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**MAKING A
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A LIFE IN SCULPTURE

BY LISA TREMPER HANOVER

"[George R.] Anthonisen thinks deeply about the human condition, as he distills major events into a focused examination of figural gestures."

WHEN ONE THINKS about contemporary sculpture in today's artistic climate, large-scale, abstract forms tend to dominate the scene. Figurative work, which reigned supreme for centuries, either is relegated to mass produced—almost kitschy—animals and dancing nymphs, or human forms that are poorly conceived because the sculptor does not know proportion or how a figure moves in three dimensions. Few sculptors have the capacity to imbue their subject matter with a sublime sense of something greater—to imply a presence that speaks to something more.

In 1991, as director of the Philip & Muriel Berman Museum of Art at Pennsylvania's Ursinus College, I was introduced to sculptor George R. Anthonisen. Five years later, the museum mounted a major exhibition of his work which, for the first time, brought together major pieces with their more-intimate counterparts, such as maquettes (models in preparation for large-scale executions). Revealing Anthonisen's work in an academic environment was an exciting multidisciplinary exercise in student/faculty engagement. Art history and studio art students interacted with chemistry scholars (how are bronze patinas formulated?), along with psychology majors, those in English writing courses, as well as history and language students.

Anthonisen cites Frenchman Auguste Rodin (1840-1917) and American Augustus Saint-Gaudens (1848-1907) as major influences, as there is a certain dramatic energy that emanates from his figures and subject matter. Key themes emerge consistently, including the human family, the exquisite female figure, and commentary on key historical events, thoughtfully distilled into sculptural statements.

Permanent installations of Anthonisen's bronzes can be found at the Berman Museum of Art as well as another Pennsylvania venue, The James A. Michener Art Museum. These bodies of work are powerful statements about the human condition. These discreet, perpetual exhibitions are carefully arranged groupings of work that interrelate aesthetically and in content, but are commanding individual statements.

Testament to the artist's global vision is that his work also is collected outside traditional museum organizations, including Philadelphia's Curtis Institute of Music (bas-relief of pianist Rudolf Serkin); Georgia's Clark Atlanta University (African-American standing female nude); New York's Shorin Club Room (portrait head of George Gershwin); and Connecticut's Yale University (a two-tiered sculpture garden of Anthonisen's bronzes).

These site-specific sculptures are thoughtful homages to the missions of these organizations. In addition, there is a glorious tribute to the efforts of the World Health Organization to eradicate the ravages of hunger sited in Geneva, Switzerland. "Death & Starvation" is

a powerful and evocative indictment on the cruelty of the failing environment on humanity. This sculpture of a maternal warrior, in the guise of death, cradles a symbol of those affected by famine the world over.

In the oasis of Solebury, Bucks County, Pa., sits the Anthonisen home and studio, an outdoor gallery of sculpture, and the barn-like studio filled with clay, tools, plaster, easels, plinths, and maquettes. Portrait heads and detritus from compositions broken up because they were deemed unsuccessful by the artist also populate this sanctuary. Here the artist, with his wife and muse Ellen, has worked steadily since 1971. A 2019 film by Emmy Award-winning producer Tom Spain ("Anthonisen Sculptor: George & Ellen Stories")



Images courtesy of George R. Anthonisen.

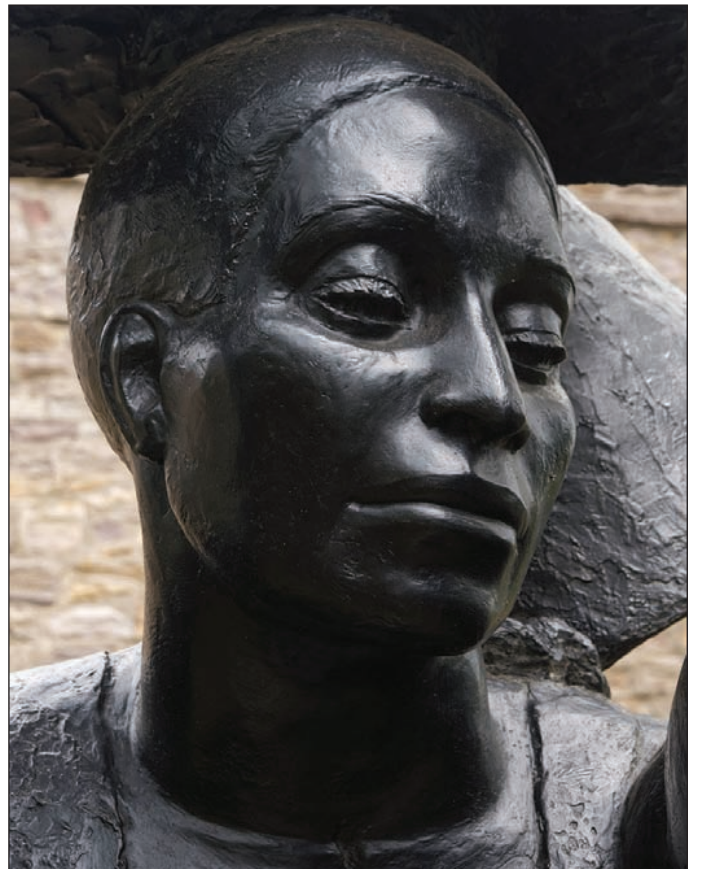
George R. Anthonisen in his studio working on plasters of "I Set Before You This Day" prior to it being cast in bronze (1985).



"Give Us Grace," detail (1994-96).



"Caryatid," bronze (1994-2000) with a close-up at right.



Photos by John Hoenstine.



"Creation," bronze (1981-82).

chronicles the extraordinary partnership that has nurtured a career spanning 50 years.

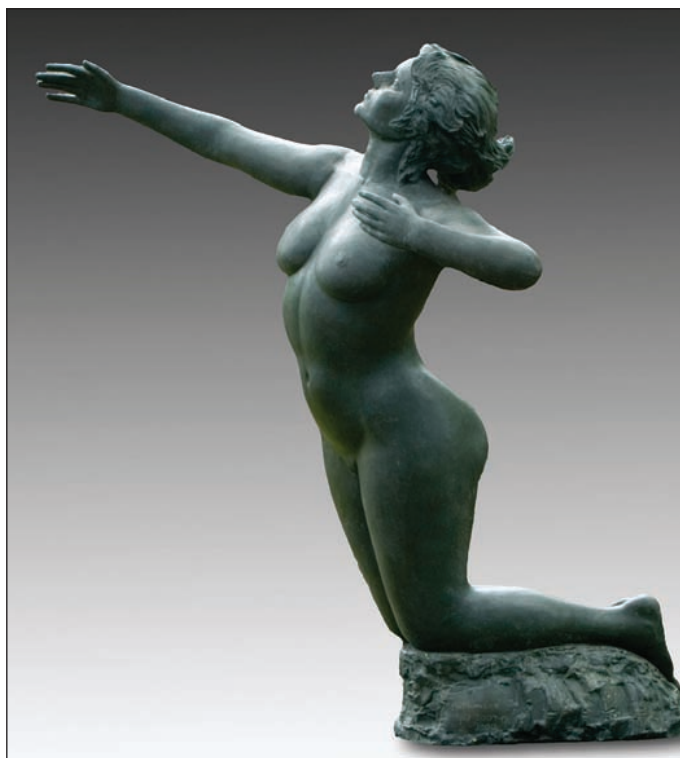
Born and educated in Vermont, Anthonisen, 73, knew early on that his primary mode of expression was creating visual dialogues. Well versed in history in spite of dyslexia, the artist always thinks critically about the human condition, the capacity of man to destroy, create, question, and make noble choices: "I majored in English at the University of Vermont. I loved the idea, but the problem was I couldn't write. I took what I thought would be an easy course in sculpture. I found that I could do something well. It was an exciting revelation. I could translate my ideas into forms that others could appreciate."

Artists as a whole work in solitude. However, the sculptor must rely on a cadre of professionals who are adept at their trade. Creating molds, pouring bronze for the casting, welding, applying patina, prepping a site and pedestal, and physically moving the sculpture are important components to the success of a finished work. Anthonisen has surrounded himself with skilled practitioners through his association with Polich Tallix Foundry, Stratton Sculpture Studios, and expert art movers.

A master modeler, Anthonisen begins his work in clay and builds his compositions with traditional and his own custom-made clay tools. He creates plaster molds that are further refined. When ready to cast a work, he relies on the long arc of collaboration with the craftsmen at the foundry where there is a great pool of knowledge about the artist's technique and medium. There is immense trust that technical details will be taken care of. It is the intangible pride in execution and



"Death and Starvation," bronze (1976).



"Aspiration," bronze (2007-08).

awe that together these craftsmen achieve the artist's vision.

Anthonisen excels in the execution of the female nude. These nudes are not sinewy; they are robust and strong, dynamic and intelligent—yet elegant, like a dancer's stretches. A series dedicated to movement—arching backs, sensual draped torsos, arms elevated and reaching—reveal muscular tension coupled with a kind of ecstasy and passion reflected in the faces.

"My work with the female figure has become a symbol for humankind at its finest. Not just a physical interpretation, I try to imbue the female figure, face, and texture with intelligence, vigor, and all of the qualities that we believe make up a fulfilled human being," he states.

"Aspiration," for instance, echoes images of the great Greek and Roman athletes, as she takes the stance of an archer. "Heroic Torso" is a forceful statement about pride and confidence. "Meditation" is a dignified young woman, gathering her thoughts and ready for decisive action.

In 1971, Anthonisen received a grant from the Department of the Interior for Sculptor in Residence at New Hampshire's Augustus Saint-Gaudens National Historic Site. He immersed himself in studies, surrounded by the sculpture, architecture, and environment which inspired this 19th-century master. Known for his heroic monuments, classical nudes, and work in numismatics (the study of coins), Saint-Gaudens' work was inspiration for the young Anthonisen, who honed his own skills in classic modeling and bas-relief.

"I learned and mastered traditional art forms and skills during a time when most of my contemporaries were focusing on modern art forms. However, rather than reject modern art and its concepts as most artists did who chose to study traditional [representational] art, I worked on synthesizing two different art vocabularies in a unique language of my own."

Indeed, his ghostly, white plaster bas-relief carvings of the faces of family, friends, and historical figures are evocative of a spare, contemporary aesthetic fused with classical and noble elements.

The commanding presence of former Alaska State Sen. Ernest Gruening welcomes visitors to the U.S. Capitol Building's Visitors Center in Emancipation Hall, a commission executed in 1976. The personality of the portrait head of Gershwin, meanwhile, echoes the exuberant music he composed—and Anthonisen's [Pablo] "Picasso" is a brilliant interpretation of the artist as man and, as a cubist construction, it is executed in the artistic style for which Picasso is best known.

Notes John Zarobell, assistant professor and program chair for European Studies at the University of San Francisco: "The artist seems to say that art exists to make the world more beautiful, that it tests our capacities for thinking and feeling, and that, most importantly, it challenges us to empathize with a world that



"I Set Before You This Day," bronze (1979-87).



"Game Over," bronze (1995-96).



"Dialogue," bronze (2003-04).

exists around us, with people who have experienced sufferings and joys we will never know. Anthonisen's art is to make people look at each other and to see themselves."

Anthonisen thinks deeply about the human condition, as he distills major events into a focused examination of figural gestures. "Game Over" is an indictment on the opioid/steroid epidemic, a needle encased in the youthful arm of a baseball player; "Murder: Cain and Abel" is an expressive and spare gesture that, in an instant, gives onlookers the crux of that story while making a statement on the anger in our society; "Antigone," based on the play of the same name by Sophocles, shares an intimate moment, as a heroine honoring her familial duty in burying her brother, who died in battle.

Family plays a key role in several of Anthonisen's compositions that group generations of relatives in circular motifs that essentially are embraces. "Dialogue" and "Generations" talk about solidarity. "Creation" is about the universal family, born of a whirling force that generates Adam and Eve, the beginning of humankind. "Five Women" reminds generations of the struggle, conflicts, and hope experienced by females throughout the world. It is a monument to dignity, perseverance, and belief in self.

What is defining commentary is Anthonisen's triumvirate of sculptures completed between 1990-2000: "I Set Before You This

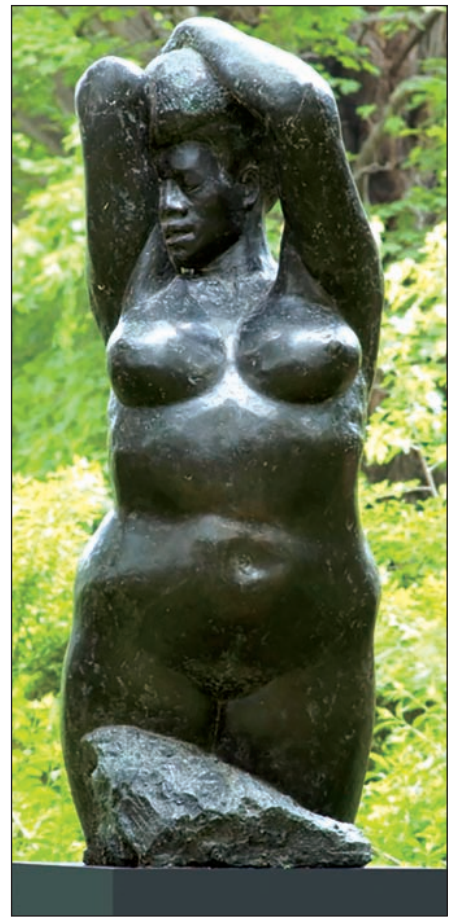
Day," "Give Us Grace," and "Caryatid" are monumental statements that stand alone as powerful singular declarations. These works comment on diversity, making choices, and individual/community responsibility.

Inspired by the Biblical text, from Deuteronomy 30:15-20, "... that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live. . . .", the artist's work of the same name recalls that one generation ago the world was called upon to choose whether the Jews would live or die. Anthonisen spent nearly eight years working on plaster models of the multi-figure sculpture.

As in Rodin's "Burghers of Calais," Anthonisen captures the emotion of making brave decisions that may result in retribution. He asks: "What would you have done? If helping your fellow man meant that you and your family were threatened with certain death, would you choose to help, or would you choose to ignore that cry?"

This sculpture focuses on issues of conscience, internal and external conflict, and a witness to our humanity.

Strikingly relevant today is the bas-relief "Give Us Grace," which celebrates a harmony of the family that transcends human differences and represents a dance of joy, tolerance, and consensus. Once again, this is a depiction of a global community of individuals whose ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, and age



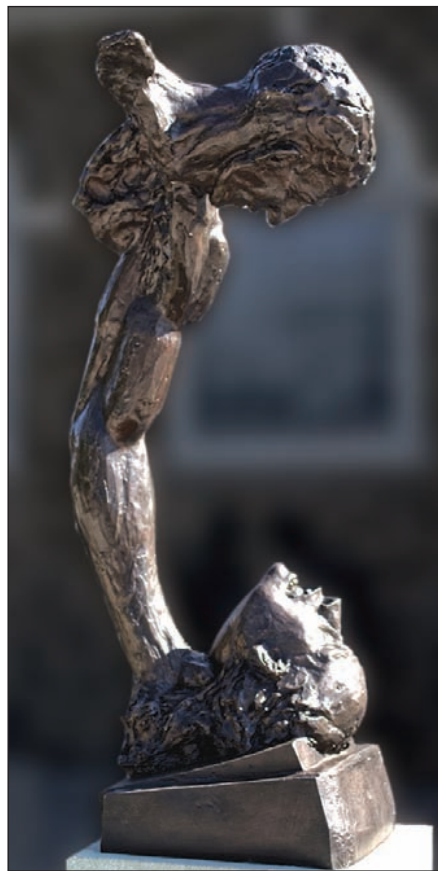
"Heroic Torso," bronze (1966-69).

combine to celebrate our differences and commonalities.

"Caryatid" is a bold, proud symbol of struggle and triumph—a contemporary reference to the caryatid, ancient architecture support columns modeled in female form. Anthonisen chooses a universal image of strength, carrying the weight of responsibility, while also making a reference relevant to our social and political climate today. The heroic African-American female figure represents every person's eternal burden.

Anthonisen reflects that he has "worked at defining love, grace, beauty, dignity, serenity, meditation, and constructive action as well as hatred, jealousy, anger, discord, deprivation, and destructive action." What is consistent is his spirit of optimism, joy of continuing to reflect on the human condition, and executing work that is respected and celebrated.

Anthonisen's sculpture will be on view Jan. 22-March 11, 2020, in a group exhibition at The Hicks Gallery, Bucks County Community College, Newtown, Pa. ★



"Murder: Cain and Abel," bronze (1975-76).

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"Picasso," bronze (1982-84).