

# Art Studio

## Sculptures in Steel

*Barton Rubenstein applies his knowledge of engineering, physics and visual sciences to the creation of bold, inspiring art*

By Rosemary Knowler

Barton Rubenstein's sculpture is more than simply metal, water, wind, light and movement, though all of these have a part in it. Rubenstein believes his work should reflect our times as well as our needs. "All my life, I have found joy in throwing myself into a new experience, an unknown environment," he says of his approach to his sculpture. "I don't believe in putting off doing the things you want to do; you should live every moment in the moment. Good things happen when you throw yourself into new arenas. Do you have the courage to ride the waves?"

Rubenstein's work is the result of what happens when that courage pays off. He never makes a piece that doesn't push

the limits of the tensile strength of metal when it becomes malleable in fire. The massive works which result from that meeting of design and skill can be seen in such diverse places as Bridgerland Applied Technology College in Logan, Utah, the University of Central Florida Student Union and the Baldomero Lopez State Veteran's Home in Florida—all national design competition commissions. But his work has also attracted private collectors from Massachusetts to New Mexico and his installations appear in parks and

corporate and liturgical spaces around the country.

In the Washington, DC, area, you can see his public work outside The Blairs of Silver Spring, in Brookside Gardens, in the lobby of the Millennium Building downtown and in front of the Jewish Community Center at Dupont Circle. Often, commuters who pass by his sculptures will let him know how much they value that daily interlude of visual pleasure in the drudgery of the drive. His Web site ([www.rubensteinstudios.com](http://www.rubensteinstudios.com)) even includes an interactive map for those who would like to locate all the pieces in his outdoor "gallery," as well as view a full portfolio of his work here and elsewhere.

*Barton Rubenstein works on a stainless-steel sculpture in his new Chevy Chase studio (left). In Tower, one of his finished pieces (above), water rains down through a series of triangular stainless-steel belts, which appear to be suspended in space. The piece is on loan to Strathmore Hall Art Center in Bethesda.*





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Rubenstein came to sculpting after a full career as an engineer and a scientist, an explorer of the philosophical questions raised by the physical universe. "I spent my early life enamored of science," he says. "I pursued a degree in physics at Haverford College and in engineering at King's College in London, and did my graduate work at the Weizmann Institute of Science in Israel. I was researching my

thesis at NASA at about the time they were finishing the Hubble, prior to its launch. I remember standing at one end of an enormous hanger, and looking down to see a man with a gigantic head, walking at the other end of the building. A massive head, twice as big as my arms could reach, on a normally sized body. When I looked surprised, the scientist

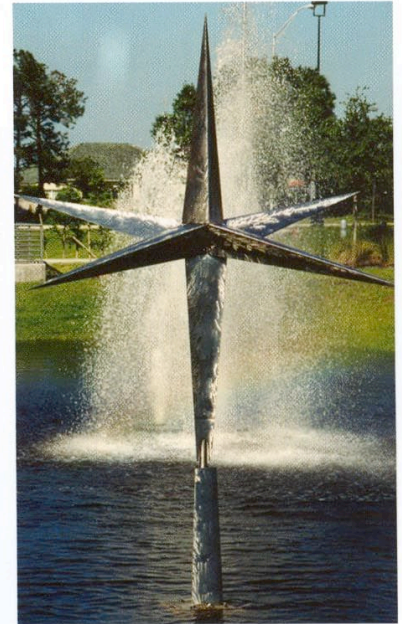
next to me smiled. 'He's walking behind the Hubble lens,' he said. 'They're putting it up next week.' I had studied the visual qualities of the brain, and that unforgettable glimpse of the huge head reflected through the Hubble lens has always stayed with me. I've always been enamored by material science and mechanical engineering."

*While his pieces convey simplicity and free spirit, they are in fact a controlled marriage of engineering knowledge and a deep understanding of the steel and bronze with which he works.*

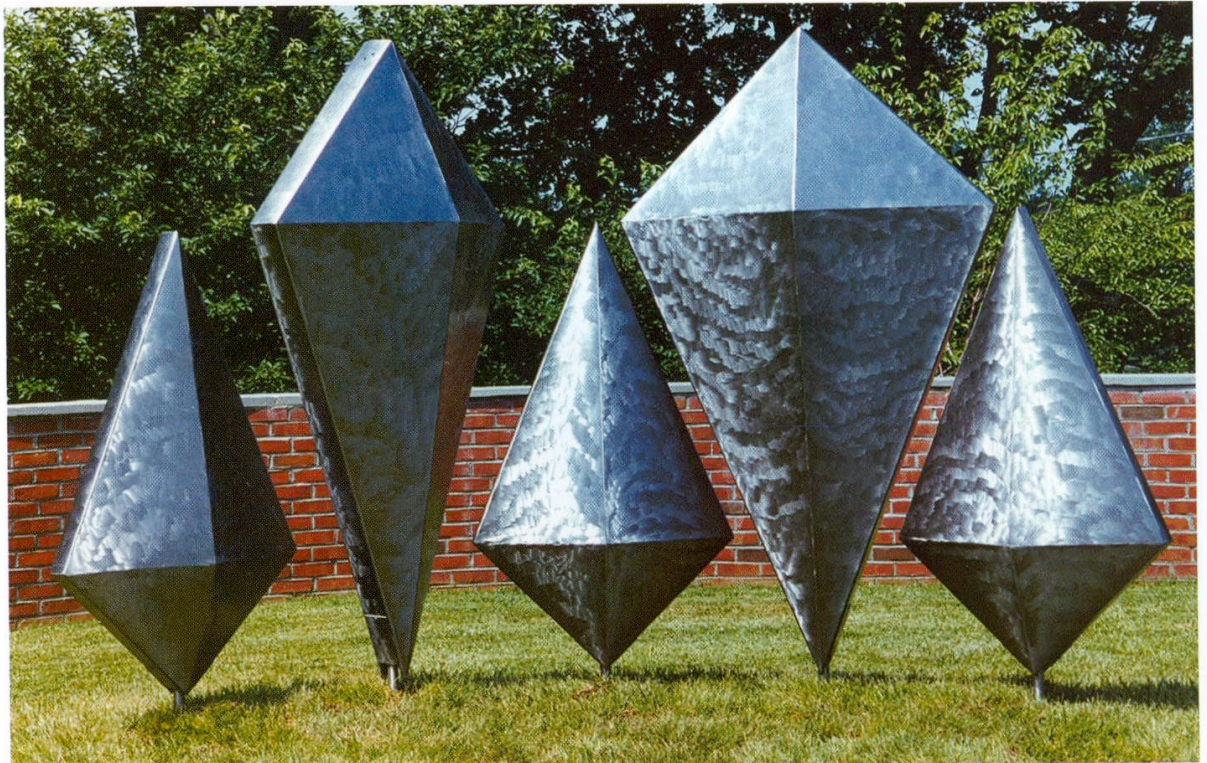
But he has always made things with the knowledge he gained. As a boy, growing up, he made motorcycles from old bicycles, go-carts, even elaborately constructed snowmen, though he didn't like the impermanence of the snow. An avid sailor, he was also fascinated with the way water "does chaotic things in a consistent way."

Nine years ago, the urge to make things became so strong that he left his

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*Created for the Florida State Turnpike Authority Headquarters, Andromeda comprises six kinetic sculptures, each of which has six points and rotates in a dance-like movement around a vertical axis (above). Five diamond-shaped objects that rotate independently form Familia, also on loan at Strathmore Hall (below).*



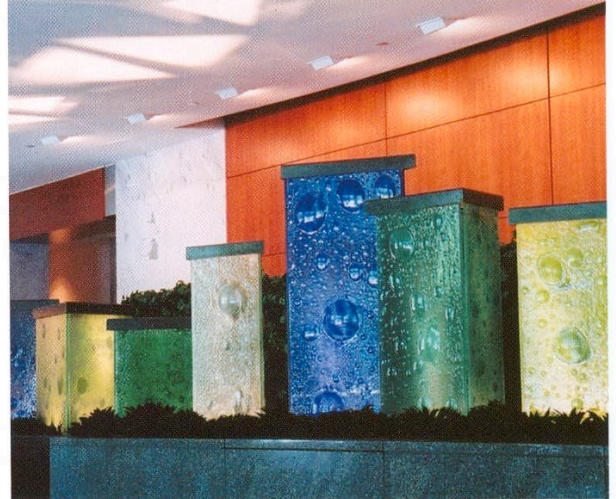


career in science and began to make monumental sculptures, many of them incorporating water. Always, they are evocative of the human condition in a mutable world, massive reminders of the daily vicissitudes of life, and generous invitations to stop and enjoy the beauty of the world. One of his first major commissions was from a national design competition sponsored by the Florida Transportation Authority. "I designed a piece that was representative of the converging forces in the universe, and on our roads," he chuckles. *Andromeda*, the piece he fabricated and installed, is comprised of six stainless-steel kinetic structures that play with turbulent water and wind, shifting their appearance according to the light and the time of day.

Rubenstein's studio is full of the maquettes from other triumphs, including *Familia*, installed at the Strathmore

Arts Center in Rockville, and *Oasis*, at the Weizmann Institute of Science in Rehovot, Israel. Just now he is fabricating a large piece for the revitalized downtown center in Rockville, commissioned by JPI Developers. The great steel curves lie unassembled on the floor of his studio and in the adjunct office space.

Also in the works is another water sculpture, *Ray of*



*Rubenstein's sculpture in DC's Millennium Building (above) encompasses eight towers of bubbled glass rising out of a bed of plant life. As the site is one of the first "green" buildings in the city, this sculpture suggests a potential harmony between the urban landscape and the environment. He is now finishing another piece in his studio (below). The space was specifically designed for hefting tons of metal using a crane in the ceiling.*

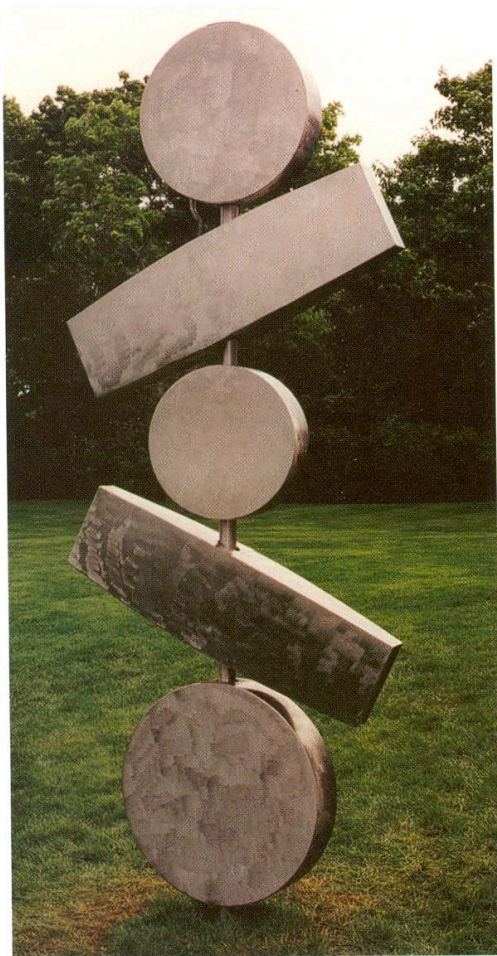




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*Light.* Grinding precise edges is essential to the proper flow of water. The edges must be exact, so the spill of the cascade will fall in the pattern designed for it. The inside surface of the curves are textured with fine grit, so the water will flow smoothly; the outer edges have a more deeply incised texture, to direct the flow. Rubenstein strokes the work-in-progress, imagining the play of light and spray that will result from the precision technology controlling shape, surface and water.

While his pieces convey simplicity and free spirit, they are in fact a controlled



*Circle Up was created for a private residence in Massachusetts. Each shape is supported by an internal cable, causing it to "wind up" in one direction and then recoil.*

marriage of engineering knowledge and a deep understanding of the steel and bronze with which he works. Stainless steel will fly together during welding," he muses, "but bronze has to be oaxed. It can be sullen."

His studio, in a listed historic neighborhood in Chevy Chase, was specially created to allow him to

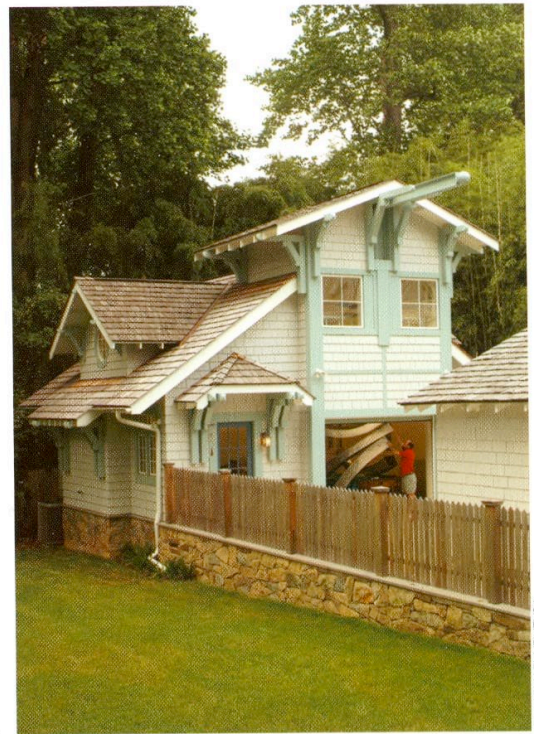
heft tons of metal using the crane in the ceiling, to test the water structures with a recirculating reservoir of water before installation and to apply the enormous heat

necessary to cut and weld fully dimensional sculpture from uncooperative metal sheets.

"I had been working in a small garage in our previous home," he says.

"They say the best way to design what you want is to live in a place where you have to make do. When we came here, I knew what I wanted and needed for the work. Our house was built in 1910, and the neighborhood association has very strict historical conservation rules. The new structure had to fit in."

Working with Laurence Cafritz Builders, Rubenstein and architect Alexia Levite came up with a novel, care-



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*Architect Alexia Levite and Laurence Cafritz Builders created a studio that, at least on the outside, would complement the style of Rubenstein's historic 1910 house.*

fully engineered design that completely satisfied both his needs and the historic code. Outside, the new studio looks like it's part of the neighborhood: inside, it is a clean, modern space where he can make anything he can visualize happen to the metal.

"Creating Rubenstein Studios fulfills many dreams for me," he says. For information on current work, or to discuss commissions, call the artist at (301) 654-5406. ❖

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