

HOMETOWN PASADENA

Christopher Slatoff: Sculpting Life

By Mel Malmberg

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Chris Slatoff at work

Christopher Slatoff looks like a sculptor. Standing over six powerful feet tall, with a cherubic yet introspective face framed by a shaggy, graying coif, he's somewhere between Michelangelo's *David* and *Moses*. Chris, who has a BA in sculpture and once made a living traveling the world's beaches sculpting sand, is a professor at both **Art Center and Cal State Long Beach**. At **Fuller Seminary**, he's an artist in residence helping the

Masters of Theology and the Arts students mount a

show at the **Brehm Library** (opening May 8). And for the Pasadena-headquartered **California Art Club**, he's the chair of sculpture.

Chris's current project, *Fr. Electrico*, is a collaboration with the writer **Ray Bradbury**. A life-size version of the concept recently won the Gold Medal for sculpture at the 97th Annual Juried Exhibition at the **Pasadena Museum of California Art**; he's now working on a monumental-scale cast of the piece at **La Foundrie**, a foundry-studio-gallery in Echo Park, where he's part of a fledgling cooperative that includes animators, woodworkers and graffiti artists.

Mel met Chris at La Foundrie, which is in the old **Keystone** (as in **Kops Studio**), at the base of one of LA's steepest streets. His golden retrievers, Buddy and Carl, and the foundry's own German shepherd, Leika, accompanied us throughout on the tour. There was a huge fiberglass vinyl-toy-style totem and swirling, graceful clay draperies – the bottom half of an angel – on the floor of the cavernous foundry. Artists were at work on enormous wings in various pre-cast stages: grey clay, scarlet wax, bright-green silicone. Molds for sculptures ready to be cast lay like giant white organs on the floor, tubes for bronze protruding like veins. It smelled like hot wax

and sand, and a fine dust in the air gave a most appropriate chiaroscuro effect to a space that is both contemporary and timeless.

***“Sculptor”:* sounds like a dream job. Disabuse me.**



A model of a work for Fuller

(Chris squeezes a lump of clay in his hand, which continues throughout the interview.)

Actually, it is my dream job. The feast or famine aspect of the finances is difficult. But it is the perfect mix of creativity and physicality, which leaves you feeling satisfied at the end of the day. Being a young sculptor is difficult. Most galleries carry very little sculpture, and the cost of casting your work into a permanent material is very high. One creates small models and hopes to be able to afford to develop ideas into full-size sculptures later.

Tell us about your first sculptures, both amateur and professional.

I never remember *not* sculpting. After completing my bronze *Pieta* for **Mission San Diego**, the newspaper published a story about me called “From Play-Doh to *Pieta*.” There is actually more truth to that title than I care to acknowledge. My aunt still has a collection of my little Play-Doh animals in a glass case. The first work that I really consider to be an achievement was when I

sculpted my childhood basset hound (the most sculptural breed of dogs) and her six puppies in real clay. I tried to capture each puppy’s look and personality. I think I was about 7.

If by “professional,” you mean I got a paycheck from a stranger... that was when I entered an open competition. The sculpture was sitting on the floor of the back room of the gallery, waiting to be judged, and a collector saw it and bought it. That sculpture was the beginning of a series of work based on sleep and dreams. They were part of my first solo exhibit.

Devotional sculpture is a speciality. Why?

I like your term “devotional sculpture,” rather than religious sculpture. First of all, I believe that all art at its core is devotional. Sculpture has always been how humanity measures itself against the universe. Because of my background, I had a great deal of difficulty with the idea of directly sculpting Biblical subject matter... that’s why you seldom hear the term “great Presbyterian sculptors.” Also, as a late 20th-century sculptor, I was free to sculpt *anything*, well... actually, anything except non-ironic Biblical subject matter. So maybe “devotional art” is the forbidden fruit for me on two counts. With a father who was a militant modernist painter, merely sculpting the human figure was suspect. Thank God it is the 21st century. In the end, I have spent many years studying the Bible. It is my favorite resource to help turn life, as I experience it, into art.

Abstract sculpture — help us appreciate it.

What a wonderful question. People always assume that because my work is figurative, I don't understand or like abstract art. I grew up on abstract art. However my favorite purely abstract sculptures always reference natural form. Really, all sculpture is abstract. The greatest figurative sculptors have always abstracted their forms to trick the light into revealing what they want to say about the human figure. Sculpture is like a novel, a lie that is created to tell the truth.

In abstract sculpture, like any form of art, once the heavy lifting of creating new forms has been achieved, there is a tendency to create a rather bloodless imitation of what has come before. Too often I see what I can only describe as a kind of mannerism in abstract art. I admire artists



Chris at work on *Fr. Electrico*.

who do abstract sculpture now; it is very difficult in this age. I am actually designing some new abstract pieces myself, which speak to my father, myself and my sons (I have five, four grown and a 13-year-old at home).

How's the cafeteria at Art Center?

I teach at the south campus, so we are blessed with the restaurants of Fair

Oaks. My class, Sculpting + the Human Figure, should actually be called Sculpting + the Human Figure + A Good Meal. In a six-hour class – which is part of the Art Center at Night program but is actually held all day on Friday — it's good to get away, so my students and I can discuss the work that we have just done. The joy of art school is in creating an arts community. Eating together and discussing art helps this. Technical skill needs to be balanced with intellectual searching. And sometimes that means a good argument. So Friday you can usually find us at **Saladang Song**, **All India**, **Kansai** or the **Kingston Café**. When the staff at Song sees my class come in, they put the spicy calamari skewers on the grill. As a family, my wife, **Wendy Weaver**, and our 13-year-old-son **Jamie**, and I like **Green Street Restaurant**.

Where do you go for inspiration?

You mean where do I go to get *away* from inspiration! As it was for **Leonardo da Vinci** and **Michelangelo**, finishing work is very difficult. Usually before I can bring a sculpture to the level of completion that satisfies me, the sculpture sirens are seducing me away to a whole new series. Blinders are actually what I need. However, if you want to know the name of the most powerful of the sculpture sirens, that would be Ray Bradbury. Every time I speak with him, I come away with something new to add to our collaboration.

Speaking of your collaboration with Ray Bradbury — how did it come about? Where will Fr. Electrico be shown/installed?

This all has a Pasadena connection. The **Villicana family** of Pasadena brought me to **Richard and Carol Soucek King's** house to meet the great author. I offered to do his portrait, but he felt that we should do something more imaginative. In the end we mixed my *Pieta* with his *Illustrated Man*. I first did a 12-inch model, then a finished three-foot sculpture. I expressed to Dr. and Mrs. Villicana my dream of sculpting this composition on an heroic scale. They then commissioned me to do it and have it cast in bronze. Right now we're looking for a really good venue for its unveiling.

You've worked with clergy, inmates and Art Center students. Discuss.

For some people, the need to make art is so great. The most unlikely people are driven to do it. You expect that enthusiasm from kids, but I also find it in men who have spent most of their adult lives in prison or in a locked mental health facility. I remember walking through the gates under the razor wire in the forensic unit of **Metro State Hospital**. I was there to be an artist facilitator, to do sculpture with the "clients." Right next to the classroom was an exercise yard that belonged in a B prison movie. There was a guy curling an enormous set of weights: shaved head, long beard, at least 6'3" and 240 pounds, the works. When I got into class, there he was ready to sculpt. Besides everything else, and I mean *everything* else, he had made art of some form or another all of his life, and was conversant on Michelangelo. It was a great group of guys in that class, but instead of talking about the college we went to, I heard about the prisons. One guy had been in San Quentin with Sirhan Sirhan. I believe most of them preferred San Quentin to Soledad. I got stories about Johnny Cash performing. It was amazing.

The clergy is a very interesting group for an artist. You can just feel their excitement at having a visual equivalent to their preaching. When I met my good friend **Clay Schmidt** from Fuller Seminary, he told me that he taught preaching. I said that I always felt that my sculptures were sermons in bronze. He then said that his class started in a few minutes, and would I be willing to speak to his students. That one comment has expanded to me being artist in residence there, being an adjunct faculty member, and teaching in Orvieto, Italy every summer. In sculpting saints **Felicitus** and **Perpetua**, for the church of that name in San Marino, I had grown to love everyone there so much that it was hard to finish the sculpture and walk away. By way of closure, one of my current assistants went to grammar school there and remembers when the piece was installed.

I am very impressed with Art Center students; they are extremely motivated. Several of my students from there have gone on to become my assistants.

Any local installations, current or planned?

We just installed a life-size sculpture of George Pepperdine at **Pepperdine University**. Soon we will be installing a sculpture of St. Therese of Lisieux at a church of that name in San Diego. We are hoping for a good venue for the debut of *Fr. Electrico*. By the end of the year, I will be installing a large sculpture for an institution in Southern California.

If your son wanted to be a sculptor, would you encourage him (see first question above)?

I would probably encourage him to be a painter; they have an easier time of it. I have encouraged him in art. His talent seems to have skipped a generation. He paints rather like my father, the modernist. You want your child to create art from his own need rather than just wanting to do what his father did.

My father actually told me not to be an artist, which I did anyway. I think any parent is wise to let his or her child know that being an artist is a very difficult way to make a living. Art also puts a premium on self-involvement, which makes artists' private lives a little hard on the people around them. When I am asked by students about becoming an artist, I generally say, "Don't do it — unless you don't have any choice."