

Sigmund Abeles

Measuring Up

By Craig Brandhorst

They barrel down the highway like gods — elegant nymphs and hulking beasts, mythical figures strapped to flatbed trucks beneath tarps that flutter in the oncoming wind. A marble shoulder reveals itself, a muscular bronze thigh. An enormous carved wing slips loose, on the verge of flight.

To a boy with an active imagination, the strange cargo rumbling down Highway 17 could appear almost magical. To Sigmund Abeles — six, seven, eight years old, eating raisins and Ritz crackers on the stoop of the Myrtle Beach rooming house operated by his mother — it's also breathtakingly real.

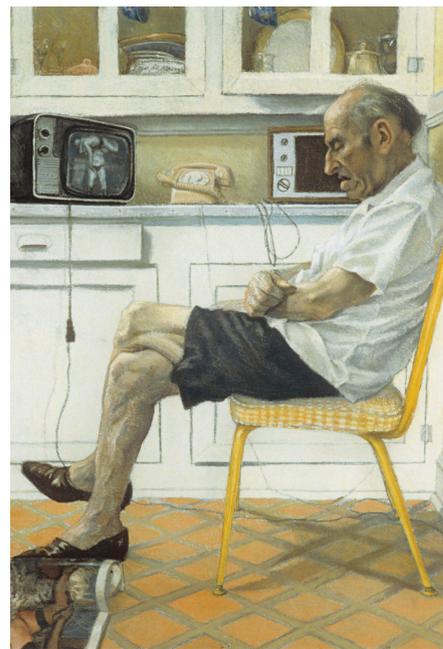
Sig knows what he's seen: new work headed to Brookgreen Gardens, artist Anna Hyatt Huntington's sprawling sculpture park down the coast. Each spring, he and his mother, his aunt and two cousins picnic at the vast botanical wonderland, which he will later describe as "Disneyland for a kid who wouldn't care about Disneyland."

"Mom! Mom!" he shouts as he runs inside. "They're taking another sculpture to Brookgreen! Can we do that picnic early? Can we go? I want to see it!"

He's seen other amazing things from the stoop — Franklin Delano Roosevelt and financier Bernard Baruch in a presidential motorcade, trucks carting German prisoners to POW camps, the endless stream of traffic between Florida and New York — but it's art that speaks to him.

And it's not just sculpture. An itinerant sign painter notices him trying to draw, gives him a few books and tells him that if he draws five pictures a day for five years, he can call himself an artist. So he trains his eye sketching carnies at the Pavilion amusement park and vacationers on the beach. He hones his draughtsman skills copying the great masters.

"What really excited me about art was LIFE magazine," he says. "I used to say that my first centerfold was the Sistine ceiling that I unfolded out of the magazine and hung over my bed. It must have been four or five feet, in color. They had wonderful, serious articles about artists — Michelangelo, Van Gogh; later, Jackson Pollock..."



His Saturday (Homage to My Step Dad)

1982, Pastel on paper, 41 x 31 in.

Collection of Joseph Feury and Lee Grant

"This genre picture portrays my step dad catching glimpses of 'ballet' (wrestling) and a Playboy magazine on the floor featuring a disgraced politician's wife. Mom's presence resides in dishes in the cupboard. This is the spot, while making toast, where we heard the radio report of Pearl Harbor Day. Life was lived in our kitchen."





Max, Young Painter & Composer in a Suit
2000, Pastel on paper, 30 x 40 in.
Colby College Museum of Art

Boyd Saunders, USC professor emeritus of art: "I put Sig in the same category as some of the great masters of drawing, such as Degas, for instance. His figurative work always contains an intensity, an immediacy and an involvement with the subject. There is nothing that might be called distance. It's very committed and very personal, yet it stands on the foundation of great drawing skills."

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Self Portrait with Sketch and Brushes
1953, Oil on canvas, 24 x 18 in.
Collection of Max Abeles

"Done while I was a student USC and inspired by a number of self-portraits I cut out of LIFE magazine, I really tried my best to add my face to the timeline of the great history of art. It is so totally fitting that my artist son, Max, should own this, as I own and hang a few of his self-portraits from an even earlier age."

ON THE EVE OF A TWO-MAN SHOW at Brookgreen Gardens (with sculptor Grainger McKoy), Abeles, '56, sits at a long table in the library of Myrtle Beach's Burroughs-Chapin Museum of Art. Just in from New York, where he splits time between a studio on the upper west side of Manhattan and another upstate, he reflects on his career with the perspective of time.

Now a celebrated draughtsman, printmaker, painter and, yes, sculptor, he has work in collections worldwide, including the Metropolitan

Museum of Art, the Chicago Art Institute, the British Museum and the Whitney Museum of American Art. He can also look back on the three decades as a professor of art at the University of New Hampshire and elsewhere.

None of it came easy, though. Raised at time and in a place where art education wasn't part of the school curriculum, he knew what he wanted but a career in the arts seemed nearly unimaginable. To his mother, it wasn't even an option.

"I saw art as a big deal, I was nuts about the stuff. My mother saw it as the stupidest thing anybody could ever do," he says with a quiet laugh that is at once self-deprecating and forgiving. "I mean, maybe you could do it as a hobby, but not as an intelligent person. She said I was going to waste my intelligence drawing pictures."

Luckily, as he entered his teens, a couple of people took an interest, including Truman Moore, the father of a friend. A successful local builder who had also studied at the Art Institute in Chicago, Moore possessed a natural talent for woodworking. Watching him carve elaborate doors for the homes of wealthy clients, listening to him expound on the qualities of different materials, Abeles began to understand what it took to be an artist.

"That was an amazing guy," he says. "Truman was the first person I ever met who wasn't counting how much money he was going to make from something and wasn't counting how many hours it would take to earn it."

Then came Gerard Francis Tempest, a wealthy eccentric who had studied at the Boston Museum School and had a Ph.D. in art history from Harvard.

"One day Mister Truman said to me, 'Get in the truck, I want to show you something.' We went to see this house Tempest was building out of an old rumrunner's boat," Abeles recalls. "It had all these beams with barnacles on them, really unusual. I'm normally pretty shy, but if there's something I really want, I can figure out a way to ask for it. I said, 'Can I study with you? Or be your apprentice or something?' He says, 'Sure, how about three days a week?'"

Abeles was immediately drawn to the classically-inspired art coming out of Tempest's native Boston, which offered an antidote to the abstract expressionism dominating the New York art world and, by extension, American art in general. For a kid emulating the masters, and otherwise filling his sketchbook with amusement park carnies and ungainly sunbathers, the minimalist abstraction of Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko didn't cut it.

"When I look at minimalist art, I feel like I've gone to a dinner party and they just have a corner of a Saltine cracker for me to eat," he says. "That's not enough nourishment for me. I understand it — I understand the idea of clean lines — but it can't sustain me."



YET WHAT DID ABELES DO after high school but go straight to New York and Pratt Institute — to study commercial art, the one creative avenue his mother thought might actually lead to a career. “What mystifies me, and I still don’t have an answer for it, is why I went to New York,” he says. “I knew full well through Tempest that if I had gone to Boston I could have continued the kind of point of view that he had. I guess New York is New York.”

New York was also a tough gig and for a lot of reasons, among them the fact that his estranged father lived there and hounded him incessantly. “I lasted one semester,” he says. “Then, tail between my legs, I came back to South Carolina and made a deal with mom that I would study pre-med at USC, and study art on the side and in the summers.”

Asked, though, if he intended to keep the promise he made in the fall of 1953, he is unsure.

“I probably wanted to keep it,” he says. “I certainly didn’t want to scare my mother to death. And I’d seen how hard it could be to make it as an artist. You’d go into any diner in New York and you’d see somebody who had been to Pratt, somebody who had been to Cooper, and they were waiting tables.”

As it happened, coming to Carolina had a significant impact on his art, if only because it gave him something to react against as an artist. He liked many of the professors, including art department director and celebrated painter Edmund Yaghjian, but a preoccupation with the latest trends out of New York didn’t jive with his own interest in figurative art, which was increasingly touched by a discernible darkness.

“Yaghjian liked me and I liked him, and I liked his work. He was a most interesting guy, with his blue eye and his brown eye, a handsome man. We’d look at the art magazines together, and he’d say, ‘I don’t know if this is a trend yet or not, but we should be watching it.’ It implied that this is what we should do. I thought, ‘Well, aren’t we supposed to be finding our own way?’ I admired that he was political and sharp and wise, but it just didn’t fit me.”

Folded Figure
1980, Charcoal, 22 x 30 in. is owned by William Carl

Will South, curator, Columbia Museum of Art: “The figure has been the thread throughout his career, how the figure can express something about who we are and how we live. Linear elegance wasn’t so popular in the ‘50s and ‘60s when abstract expressionism, and then pop, reigned. A few artists hung true to the figure and weren’t going let to go, and Abeles was one. Now he’s lived long enough to say, ‘See? I told you.’”



Innocent Red Series: Light Back/Red Robe
2000, Pastel on paper, 30 x 40 in.
Private Collection: Tara Williams, London

"I've heard it said about the only nudes that ever sell are back views, horizontals and partially covered. Lo and behold, this pastel meeting all those criteria was my first sale at my 2000 solo exhibition at The Thomas Williams Fine Arts on Old Bond Street in London. My model for this series was Mireille Enos, an emerging Broadway and TV actress. Besides her high intelligence and bright personality, Mireille had the palest, translucent skin, which led me to use, almost for the first time ever, light, bright colors, almost impressionistic, when translating her alabaster skin into dusty pigments."

"The attitude was, 'When you grow up you'll be an abstract artist.'"

And so he spent his summers at art schools around the country, then during the school year hung around the Columbia Museum of Art on Senate Street, where he eventually landed a job.

"That was an exciting time," he says. "And the most exciting thing was when they would have a major show from the New York galleries. I would go and unscrew the crates and lift out a Pollock or all these amazing things —"

He stops himself. He laughs and shakes his head. "I shouldn't mention Pollock," he says, almost regretfully. "I've mentioned Pollock twice and he's not in my pantheon. Although he did study with Thomas Hart Benton, he did know how to do representational stuff, but that's another story..."



THE TARP FLAPS LOOSE AGAIN, only this time the figure revealed is Abeles himself. At 81, long since established in the New York art world he once consciously rejected, the South Carolina native now enjoys the chance to define his aesthetic on his own terms. He rattles off favorite artists — Rembrandt and Van Gogh, Edgar Degas and Egon Schiele, George Bellows, Lucian Freud — and as he does, the point of view he has honed over the last half century comes into sharp relief. ‘Figurative art with a twist,’ he calls it, a sort of realism with an expressionist streak.

“And by the way, at the beginning of my career I knew what way art was going,” he says, interrupting himself. “I didn’t want to work from life. I didn’t want to show that I could draw like that. And I was very interested in abstract expressionism, kind of brutalizing the drawing and working from my head. I do very little working from my head now.”

Instead, he works much the way he did when he first started, only with the benefit of a lifetime of practice and observation. His subjects are no longer carnies and sunbathers — the darkness that put him at odds with abstract expressionism and then pop art — has evolved, but the fundamental compulsion is the same. “I’m interested in the quirks,” he says, “those people who used to come into my mom’s house, and they didn’t look all that great in bathing suits.”

A few blocks away, beach traffic roars down Highway 17. The Grand Strand has changed dramatically since the 1940s— his mother’s boarding house is gone, the Pavilion is gone, his mentors, gone, every one of them.

But some things are constant. The body, the face, the connection between the drawn line and human emotion — figurative art has gone in and out of fashion, but artists like Abeles never forsook it. Witness the new work going up at Brookgreen, which, not surprisingly, Abeles is eager to see. This time, after all, the work being unveiled is his own.

Self Portrait With Cats

1965, Etching on paper, 12 x 17½ in.

Museum of Modern Art, Philadelphia
Museum of Art, Nora Lavori, NYC

“This work signifies my Andy Warhol’s ‘fifteen minutes of fame’; it was shown in the 1965 Whitney Annual and subsequently purchased from the Annual by the Museum of Modern Art so would be the ultimate highlight of my career. Oh, I was phobic about cats for my first forty years.”