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David Sorensen

Brigitte Donvez

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## David Sorensen

**D**avid Sorensen, born in Vancouver, studied architecture and majored in sculpture in Vancouver. He travelled to Mexico where he studied woodcarving and foundry work and had his first exhibit. He lived there for two years, before moving to Montreal where he became an abstract painter and teacher at Bishop's University. His studio is in the Eastern Townships, where he has built his own solar house and lives with his family. His work will be presented in Ottawa from October 11 to November 24 at the Wallick Gallery, and in Vancouver in the Spring.

**Brigitte Donvez:** Why did you move from architecture to sculpture and finally to abstract painting?

**David Sorensen:** I went to school first at U.B.C. in Vancouver, in the school of architecture, then the Vancouver School of Art. In between I had obtained a grant to travel in Europe for a year and study window details and designs. I did the museum circuit and my interest was caught by Michelangelo, Donatello sculptures, and Romanesque statues. Back in Vancouver it seemed that studying sculpture was the right thing to do.

I had started with a strong inclination toward form. An advanced student in pottery and sculpture, Leonard Epp, taught me more about form than any of the teachers, incidentally: some basic things about proportions, harmony of part and overall image, and integrity of materials. I was doing life size figures, then large heads that I cast into ciment fondu. I would say that the idea of monumental or heroic sculptural expression in the figurative vein ran out for me as I got further into those big heads that had preColumbian or "primitives" simplicity and power about them.

I had teachers like Arthur Ericson and then Jack Shadbolt who, I would say, set up some kind of attitude or framework of approach for me. Shadbolt brought the teaching of New York, of Hans Hoffman, to the school.

I did a summer course with Bill Reid, carving wood, when he was doing copies of the Queen Charlotte poles; the Indians were getting new copies and the museum of anthropology, the eroded originals, the masterworks. Reid was a quiet communicator. It was a question of presence.

Looking back I'd say Shadbolt's strong sense of chiaroscuro and agitation of spirit made some mark on my work and the meditative quality of Ericson, perhaps even Reid, also stuck with me.

Later I went to Mexico to study bronze casting. I stayed two years down there, but I knew already that coming back to Canada it was going to be Montreal. Clement Greenberg had worked with Shadbolt at Emma Lake and when he came to the Vancouver art gallery to speak there, there were the stories of "Jacki" (Pollock) and Mondrian that set up an attraction in the East for me.

Coming to the East was direct exposure to Rothko, Newman, Riopelle, Borduas and the like, the major abstractionists. My work changed when I came to Montreal. Before I came to Montreal I decided that I was never going to do abstract work, and what have I done ... abstract work. In the end, I have got a lot further with painting than I did with sculpture.

**B.D.:** When you started your work with art, what was your original intention?

**D.S.:** I just saw a rerun of Jimmy Dean's *Rebel Without Cause*, a video that summed up the seemingly strange emphasis on the psychological side of those post-war days. It seemed corny from a 1990's perspective but at the same time it was very real. Natalie Wood is there saying: "No one will ever like me". Dean, who was a masterful actor, is tormented by the confusion and conflicts of his parents. To celebrate the human condition, at least for me at that time, meant to go outside, to work into a place that had something classical. If that's the right word. I guess "universal"... something that stood as a framework for the particular troubling conditions and climate of the times, without being a vehicle of the conflict.



David Sorensen, *Maquette No 3*, 1989

**B.D.:** *What is it you wish to express through your art?*

**D.S.:** The idea of celebration comes to mind. The art that had inspired me, largely the work I had seen in Europe, from whatever period, was about a celebration of life. The power and genius of Goya and other master expressionists swept deep but an art that contained and got up over the conflict, the states of anxiety, stood for me as a goal. Lyrical art, from impressionism to painting such as Bonnard, Bush, Diebenkorn and Matisse made its own invigorating proclamation about life. I remember seeing the big American show touring Europe in '59, in several different cities, and Rothko was the painter I connected to; now when I look at Barnett Newman's paintings, as austere as they may seem, they stand solid as audacious confirmations of what he proclaimed to be "the ongoing or relentless portrayal of self, of oneness", that was his battle, and the final quality of form and content as one is unshakeable.

**B.D.:** *You are using Barnett Newman's statement but is it also your personal idea?*

**D.S.:** I feel involved in that exploration myself, and this whole quest of finding out through art, through experience in life, what you are, what your self really is. But I find the closer you get to that and the more you get involved with that, the more consistent your work becomes and your paintings reflect that. It seems to me it is all one process.

But to me it is, to some degree, hidden and it's mysterious and it is not something that I want to pull out of myself and roll it up and paste it on the wall. I had moments of confusion, I had moments where I could not get it any more in focus, but I feel better and better about what I am doing, in my feelings about all this. It is a process; all is changing, all is growing. You have to have patience. You have to go through the worst to get to the best. You have to have the courage to keep going.

I leave it and it is cumulative. I go back to where I left off, and I am wise enough to know it is not exactly where I left off. That's an attitude mostly.

The idea of art being a way of keeping that search alive and working at it and becoming more conscious. That's what it is for me. So I no longer get hysterical when somebody is getting in the way of my art, I deal with it and get it out of the way and it gives me more strength when I get back to my work.

**B.D.:** *What do you believe about art?*

**D.S.:** Every artist is kind of involved in a self-portrait. The tortured self. The liberated self. It is like

a coded language, it is abstract, it is almost like primary colors, they are bold and almost simplified, and a lot of people miss it completely.

In art it's light and open space and a liberation of spirit. In life, it's similar. The attitude Newman dealt with — the spirit of struggling with and working on the self — this endless job — with its many rewards — the resultant access to the marvel of creation — that appeals to me. That's a reward in itself. There are more and more people organizing around that principle because people want to believe in this planet and this life; to be refreshed and get on with a life of self-respect.

A lot of it is underground as usual but consciousness goes on evolving in its own time.

**B.D.:** *How do you feel about the modern art trends? What is your reaction to post-modern, to neo-expressionism?*

**D.S.:** It is absolutely timely. "The return of the mythic"; the referential quality, looking back to earlier kinds of expression and the rebirth of universal myth had to follow minimal in the cycle. It's usually the way, — you have free expression, then Cezanne, Pollock then Jasper with targets. ... Here it's a return to new freedom.

The only problem I have with it is that somehow it falls into the cultural "trendy" and the real strength so often is not there. I guess it's intellectual detachment of a sort. The constructivists right up through the best conceptualists are rigorous. There is still more power, more internal vibration in the modernists from Cezanne, to Picasso, Lipchitz and Brancusi than in most neo-expressionists. The juice comes more directly from the so-called primitive influence, that highly sophisticated work about spirit, than it does with neo-expressionism where you sometimes feel you're looking at pictures, somehow removed from, but distantly about those original forces.

In architecture there's a spirit of fun in it. In Montreal you see those forty-storey concrete backdrops, kind of like an enormous stage set, for the realer, more structural early stuff. Why not? It has pizzazz.

**B.D.:** *Tell me about the way you work, your process.*

**D.S.:** In painting, as far back as the early seventies, I established a balancing of cloud-like areas of open space in contrast to very tactile lines, very much on the surface, and these two poles or treatments could be interpreted as a kind of interplay between "spiritual" and "material". Those works from '74 and



'75 in Mexico have led up to what I am doing now, where there is a kind of lateral, linear movement like "the track of a billiard ball bouncing around the face of the space", this being played off against a controlled depth that has a fair amount of gestural brush quality on the surface.

Also my colors, which I think echo the push-and-pull of depth that Hoffman established, now have more contrast; black has come into it and the lighter more obviously "positive" colors are mingled with deeper feeling, which I think is the life experience. There is more potency in the new work as a result.

In the more recent paintings, there is still the real depth but it is always kept balanced with the actual surface that the canvas is, as an object. So I let the space go back and I balance it with a line and with a mass of color and it finds its space on that surface. Then I am playing with the lines; it is like a surface movement creating depth.

In one of the latest series, *The Passage Series*, I played with the idea of a threshold, using a visual shape suggesting it, particularly playing with the edge of space in the painting.

**B.D.:** *I see curves in the sculptures but not in the paintings. Why is that?*

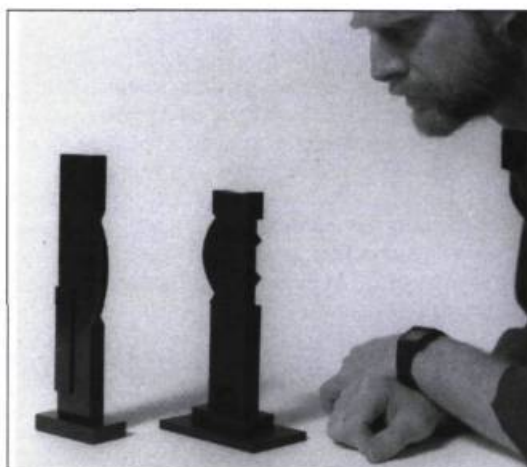
**D.S.:** I have done curvy wall pieces that lie between painting and sculpture but the paintings work better by limiting the curves to what the brushwork, the hand-held brush, working intuitively, produces. The framework, structurally speaking, stays architectonic and rectangular — it's just a question of results, what delivers more directly.

In sculpture there is a definition of real form, balance in the masses, whereas in paintings I am playing with the nature of light, using the complexity of elements to create illusion. There is always reference to space or light.

**B.D.:** *How are you preparing for your next exhibit in Ottawa at the Wallick Galleries?*

**D.S.:** Quite often I consider where I am painting for. When I do a show in Vancouver it is one thing, in Milan it is different... I ask myself: "Would that painting be good in New York? Is it a Montreal painting?" But for Ottawa I am not thinking of anything or any audience in particular. I do not know what it says about Ottawa...

I am into more color than I used to be, recently. I am combining works made in New York, works from Montreal and works just made in my



David Sorensen and *Millenium Steles*, 1 and 2, 1990

studio. I was in New York during the Winter of 1989-90 and I was impressed with the work I saw there. There were not many colors, but a lot of content and form, and nice material treatment, really strong stuff. During the New York period, I concentrated on texture surface, there was more gesture; when I came back here there was more color, and even more when I painted in the country. That play of surface and angular lines around the edges, that movement that creates the balance of those two things. It's consistent, it's pretty coherent through the variation and intensity of color. They are very gestural surface paintings and big areas of colors — I was working with a big trowel and sweeping paint and working with the surface as a whole. I did 11 big paintings there.

The Wallick Gallery is supposed to have a large space upstairs and I'd love to be able to bring big paintings. I have got a pretty coherent theme.

**Brigitte Donvez**