

Pam Rosenblatt
Zuërich's Frank Carlson and his innovative sculptures

On one warm April 3, 2012 afternoon, arts editor Pam Rosenblatt interviewed artist Frank Carlson, a sculptor and comic-style drawing artist, at a relative's house in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Frank Carlson had recently arrived from Zuërich, Switzerland to the United States for a visit with family and friends, and was excited to speak about his sculptures and drawings. What follows is an arts article compiled from an e-mail correspondence from Carlson in Switzerland to Rosenblatt in Boston and a two and one half hour personal interview on that spring afternoon.



What do a jack-o-lantern as great as Charles Schultz's Great Pumpkin, a cat lying on its back and an elephant bending over backward have in common? They are all limestone sculptures created by Zuërich, Switzerland sculptor and comic-style drawing artist Frank Carlson.

Born in 1947 in Winchester, Massachusetts, Frank Carlson now lives in Switzerland and has been there for the past thirty years. He had resided also in Bethesda, Maryland and Italy before moving to Switzerland.

"I am living in an exhausted limestone quarry about 15 miles from Zuërich, Switzerland.

I have worked there as a quarryman, cutter, carver and blacksmith for nearly 30 years. In 2010,

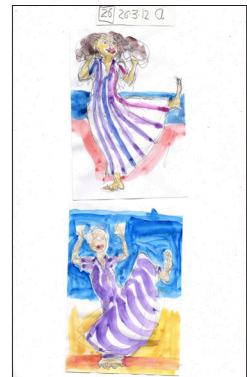
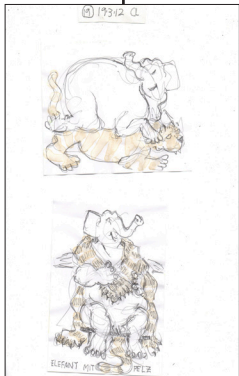
I was advised to stop working and was granted disability and early retirement. Stonecutting is hard labor and few stone craftsmen can work physically, outside, after his or her 60th year," said Carlson.

"I worked part time and attempted to produce sculptures in my free time. My work never became known, much less popular or sought after," he continued. "I loved stone carving, but

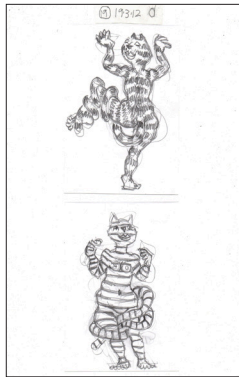
the sheer number of hours required to satisfy me priced my work out of the market."

And how many hours does it take to create a limestone sculpture from start to finish?

Carlson used to time the number of hours on occasion and figures it takes about 300 to



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400 hours, sometimes more, to complete these massive sculptures. He would work on his sculptures outdoors throughout the cold winter nights of Zuërich, Switzerland, Carlson said.

He estimates that the cat lying on its back took 200 hours to create. And the Great Pumpkin required 240 hours to make. There is another limestone sculpture – the lady hippopotamus with a foot on a pumpkin – that took 394 hours to complete.

The prices of Carlson sculptures are “whatever I can get for them. If they’re unique pieces, and I really don’t want to sell them, I prefer to give them away.”

And Carlson does give away certain sculptures, like the Great Pumpkin that he made for two young women who are like daughters to him.

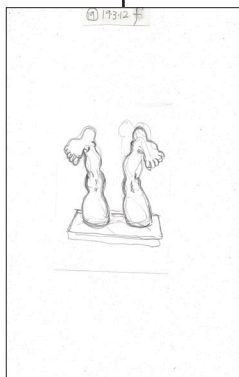
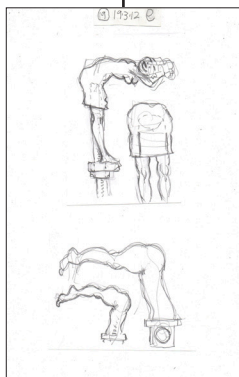
He explained, “In fact, I did give away one jack-o-lantern, a large thing, a lantern hollowed out. It’s about 35 inches across and it took about 240 hours. I gave it to two couples who got married and set up houses – one beside another – just like in Italy. Now, of course, it’s in a place beside the two houses.”

The Great Pumpkin, which weighs at least 400 pounds, was created after Charles Schultz’s death. “And of course it’s covered with all little beasties. There are [a frog, a crab, and a turtle]. There’s a crocodile,” Carlson said. “I like crocodiles of course. They’re appropriate for fountains. They’re water beasts. And they don’t have extended fins which can break off. And they’ve got teeth. But this works – I made it in two pieces. You can reach in there and light a candle. It works, yes. And it’s a very interesting piece.”

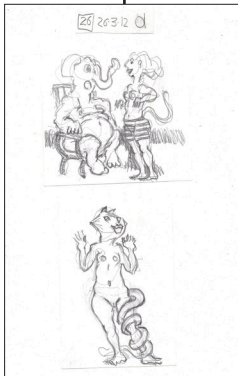
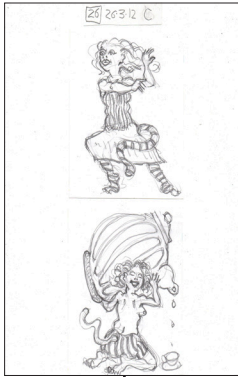
And Carlson’s sculpture of the cat on its back is special, too. The sculptor said that he does not know the significance. “Sometimes I make cats and of course the idea of making a large stone cat was attractive. And a hotel owner wanted a cat to put in front of his hotel, so I created this cat on its back. Well, this was a cat on its back obviously enjoying itself and reclining as it were. It wasn’t a classical Donatello lion. And it was a bit different. And so that’s why I made it. A cat on its back – does that have any particular significance? Cats like to play on their backs.”

A cat on its back is built to be very sturdy. “It’s compact,” Carlson described. “You’ve got all of these pieces. They’re not free floating appendages...Of course these are touching. There’s not an extended arm or leg or tail which can easily be snapped off.”

Then Carlson has created another innovative piece. “This is a plaster of an elephant bending over backwards. This is an unusual position for an elephant. This was cast in bronze, too. But I only made one of them. It was a bit of an experiment. Perhaps not even clever. But I wanted to try it. So I made it,” he said.



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Since Carlson has retired, he said, “Now I cast small bronzes, a hobby after large stone figures. I have not returned to wood, which is how it all started. As for my training, I studied at Rhode Island School of Design and spent my last year as a European honors student in Rome. I liked Italy and learned the language and made several friends, whom I still visit.”

Carlson has worked mainly with limestone, although he has created marble, granite and bronze works.

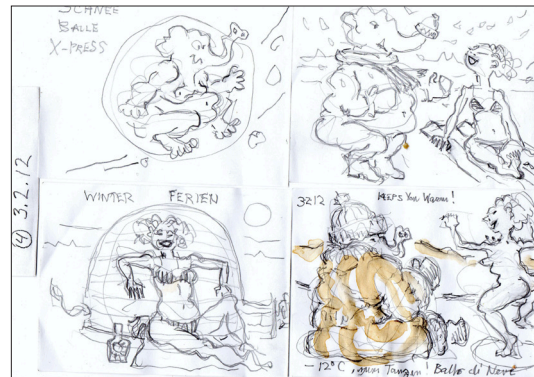


“I worked with marble in Carrara, Italy. I worked with granite when I was in Baltimore until 1972. And when I landed in Switzerland, all they had was this limestone. Then, I thought,

‘Well, limestone is soft. It’s inferior.’ But that’s not true because it has possibilities. You have to

work with the stone directly to notice these possibilities and learn how to exploit them,” he said.

While some sculptors do not like marble, they still will only work with this dense crystalized rock. To Carlson, “limestone is a basic raw material especially in the stone industry. There are several advantages with working limestone: First of all, there’s lots of it. And secondly, it’s relatively easy to work. And third of all, you find it everywhere! If you work with jadeite or special granites, you’re limited in many ways. But a limestone carver can go anywhere and work anywhere.”



Limestone is found in many different colors: off-white, almost black or what is called ‘Black Belgian limestone’, reddish, etc. “It has a great variety of colors,” he said.

To view Carlson’s sculptures and drawings is an opportunity to see an innovative master’s work. His pieces are provocative, natural, often humorous, and may exaggerate or make fun of the human experience. Each sculpture and each drawing suggests a complex story behind it – or even during it. His pieces tend to make people smile.

“I’m not trying to illustrate anything. But naturally a sculpture doesn’t come out of nothing. And sometimes all these things tumble around in your head. And whatever is essential, I suppose, even-

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tually solidifies and suddenly you have an idea. And you start with this idea and a piece of stone. Then you work and work and work. And the idea develops as you work on the stone ... It's strange when you step away from a large piece and realize it's finished," he said.

A relationship forms with the piece. "But the relationship is enhanced or elaborated when you're working with the piece itself," Carlson said. "It's a direct carving. But this happens in bronze, even when you're modeling."

Carlson seems to enjoy his sculptures and drawing. But he admits. "The two are not balanced. I suppose if I had to choose between the two of them, I might prefer drawings because I can make more of them. But I like making

sculptures very much."

The figures in Carlson's pieces are usually undressed. Why does he appreciate the naked form so greatly? He traces the reason way back to his college days at RISD.

"Of course, everyone was possessed with telling the truth," he mused. "I think even a professor said that 'Art is Truth!' and all that. And carving clothing on a figure, I think, is a bit superfluous. I like naked figures, especially women. And, of course, this might be one reason why I like animals, too – because they can run around naked all the time."

He added, "As a sculptor, of course I'm interested in anatomy, and in human figures –

more in expressive figures than anatomy. I'm not a very good anatomist."

But Carlson is very good with his chisel, as seen in on the waist of one of his female sculptures where detailed wrinkles are shown.

And why not? He replies, "I mean it's there. And if it's important, you have to express it. You have to achieve it. That's why some of my drawings are reworked. Sometimes I draw them

And then I go back and I retouch them with color. Usually I don't start out with pure color. Color, though, is extraordinary. It's very expressive and occasionally these retouched drawings colored with stain or with coffee enhances the drawings."



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As a comic-style drawing artist, Carlson makes detailed scenes on a flat piece of paper. "I tend to draw naturally. I seem to have a horizon line in most of the drawings. And of course there are these beach scenes which are proudly derived from Picasso's beach scenes. But he's not the only one who painted beach scenes. And when I'm working on an even smaller drawing, I tend to use the sides and tops and bottoms of the page to fit these figures in. Actually even my sculptures tend to be viewed from the front and the back. Almost like a grid or a perforated mass. But as far as the drawings are concerned, it may be due to my interest in cartoons."

Carlson grew up reading the Sunday comics in the United States. He remembers Walt Kelly's "Pogo" which was intellectual and had a great influence on him. "You really can't mix drawing and social comment very easily in many art forms; but with cartoons you can."



In many of Carlson's drawings, he draws figures of a woman with an elephant. He explains, "I always say that humans are not any less noble than animals and vice versa. And naturally people have affinities and relationship with animals which are a very wide spread cultural trade. And somehow it adds to the diversity. Of course, I like women very much. And usually I juxtapose these animals with women."

The comic-style drawings that Carlson currently creates are made in postcard sized formats. He purchases these pads by the dozens and he always carries them with him.

"If you're a photographer, you always have to have your camera with you at all times ...

And this is what I do with these drawings," he said.

