Scott McLeod
Saskatchewan Sculptor Who Works in Granite Struggles for Recognition

Greg Beatty
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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 (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 Olto, or Saskatchewan's John Nugent, he's too outer to be commercially salable 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 went to school and done the best I could..." McLeod left the farm to become a sculptor in Regina in the early 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 4,000 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 4,000 hours," he said. "I'd get busy doing other things during the summer. Then I'd do 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. "Granite is a much harder medium than soapstone to shape, although there is one large soapstone carving. In 1998, in fact, it received a major donation of 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 garden. 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."

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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 garden. 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 sculptor'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.
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 Walking 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 Walking 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."