and he left brick on the outside. I saw it, bought it, and finished it. I can park my car on the top floor, and I've put a lot of sculpture up there, as well. I also have an elevator that can take large sculptures up there. It's a big studio with a lot of light, and the walls are painted white. I recently began renting out the bottom floor to The Noguchi Museum as a space for their Akari lamps, but I still have the whole upstairs level of my studio.

SHERMAN: The book talks about you working as a union carpenter in New York City. Obviously, your work is very architectural. Would you have fun designing a building or a skyscraper in New York City?

GUMMER: I think it would be more fun to do a house than a skyscraper. Frank Gehry is a friend of mine, and I asked him, "How do you like doing these skyscrapers?" He said, "There's no wiggle room." The skyscraper that he did in New York City has a beautiful rippling quality, but to him it was constraining.

SHERMAN: When you create a sculpture, do you have a specific intellectual or emotional response that you're looking to elicit from the viewer? And is that response a determining factor in your reflection of whether or not a work has been successful?

GUMMER: Sometimes, as artists, we wonder if people "get it." Some people get different things or they express their responses differently. Other people pick it up right away, like Peter Plagens, who wrote one of the essays in the book. Peter came to visit me one day, and I had this sculpture made of five rocks and brass plates that were all connected by cables. There was water underneath the cables, and there were five stones in the water and five stones that were hovering above it. The title of the work was *Station Five*. When I was making it, I had been thinking about a science-fiction movie called *District 9*, where extraterrestrial pods come down over South Africa. I wanted to create something where things were bearing down from outer space, and then all of a sudden, they were locked into this zone. After looking at the piece, Peter came over to me and said, "This reminds me of *District 9*." Those moments—where people are able to connect with my works and understand the intensions behind them—make me very happy.

SHERMAN: We're here at MASS MoCA, so I would be remiss if I didn't ask you about *Primary Separation*, which is prominently displayed in an outdoor plaza on the MASS MoCA campus. In the book, you talk about the tension in the piece and its simultaneous togetherness and separation. When I saw the photo of *Primary Separation* in the book, it actu-

ally reminded me of one of my favorite sculptures by Rodin of Cupid and Psyche. In the Rodin sculpture, Cupid is abandoning Psyche as she reaches up to him with her lips and he turns his cheek away. There's a space between them, which creates a similar feeling of tension, separation and togetherness. When I went to the actual sculpture today and revisited it in person, it actually felt more like when I visited the aquarium in Sarasota, Florida. They had a massive Megalodon model that you could stand under, and it reminded me that part of the inspiration behind *Primary Separation* was Constantin Brancusi's *Fish* sculpture. It was interesting to me that seeing the sculpture in print (in the book) and in person (at MASS MoCA) gave me two different emotional responses. Do you find that looking at the smaller model that you made of the piece from the 1970s elicits a different response in you than the larger scale, final product?

GUMMER: When you see the sculpture in person, you do feel its weight, although it is the same concept as the original model. When I did the smaller model, I imagined it being big. I wanted to attack it, and I dreamed of bringing it to a big plaza in its full size. I'm just lucky, because [MASS MoCA founding director] Joe Thompson came to my studio when I had rebuilt it from the first version that I had made in Boston. The genesis of that piece happened in Boston in 1969. There were a number of student demonstrations that were going on in Boston, and the Boston Museum school had closed down. At the time, it seemed like everything around me was coming apart. I was in a relationship that was coming apart, The Beatles had split up, and boosters were coming apart from rockets that were going to the moon. I did the original version of the piece as a comment on separation.

SHERMAN: When you develop these pieces, do you think of them in terms of how people engage with them? Whether people stand underneath them or look at them from across the street?

GUMMER: It depends on the site, but nearly every piece I do has no front or back. I do a lot of work on a turntable, and if a piece is at a stage where it's too big to look at it from all angles, I walk around and look at it from every side. To me, a piece has to work from every angle.

SHERMAN: The book reveals that when you first started, you actually wanted to be an illustrator. We have the Norman Rockwell Museum in Stockbridge, of course. I would love to know—who were some of the illustrators that influenced you?

GUMMER: The first animated illustration that I ever saw that stood out to me was probably Disney animation. I liked the shape of Donald Duck's bill. Later on, I got into Norman Rockwell, and he somewhat influenced my illustrative style. When I was growing up in Indianapolis, I went to a big high school called Ben Davis High School. They had a tradition every Friday where we would wear our "senior cords." People would wear white corduroy skirts or corduroy pants, and they would have things painted on them, such as flames, car crashes, or painted-on chastity belts. I would make money doing illustrations on people's corduroys, and I also did the lettering for the Ben Davis High School band. Back then, I knew art was a job that you could have and a potential career path. I thought that I'd be an illustrator because I could draw, and I worked for a couple of guys that had a gallery on the side of U.S. Route 40. One of them did a lot of Emmett Kelly clown pictures, and another did landscape pictures with a palette knife. This one guy would get me to go and draw clown heads and give me the canvases and an opaque projector. He also had me do a New Orleans street scene. I did a really good drawing, and he said, "Well, why don't you paint it?" After I finished the painting, I went back in and saw that he had put his name on the piece. I quit after that happened, but it was still a good learning experience. People would stop there when they were driving across the country, and they'd buy



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Above, sculptor Don Gummer stand by his sculpture, *Primary Separation*, prominently displayed in an outdoor plaza on the MASS MoCA campus. In the monograph of his work, published by the Artist Book Foundation (TABF), he talk about the piece. Gummer, left, with a model of the work in TABF's gallery.

the portrait-style drawings that I had done of people like Albert Einstein, Ernest Hemingway, or Albert Schweitzer.

SHERMAN: Do you still do any figurative sketching that is based in traditional realism?

GUMMER: Sometimes I'll work with a model and just draw for a while. Time passes in a different way when you're drawing, and you can see your progress in a different way, as well.

SHERMAN: One of your self-portraits from many years ago is in the book. Have you done a self-portrait recently?

GUMMER: Not recently. I've thought about it, though. I actually made that old self-portrait when I was kicked out of school. I did a head for a clay sculpture class and they told me to tear it down after I finished it. I wanted to cast it, so I took it home to my apartment. They found out that I had taken the clay head, and they came into my apartment and

told me that they were kicking me out of class for two weeks. I painted the self-portrait during the two-week period when I was at home in my studio. After I came back to the school, I asked my teachers if I could have the drawings back that they had posted in the hallway. I used those drawings to make a portfolio, then applied to the Boston Museum School with that portfolio and got accepted there.

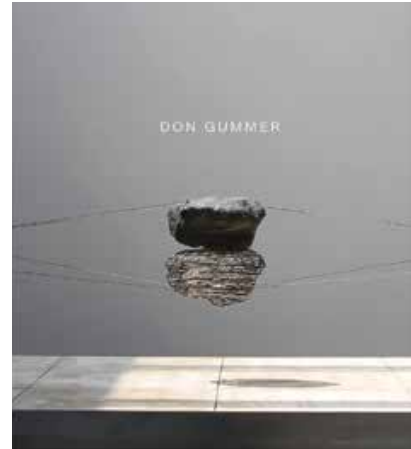
SHERMAN: In the book, it mentions the fact that you disapprove of volume in sculpture. At one point, your work is described as “skeletal to the point of being lacy.” Still, Constantin Brancusi’s *Fish*, which was an inspiration to you, is very solid and voluminous. I can certainly see that influence reflected in pieces such as *Primary Separation*. Do you agree that the majority of your work is skeletal, or do you disagree?

GUMMER: I somewhat agree with that.

For example, I like Richard Serra’s solid steel cubes, but I don’t really like when metal sculptures are welded and hollow inside. I feel that it takes something away from the weight of the piece. Sometimes I have to eat my words, though, because I went to the Barnes Foundation recently in Philadelphia. I saw a beautiful Ellsworth Kelly sculpture that was just two long boxes. It was so simple and it wasn’t solid, but it was still beautiful. For myself, I have also made several pieces out of boxes that were shipped to me that I had around my studio. Those boxes were hollow inside, and I’ve done some work that way, but most of my linear volumes are still volumes.

SHERMAN: You’ve accomplished a lot in your life, and this book serves as an excellent career retrospective. What are some of your goals at this point in your career?

GUMMER: I’d like to do some more commissions and museum shows. I have a lot of work that is not quite yet cast, and I have saved most of my cardboard models. I’d like to find a good place for those pieces and continue working on them. ■



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Don Gummer’s monograph is the latest book published by The Artist Book Foundation.

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