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Saskatchewan Sculptor Who Works in Granite Struggles for Recognition

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GREG BEATTY

Scott McLEOD: Saskatchewan Sculptor Who Works in Granite Struggles for Recognition

Because visual art is a subjective discipline, the success an artist achieves in his or her career depends on a number of variables. Certainly, talent is one of them. But it's not always the determining factor. In the commercial realm, the support of an astute dealer or wealthy patron can be the key. In the academic realm, the proper credentials behind one's name (ie BFA, MFA) are vital, as is an allegiance to the prevailing concepts in art discourse — postmodernity, Marxism, feminism, whatever.

As a self-taught sculptor whose preferred media include multi-tonne granite boulders and scrap steel, Radville's Scott McLeod would appear to fall through the cracks. Like Manitoba's Michael Olito, or Saskatchewan's John Noestheden, he's too *outré* to be commercially saleable and lacks the formal education to be accepted in the academic arena. Still, there is a tradition in art, especially in the postmodern era, of embracing Outsider and Folk artists who, while perhaps lacking in technical skill and theoretical knowledge, are nonetheless valued for the purity of their vision.

Born in 1952, McLeod began sculpting as a child in clay and plasticine. At 16, he completed a one-year apprenticeship with well-known Lumsden abstract sculptor John Nugent. Dissuaded by his family from pursuing an art career, McLeod instead farmed for twenty-six years with his grandfather. "I tried to fit in," he says. "I worked for my father's farm implement dealership. I joined the curling club. God bless all that stuff. But I found that if I don't sculpt pretty well all the time I get edgy." Inspired by the rich array of ancient Indian artifacts in the area where he farmed — especially spear points and arrowheads — and the work of "cowboy sculptors" Charles Russell and Fredrick Remington, McLeod returned to sculpting in 1975. One of his first projects was to make plasticine models of the hobbits Frodo and Sam from Tolkein's *The Lord of the Rings*, which he had recently cast in bronze. Over the years, he's sculpted in media as diverse as

dinosaur bone, elk antler, jade, marble and soapstone. In the mid 1980s, he began working with large granite "erratics" that had been pushed down from the Canadian Shield by glaciers during the last Ice Age. He describes his working process, which has thus far seen him create such objects as a crouching buffalo, a lizard-like politician, a cloaked man's head and a recumbent female angel, as intuitive. "The rocks give off powerful vibes," he said. "When it first started, I thought there was some quantum thing happening. The hammer I use runs at 4500 beats per minute, and I used to wonder if there was some point at which our molecules were in sync. Then a neighbour went to a seminar on an Indian reserve north of Regina. And the first thing the Elder said was 'See all these rocks [around us]. They help us with everything. They have the same soul as us. They chose to be rocks instead of humans because they didn't want to have to deal with death.' I believe that to be true, and it makes me happy. The rock guides the hammer, I just have to show up for the work." Sounds simple, right? Well, McLeod's most accomplished sculpture, *Waking Angel*, was begun in the fall of 1996 and not completed until 1999. "It took over 4000 hours," he said. "I'd get busy doing other things during the

summer. Then I'd go steady for five or six months. It takes a couple of weeks of hard pounding before the endorphins kick in. Then you're afraid to shut it down, because if you do you have to go through all the pain again."

Jack Severson, a Regina artist and professor at the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College, first learned of McLeod's granite sculptures in the mid-90s. He recalls visiting then MacKenzie Art Gallery curator Lee-Ann Martin and showing her pictures of McLeod's work. "She said she was interested and wanted to go down and see the work in person. Maybe she was just being a politician. I phoned her three or four times, but she was always busy. So I stopped calling her." While the MacKenzie is not the only gallery in Regina, Severson thinks it would be a perfect venue for McLeod's art for two reasons. First, it maintains an outdoor sculpture garden. Most of the pieces currently on display are formalist in nature, and made of metal, although there is one large stone work by Lipchitz (*Mother and Child II* (1945)). In Radville, McLeod displays his sculptures in his expansive, tree-lined yard. Installing them in the garden would replicate their normal milieu. While such an arrangement would certainly be striking, Severson believes that a dramatically lit indoor exhibition

would be equally, if not more, compelling. When McLeod works on his sculptures at home, he employs heavy machinery to move them between his yard and studio. Of all the Regina galleries, only the MacKenzie has a freight elevator that can take the weight of the sculptures.

Subsequent to her meeting with Severson, Martin left the MacKenzie. When I queried current MacKenzie curator Timothy Long, who has been employed at the gallery since the late '80s, he replied: "I'm familiar with Scott's work. I saw a display of it at the Emerald Park Golf Club a few years ago. I'm not sure if his work qualifies as Outsider art or not. That's debatable. Either way, I was not interested in the themes or formal qualities of his work." One genre of rock sculpture that the MacKenzie is interested in is Inuit soapstone carving. In 1998, in fact, it received a major donation of Inuit work from a local benefactor, work that now forms a semi-permanent display in a specially built sculpture court. Granite is a much harder medium than soapstone to shape, yet McLeod manages to achieve a reasonable degree of detail in his sculptures. By leaving part of each boulder's lichen-encrusted exterior untouched, he creates an intriguing textural contrast with the polished interior surface (when McLeod

SCOTT McLEOD, *Waking Angel*, 1999. Detail. Granite. 96,5 cm x 2m, 13,5 cm x 120 cm. Photo: Courtesy of the artist.



JOHN K. GRANDE

Nils-Udo's *Entrée*

decides a piece needs further work, he has to rough up the polished parts, recut the stone, then polish it again with an emery cloth). Heightening the formal allure are ribbons of green, white, red and black minerals that swirl through the granite (on *Morning Star* (1990), ribbons of a red mineral run like a stream of tears down the cheeks of a woman's face). Among his sculptures, the most thematically complex is *Waking Angel*. Inspired by the death of a close friend, and executed in black granite, it depicts a nude winged angel curled on her side, her finger dipping into a ridged spiral meant to symbolize the universe's eternal nature. Representing stars and planets, half-spheres float beside her. When McLeod was working on the sculpture, he experienced a minor crisis when he discovered a fissure in the boulder. Had it extended a few centimetres further, it would have infringed on the figure's feet. Fortunately, it didn't. Despite the sculpture's incredible mass, it has a precise balance point, so that it rocks gently when you sit on the edge, lending a sublime delicacy to the work.

Severson is used to tilting at windmills: for over a decade now, he has championed with little success the imaginative, collage-like paintings of enigmatic (and prolific) Regina artist Roger Ing. "Scott creates from the gut," Severson said. "I think people who are bureaucratic, or are into the academic art scene are afraid of his work because it's so powerful. They don't know what to do with it. It doesn't fit into their academic scheme. He doesn't have an artist statement filled with jargon and rhetoric."

While McLeod recently sold the piece *Gabriel, Knight of the Sun* (1990) to a Montreal collector for \$40,000, and has had other modest commercial triumphs, he is philosophical about the lack of attention he's received from curators and more established artists in Saskatchewan. "Working with granite makes you rethink your concept of time," he says. "With *Waking Angel*, it's who she's going to see in her lifetime that I wonder about more than who's going to see her in my lifetime." ←

As part of an effort to regenerate university lands bordering on the highway, and with wetlands, miniature lake and grassy hillside already restored, the University of Moncton has invited artist Nils-Udo to make the first permanent site-specific installation on their grounds. Nils-Udo visited the site initially in December 2001, when it was miraculously still clear of snow, and came up with the idea of making a cut in the hillside to create an entrance into the natural lands of the area. While most entrances will lead you into a building, this one leads directly into nature. Titled *Entrée*, Nils-Udo's new work, one of his first permanent installations in North America, signals a whole new paradigm shift in the perception of our relation to nature in art. Realizations such as these seem wholly necessary for regenerating a 21st-century definition of art-making, one that would place less emphasis on the art object, or concept, and seek instead to sensitize the public to our mutual dependence upon and need to maintain the cycles of life that surround us on this planet.

With a gazebo already situated on the grounds, now referred to as the *Parc Écologique du Millénaire*, plans at the University of Moncton are underway to maintain and develop this Moncton reserve to provide a green belt between the university and developing city area. With a new book titled *Nils-Udo: art in nature*, recently published by Flammarion, already sold out and a book forthcoming in 2003 on his Nests, with Editions Cercle d'art, Nils-Udo is an artist whose career continues to evolve in remarkable ways. His permanent land art installations and ephemeral artworks, like those by other artists of his generation—Andy Goldsworthy, Richard Long, among others—, have attracted ever more and increasingly enthusiastic audiences



over the past decade, particularly since the onset of the new millennium. Ironically many of the people who love Nils-Udo's art the most are city-dwelling urbanites who long to reconnect to nature and develop a tactile and physical relation to the world that surrounds them. For many, this once normal facet of life is being lost due to high-tech and concept-based digital image art. The deprivation has contributed to a sense of disregard and neglect for all things natural.

The actual installation of *Entrée* was achieved with the help of MacArthur's Nurseries and Price Contractors from Moncton. A dedicated team of stone cutters and landscapers played a major role in getting the work done. As the initial 16-metre-long, 3.5-metre-wide pie

NILS-UDO, *Entrée*, 2002.
Photo: J.-K. Grande

slice was cut into the hill, some substantial boulders turned up in the residue and were then integrated into the work. Just as the flat stones eventually set in the ground to form the walkway into the hill were made of sandstone, so too were these boulders. To create a living border to the piece, and after much study of indigenous east coast species, Nils-Udo asked to have 250 *Virginia Creepers* planted around the cut and 65 *Viburnum Trilobum* bushes (American Highbush Cranberry, known for its bright red berries) integrated into the border lines separating the natural hillside from this land art installation. Plans are underway to have Irish Moss fill the cracks