

Nature Boy: His mythic sculptures cast ever-youthful Harry Geffert as a Texas giant

By Steve Carter

In Harry Geffert's homemade home, next to his homemade gallery, situated on 13 wild acres south of Fort Worth, there's a wooden display cabinet with glass doors. Behind the glass, a collection of his small carved wooden figures offers mute testimony to his childhood, sculpting a portrait of the artist as a young man: a Dixieland drummer pounds his trap set, a hobo cooks his dinner over a campfire, a forlorn castaway leans against a palm tree on a sliver of desert island. Always oriented toward three-dimensional art, Geffert's pocketknife was never far from hand, even at a tender age. "My figures were always involved in the world, rather than just sitting there as the classical male or female figure might have been in Roman times," he says. "They belonged someplace."

As a boy, did he ever consider selling his work as his collection grew, thinning his artistic herd? "I never even thought about it," he laughs. "I just had to do them, you know? I had to get that pocketknife blade open and do them, that was important; other than that, who cares?"

In the case of Harry Geffert, widely considered to be Texas' guru of bronze casting, the child was clearly father to the man. His work of the last several decades maintains that sense of involvement with an environment, and though his sculpture is commercially viable, the marketplace has never motivated his creative path. "From the beginning of time, art has come from some other source," he reflects. "It has come from nature, it has come from our experiences, and for us [artists] to start looking for sales by studying "Art in America" or "Art Forum," we're really defeating ourselves from making what is ours, not copying somebody else's."

Harry Geffert's renown as a sculptor, educator, and metal caster is mythic. In addition to innumerable showings of his work throughout the state, an NEA

grant and a Legend Award from the Dallas Visual Art Center, he created the sculpture department at Texas Christian University and inspired students there through 27 years of teaching. Since leaving academia in the '80s, his virtuosic bronze castings of pieces by Joseph Havel, Linda Ridgway, James Surls, Vernon Fisher, Frances Bagley, Ken Little, Clyde Connell, and others at his own Green Mountain Foundry in Crowley established his as the foremost foundry in Texas. "Pretty soon everybody in the state was saying, 'Hey, would you cast for me?'" he recounts. "Next thing you know I was consuming too much time doing their work, and finally I said, 'When I reach 65, there's the line, I'm not doing anything after my birthday.'

Now a youthful septuagenarian, Geffert's vision continues to evolve, reflecting his concerns in a changing world. Is his work an outcropping of autobiography? "Oh, I think there's nothing else," he laughs, "that's all it can be, if it is art. Frank Lloyd Wright said that 'no stream can flow higher than its source,' and no artist can do better than their source; I really believe that art and life is all integrated, it's one and the same thing. Right now I'm very conscious of nature and the Earth and everything, but I've been that way even from the very early things— forest and land and man... Now the people have kind of disappeared from my work, but the images of the Earth and nature are still there, coming up stronger, and the people are going back; maybe the people are less important to me now than the Earth is."

Raised in Three Rivers, Texas, a small town between San Antonio and Corpus Christi, Harry Geffert remains a country boy at heart. A self acknowledged "amateur hermit" who thrives on the solitude his 13 acres afford him, he's keenly aware of the not-so-subtle encroachment of civilization. His work reflects a dichotomy, the cognitive dissonance between his ingrained nature-consciousness and his dread of the dystopian cacophony of modern times. Critics have drawn comparisons between Geffert and Dutch Renaissance surrealist Hieronymus Bosch, and the case has merit. In a large scale bronze such as 1993's "Pursuit," part of the DMA's permanent collection, Geffert turns his apocalyptic gaze toward the paradoxical pursuit of happiness. Combining

elements of Dante-esque nightmare and Sisyphean futility with a lyrical regionalism that recalls American muralist Thomas Hart Benton, the work evokes nothing less than the Old Testament's doom-laden Tower of Babel mythology. The magnitude and detail of the piece is staggering, and the vision is unforgettable, mordant and timely. Much of Geffert's process is intuitive, and plotting a 3-D work by sketching is of limited use to him. "I'm always a little suspicious if somebody sets out to make art from an intellectual basis," he cautions. "It's something that has to come from you and your life; it's something that you just decide on."

Nature continues to play a major part in Geffert's restless artistry. In "White Water" and "Black Water," he's literally sculpted moving water in bronze; with these, his technical wizardry approaches alchemy. Geffert's cast paper sculpting of recent years also draws upon the natural world for inspiration. Closer to two-dimensional than previous works, the lightweight of the paper pulp castings allows pieces to be wall mounted rather than freestanding. "Technically I was looking for some way I could get the information I wanted," he explains, "and I tried fiberglass but it was hard to work with. Paper met the aesthetic needs I had quickly and with the detail and information." His sculptures of corn stalks, tree trunks, lettuce, cracked earth, and other elemental objects reflect his lifelong preoccupation with the fragile balance between nature and man, and a keen awareness of humankind's carbon footprint. (A conscientious steward, the artist's self designed/built home and adjacent gallery reflect his deeply-held belief that a person should be "responsible for their own roof over their own head.") "I was born in the country, that's a given," Geffert adds. "In essence what I was doing in bronze, in my mind, was just a step above those early wood carvings. Over the years, I've learned you have to be a jack-of-all-trades, that's part of the game. But then that's part of the fun of being an artist— figuring out what you need for your aesthetics and then figuring out a way to come about it." Casting in bronze, casting in paper, or casting about for wherever his art takes him next, the sculpture of Harry Geffert will be casting a long shadow.