



Harry Geffert: Pursuit

By Lynn P. Castle

Pursuit is the title of this exhibition and the title of Harry Geffert's newest bronze sculpture. "Pursuit" in one word, also encapsulates the context and theory behind this artist's work. The artist continually pursues new ways, technically and expressively, to visually communicate his ideas. By mixing autobiographical elements with references from art history, mythology, religion, Geffert comments on life as he sees it. Packed with playful allegories, he illustrates a variety of real, imaginary and hypothetical life experiences.

Geffert works in an unconventional fashion. In theory, his pieces evolve more like paintings than what one might consider a "typical" method for bronze castings. He even thinks of his pieces as three dimensional painting rather than sculptures. Unlike typical bronze casting, his pieces continue to develop until the last minute. Although his work makes historical references to both painting and sculpture, Geffert has mentioned that he is predominately influenced and inspired by painting in both imagery and process.

It is evident in many of his pieces that Geffert makes references to art history, but he looks at everything he encounters as a possible source for his work. To him, life and art are one and the same. He cast molds from body parts, and many of the male figures in his pieces incorporate self-portraits, such as in *My One Horse Marketplace Museum*, 1984-85. At times he casts directly from actual objects rather than making wax molds, such as twisting tree branches or chicken feet.

Harry Geffert's work is comparable to the 15th Century Flemish painter Hieronymus Bosch. *Pursuit* and *One Horse Market Place Museum* are particularly analogous because, like Bosch, he does not drive at the central core of his themes in these pieces. His work concentrates less on one specific subject and more on a series of adventurous and picturesque elements, which make up a narrative. His exuberant imagination takes precedence when he creates his own varieties of plant and animal life. Like the earlier artist, Geffert



juxtaposes incongruent objects, often intermingling animal with vegetable forms in the most provocative combinations. Symbols relating to the cycles of nature are scattered throughout his pieces; chickens and eggs suggest birth, couples in bed suggest intimate relationship, and plants suggest the regenerative aspect of nature.

Also like Bosch, Geffert works with varying scales in many of his pieces. In *Historical Tightrope*, a life-size chicken looms over much smaller figures; a man precariously balances on a column, an angel, and a recumbent couple. The disparate life-size/intimate scale sensibility while maintaining a foothold in reality.

Although his pieces evolve mentally like those of narrative painters, Geffert conceptualizes multidimensionally. For instance, *Pursuit*, a sculpture enclosed in a frame, is a play upon painting. Geffert mentions that the frame has more psychological power than usually realized. "The frame," says Geffert, "is like a snapshot of an event." It captures one moment embellishes it, and makes it finished or complete. The frame here, in a cube, surrounds the piece but does not enclose it. Defying the laws of painting, the piece breaks the frame boundaries by extending way beyond the top. The frame captures different events from different angles and the same events from different angles.

Harry Geffert's sculptures are so full of activity that many viewers visit them repeatedly to uncover all. *Pursuit* includes miniature portraits of many of the artist who come to the Green Mountain Foundry (Geffert's foundry) to cast their work. *Pursuit* also makes a direct historical reference to the painting *The Swimming Hole*, 1883-1885 by Thomas Eakins. Not only does the three dimensional rendition of this well known painting handily fit in with the other scenes in *Pursuit*; it is a painting that has received a great deal of exposure over the past several years. This painting created quite an uproar in the art world in 1990 when the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth sent it to public auction in New York. There was such a public outcry the Fort Worth Telegram editors wrote, "The *Swimming Hole* is a priceless part of Fort Worth's cultural soul." The museum's board ordered the painting returned from New York. It



was subsequently sold to the Amon Carter Museum. Living and working around Fort Worth, Geffert was undoubtedly amidst the turmoil.

Many of Geffert's pieces offer other unexpected features upon close inspections. Some are kinetic, such as *Clouds over Carrot Ridge* and *My One Horse Marketplace Museum* that include hand-turned cranks. When the crank is activated on *My One Horse Marketplace Museum*, three bells chime while an angel and a roasting chicken on a spit are set into motion. In *Historical Tightrope*, the two figures in bed have a removable blanket.

The removable chicken heads in *The Chicken and the Egg*, 1987 led the piece its optional title *Brancusi*, another art historical reference. Constantin Brancusi's art can be considered midway between representation and abstraction. He worked with the *Bird*, developing it through a series of successive stages for over forty years, from 1910 until the early fifties. Brancusi studied the variation of one motif and the subsequent gradual refinement of form—a phenomenon characteristic of modern art.

Geffert constantly experiments with new casting techniques. His work is very intricate because he is a master technician. Parts of his pieces are so delicate it is hard to believe that they are truly bronze, such as the minuscule tree branches in *Pursuit*. Many pieces have color from patinas such as copper nitrate, ammonia chloride and bismuth. A patina is a chemical process that causes the bronze to change color.

Harry Geffert began his present style of sculpting in 1984. His earlier metal works were large geometric shapes of steel. In the 1970's he experimented with minimal-light box constructions reflecting his thoughts on the lunar landings, which he calls his *TIME* series (*Transilluminal Induced Media Experiments*). His style radically changed after moving to Crowley, Texas and hand building a two-story house out of scrap timber and found materials. In the country, Geffert realized he could no longer work in the same way. He comments, "I struggled and struggled, but I was no longer that person, after moving to the country and building that house. It was like a divorce."



In 1980 Geffert established the Green Mountain Foundry in Crowley, Texas, where he began casting for himself as well as other artists. The foundry/studio is a structure converted from an old barn. He retired from Texas Christian University in 1989 after twenty-seven years and now works in the foundry full time.