

Art of Perception

by Jacqueline M. Duda



PHOTO BY PAUL KLINE

Barton Rubenstein



Dash and Refusal

Chedy Chase sculptor Barton Rubenstein's work can be viewed locally, nationally, and internationally. His sculpture graces Strathmore Hall Performing Arts Center in North Bethesda, the Florida State Turnpike in Orlando, and the Weizmann Institute of Science in Israel—to name a few of the public spots.

Rubenstein inserts complexity and clues into his pieces that reward patient observation. In this interview, he discusses how his study of visual perception plays into his artistic goals.

InSight: Your backgrounder says you created massive snow sculptures with your father and siblings when you were a child. What kind of snow sculptures did you make?

Rubenstein: A larger-than-life likeness of our entire family sitting on our couch. We used marbles for eyes. A 16-foot-tall Sphinx, the Washington Monument, two men playing chess. We basically commandeered the snow from our own yard as well as the neighbors' yards. My father was the major energy behind it all. I was the "grunt" person, shaping and moving the snow. My father was a developer for many years before he retired. He had a lot to do with teaching me how to use my hands.

InSight: How did he contribute to your artistic inclination?

Rubenstein: One of my father's contributions to his field was to create public spaces in development areas. He was one of the first to put aside public space in a neighborhood development that all the residents could collectively enjoy. He had a real flair for architecture. There's a fair amount of this kind of talent in our family. I

Artists Among Us



was actually thinking of becoming an architect myself, but instead worked as a scientist for many years. After training in physics and mechanical engineering at Haverford College, Pennsylvania, I spent six years completing my MSc and PhD at the Weizmann Institute of Science in Israel. I studied the brain and visual sciences, which helped me understand how we visually perceive the world. My engineering background gave me an understanding of structure and what some materials can do and what they cannot.

InSight: How much are you involved in the fabrication process?

Rubenstein: I control the entire process. I fabricate all my work, mostly sheet metal. I do all the welding, grinding and cutting. I do have some part-time help to move through the grunt work more smoothly. When working with sheet material, there are constraints. By fabricating it myself, I try to push those boundaries as much as I can. A lot of my earlier work had straight lines. Now I've progressed into curves. I do it with a precision and



elegance that creates a high-quality piece.

InSight: Some of your works seem to be optical illusions. Is this intentional?

Rubenstein: The front page of my website says that I like to create sculpture that is not literal. There are complexities that are initially not seen; you have to spend time looking at it, and it creates a dialogue with the viewer. The more a person looks at my piece, the more things are uncovered. Mozart once said that the most important part of the musical composition is the space between the notes. It's like that with my sculpture. I've always been interested in the juxtaposition of positive and negative spaces. I think the negative spaces, the spaces inside the lines, speak as loudly as the positive spaces, the shaped metal. Creating works like this comes from my study of neuroscience. When a person sees something, he spots an object of interest, which becomes the foreground. It's what he pays attention to the most. In one of my works, *Dash and Refusal*, the forms are created by the contours of the positive

shapes. Most people don't pay attention to the image inside the contours, the form of a man. This shows how the mind works and how the visual system makes decisions for the person viewing the object. When we process information, we make certain assumptions about the world. We're not objective vision machines. We prime ourselves to understand things based on our past experiences.

InSight: And the water, is it also an important inspiration in your work?

Rubenstein: I love the water, the expanse of seeing an endless body of water that will never have anything built on top of it. The water is a mesmerizing medium and I like the challenges it poses. I tend to choose paths in life that are challenging. I don't take the easy path. I want to experience the personal growth. When I first start out with a piece, there's a fair amount of uncertainty and frustration. But this is the basis of learning. It's the process, and I don't get too down on that.

Barton Rubenstein's gallery can be viewed online at: www.rubensteinstudios.com.