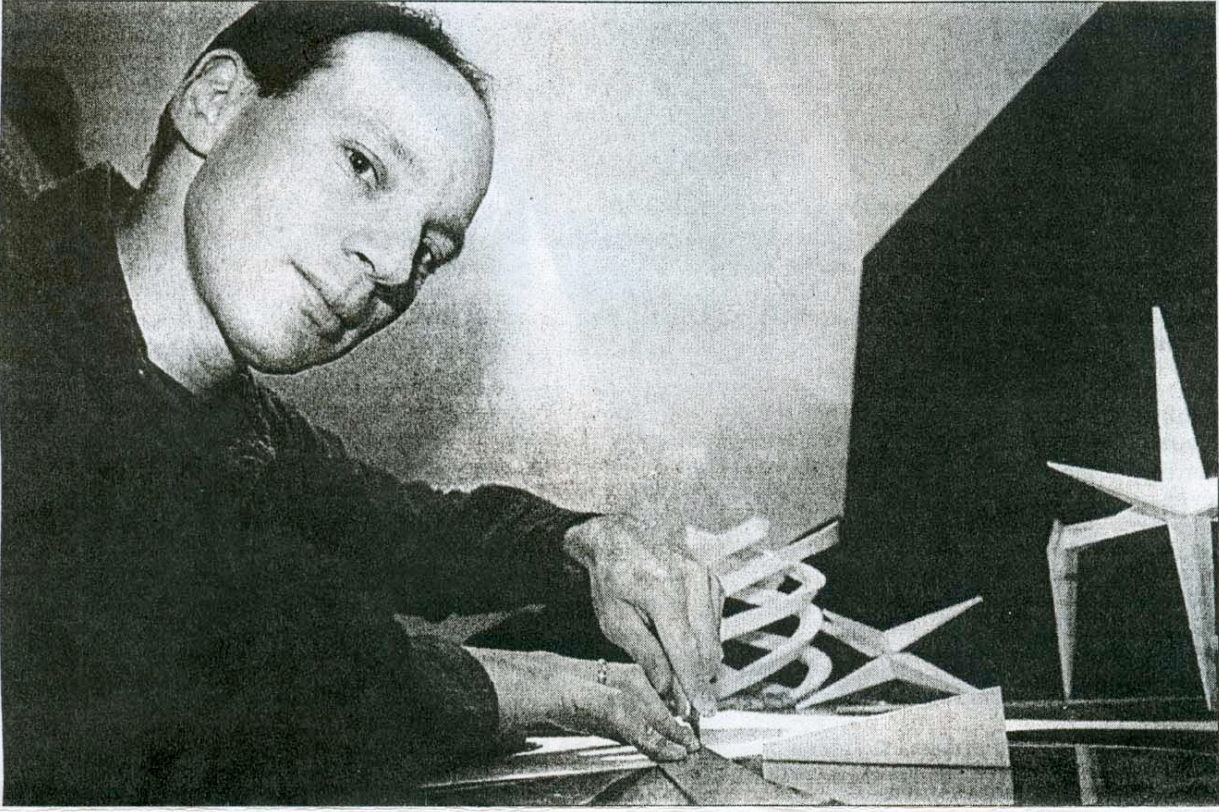


MONTGOMERY

The Gazette

FRIDAY, APRIL 28, 2000 · WWW.GAZETTE.NET · 50¢



Mike Morones/The Gazette

Sculptor Barton Rubenstein works with models of his upcoming projects in his Chevy Chase studio.

Barton Rubenstein believed his grandmother when she told him he could be anything he wanted to be.

At age 10, the privileged son of a prominent Northwest Washington, D.C., family rejected the idea of becoming an astronaut.

But the rest of his choices were not so clear-cut. His path to finding his life's work was strewn with abilities and influences from very different spheres — from math and science to art and music.

And Rubenstein would not be satisfied with obvious career options. Instead, he sought a field that would combine his talents and passions. It took him nearly three decades to figure it all out.

Rubenstein found his niche in the arts. For the past five years, the 37-year-old Chevy Chase resident has pursued a full-time career as one of perhaps a dozen fine artists in the nation who create water and kinetic sculpture. In the two-car garage he converted into a studio, he produces large-scale sculptural forms, generally out of stainless steel, stone or bronze, many featuring water in motion. Typically, Rubenstein chooses a particular water pattern, like a sheet of water or misty rain shower, then builds the more physical sculpture around it.

His outdoor public art in Montgomery County includes distinctive pieces like "Screen" at the entrance to the Brookside Gardens Visitors Center in Wheaton. Sheets of water fall between the stainless steel columns of the 78- by 70- by 30-inch work. An underground basin collects the water and returns it to the top of the sculpture.

"The Blairs Gateway Sign" in Sil-

Story by
Ellyn Wexler, Staff Writer

ver Spring is an 8- by 60- by 4-foot bronze that incorporates the apartment complex's main sign. Sheets of water pass between three different levels of long rectangular shapes, making the shapes appear to be floating. A bronze, "River Twist," inspired by waterfalls cascading into a raging river, is in place at the apartments' center entrance.

Two stainless steel pieces, "Tower" and "Familia," are on loan to the sculpture garden at Strathmore Hall in North Bethesda.

Medium rare

Rubenstein's background is as singular as his medium. It is unlikely that his friends or teachers at Sidwell Friends School in the District, Haverford College in Pennsylvania or the Weitzmann Institute of Science in Rehovot, Israel, would have predicted he would become an artist.

At Sidwell, Rubenstein loved math, a passion he feels was "squashed in college because of bright but uncommunicative teachers." His undergraduate degree was in physics, with a minor in fine arts.

Attending Weitzmann was in no way a religious decision. Growing up as a member of the District's Adas Israel Congregation, "I didn't feel that urge [for the homeland]. I see my religion in a more cultural way." In fact, he says he felt "more in tune with the Quaker philosophy, the focus on truth and simplicity," at Sidwell.

Rubenstein took his first trip to Israel with his grandmother and his two sisters. He was 26 and planning to do graduate work at an American university, but stopped at the research institute just to check it out. When his first choice didn't work out, he opted for Weitzmann, where he spent six years, earning a master of science degree in mathematics and computer science, then a doctorate in neurobiology.

"I arrived in Israel as a generalist, but found myself becoming more of an expert in a more esoteric field," Rubenstein says. "As I came to understand the complexities of my field, the focus on minutia, I felt more and more contained, yet still creative."

"Intoxicating" is the word Rubenstein chooses to describe his studies at Weitzmann. He relished "the cross-collaboration of ideas in a small institute, [there were] only 3,000 people," and his "phenomenal mentor," with whom he would talk four to six hours a day.

"That's where science is tied into philosophy, how the scientist arrives at an idea for an experiment," he points out.

His studies focused on the visual part of the human brain functionally, "how the brain recognizes objects, discriminates objects, visual perception, illusion."

He draws a parallel between the science and art.

"That keen sense of the way we see the world lends itself to art," he says.

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RUBENSTEIN

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Mother-of-pearl

Rubenstein attributes his success in graduate school to his mother, Daryl Reich Rubenstein.

"My drive for my Ph.D. was a reaction to her death [in 1981]. I had to prove something to her. Somehow I was even more powerfully motivated by her after her death," he admits.

Ironically, she also provided the foundation for her son's artistic leanings.

"My eye is discerning as a result of my mother's upbringing," he says.

Daryl Reich Rubenstein served as guide on the family's many excursions to Europe. Her artistic credentials were impeccable, as curator at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American Art, author of the definitive catalogue of the American printmaker Max Weber and member of the committee that created the Goldman Gallery at the Jewish Community Center in Rockville.

His father, Lee Rubenstein, a builder, contributed to his son's artistic leanings in a somewhat lighter vein.

"My family had a reputation in Northwest Washington for snow sculptures," Rubenstein recalls. "My father would have the ideas and I was the workhorse. We once built a six-foot sphinx."

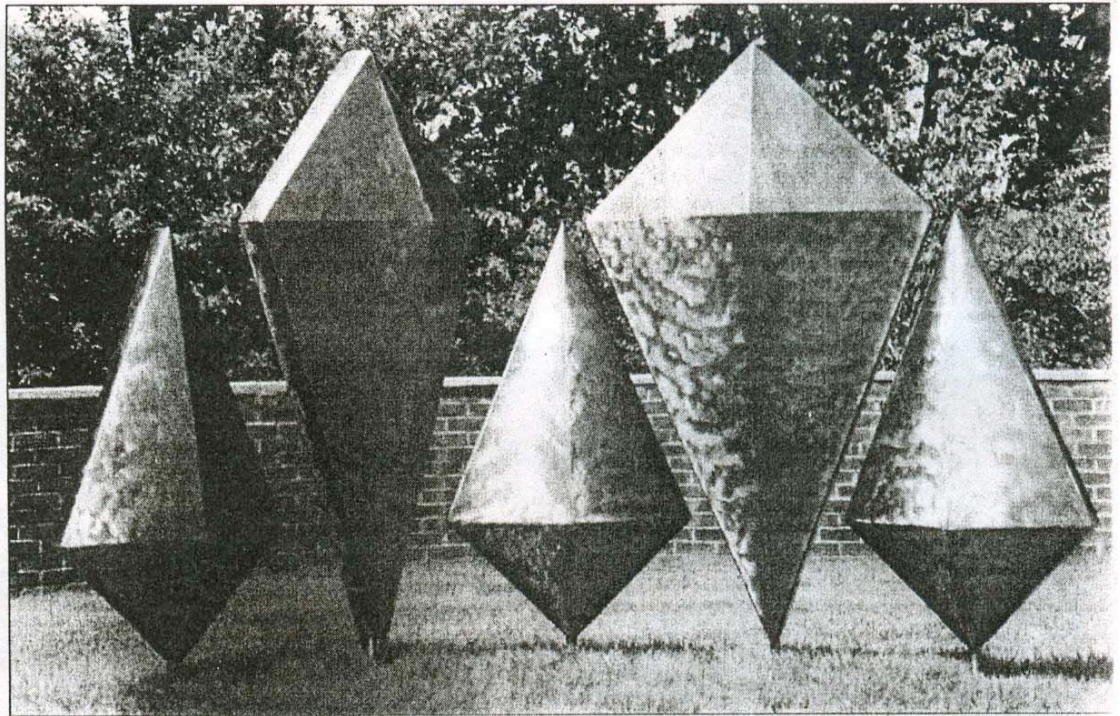
But Rubenstein remembers disliking the "temporary nature of the [snow] art," just as he "felt limited by the two-dimensional art" of printmaking and being unable to "control the canvas" in working for a landscape architectural firm after college. He preferred the contraptions — like go-carts with lawnmower parts — he and his childhood friends devised in their backyards.

Daydream believer

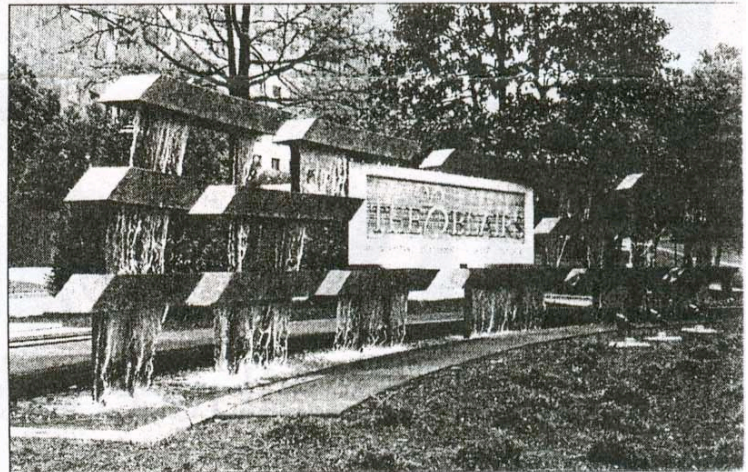
While daydreaming ["I always do that, whether or not I'm having a good time," he explains.] during a scientific meeting a year before his dissertation, Rubenstein had an epiphany.

"The idea came to me that sculpture would fulfill me. At first, I wanted to take the visual allusions in scientific literature [scholarly journals] and visual phenomena and turn them into art," he says.

Despite his substantial training and a job offer from NIH, as well as



Above, "Familla," stainless steel, is on loan to Strathmore Hall in North Bethesda. Strathmore's visual arts coordinator Millie Shott says she wishes Strathmore owned it.



"The Blairs Gateway Sign," bronze, is in place at the entrance to the Silver Spring apartment complex.

Rubenstein Studios

the risk involved in his new venture, Rubenstein was confident about his decision.

"I've always gone into unstable environments at my own will," he says, acknowledging that "it's hard to take a step away from society's version of what is appropriate."

Rubenstein came home from Israel with hundreds of sketch ideas for water and kinetic sculpture, and set out to "let the ideas incubate and make sculptures." He created seven or eight that year, had his first show in 1996 and has been hard at work ever since.

"I work all the time, from 7:30 to 5. And it's a blue-collar job. I'm dog tired when I take off all the protective

gear at the end of the day," he says.

When Rubenstein is not choosing designs, experimenting with water and wind scenarios or creating, he is marketing. Five galleries and some 20 art consultants represent him, but it is "mostly my own footwork" that promotes his work to private individuals and public art competitions. He says he welcomes the interpersonal contact to balance the solitude of his art.

His personal life also contributes to the equilibrium. Rubenstein has been married to Shereen, a part-time social worker, for six years and they have two children, Benjamin, 4, and Sabrina, 18 months.

The art of the matter

Rubenstein finds his work fulfilling, both emotionally and intellectually.

"My art is a different beast. It's the expression of all my life experiences," he says.

He doesn't name his pieces until after they are completed and even then, the titles are subject to individual interpretation.

"I want an art piece to be substantial. The art has to speak for itself. The aesthetic experience is important to me, but I'm not going to tell you what to think. It's a visceral experience," he explains.

Rubenstein's reputation is grow

ing in the metropolitan area and beyond. A finalist in four national competitions last year, he recently completed his winning design for the Florida Turnpike Authority Headquarters in Orlando. That work will be part of an art show at Brookside Gardens in June. Additional projects are pending in Fort Meyers, Fla., and in Israel.

In conjunction with Rubenstein's appreciation of his heritage and public art, he donated "Crossroads," a 6- by 10- by 5-foot stainless steel sculpture with water to the District's Jewish Community Center. The center's first acquisition was dedicated to Rubenstein's grandmother Anne S. Reich, a major benefactor of the center, in March. Water pumped to the top of

each of five forms standing in a bed of smooth black stones, glides down their outer surfaces, which have been brushed to reflect light and give the illusion of depth, and twisted to create a constantly changing reflective environment.

In Montgomery County, Brookside Gardens' Kerrie Nichols says she looks forward to the unique sculptures Rubenstein contributes to Brookside's annual shows.

"His work is a highlight to our garden. The metal and water combined together seem to have such a natural appeal when placed in a garden setting," she says.

Strathmore's visual arts coordinator Millie Shott notes that Rubenstein's sculptures add a "marvelous creative dimension" to the arts center's sculpture garden.

"I wish we owned them both," she sighs. "They're highly professional, innovative and very intriguing to watch, especially on a windy day."

Gazette art critic Nancy Ungar described his bronze and acrylic piece "Spring" in Brookside's 1998 show as "a fountain standout ... Appealing to the human desire for order and pattern, the work nevertheless evokes the mystery of blue rock and sky, the coolness of ice, the fluidity of water."

And the county's public art consultant Francoise Yohalem calls Rubenstein "an interesting young man, so focused and intent on being successful as an artist. I am amazed at how much he has accomplished in the few years he has been at it full time. The work is quite elegant and totally controlled."

Looks like grandmother knows best.