



The Sculptures of  
**Howard  
LEVINE**

By Nada Marjanovich • Photography by Robert Romer

**H**oward Levine fuses his art with both tangible, scientifically identifiable molecules, and the less definable stuff that holds them together and pushes them around. To meet him, you would think less "artiste" and more "craftsman". He is a steady, raw (but not unrefined), reliable character, strong and free of any stagnancy.

Levine began his career in the 60s, a time when the West was particularly receptive to Eastern cultures. He was producing mandalas, an art form evoking multi-dimensional spiritual sensations through two-dimensional geometric designs (often used in Hinduism or Buddhism). Mandalas have the visual effect of making the viewer question his own depth perception. And the consequent spiritual effect is the same; a type of unraveling. A mandala can be enhanced by texturing the paint, and keeping sharp lines between adjoining contrasting colors helps further its effect.

For Levine, the exercise of this spirituality is not separate from any traditional religion either. Rather, it is a harmony of the two. In his sculpture garden, "the Spirit Man" hovers above a patch of green cluttered by crunching leaves. He is marble, the face well detailed and greening from the elements. Cloaked by a burlap throw, treated but nonetheless weathered, all that's visible of the personage is the face with chin slightly tucked down, neck, and exaggerated hands. The proto-renaissance incarnation of the hands reflects more than just Levine's penchant for art history. It demonstrates the man's fascination with the human hand; an understanding of the hand as a microcosm of a man's being. In both the hands and the concerned forehead of "the Spirit Man", Levine points out how the wrinkles and attention to detail "are almost like peeling an onion."

The sculpture garden, despite the bite of winter, is an orb of serenity, and in some inexplicable way, challenge. Levine's works are conscientiously arranged to pull a visitor through the short journey. The pieces, mainly reliefs, deliberately assembled on a shed, are mosaics capturing individual moments of private emotion. "Suddenly Alone" is a depiction of Doris Grant, the woman whose mournful face resting on her piled fists graced *Newsday* after 9/11. "Suddenly Alone" is flanked by a classical stone carving of a woman with a bird on one side, and a mosaic of an Indian model, face and hands relieved, with a halo emanating from the head, residing on the other; altogether exemplifying his diverse sensitivity towards humanity.

Making for the studio he built himself (his "cathedral"), we stop at a pedestal under the terrace. "My interpretation of the Moses character," offers Howard, failing any presumption. Here again, the craftsman has harmonized between fact and fiction, man and nature, and reality and fantasy. You somehow know it's "Moses", but you've never seen him look so "right". The nose, prominent and slightly flared, is narrow and straight. The mouth is somewhat pouty, for as Levine informs, "Moses had a speech impediment...he stammered...so I actually distorted his lips to appear like he would be a person that would have a speech impediment." The cheeks are set high, and clear. And the overall determined, purposeful façade is ensconced in hair and beard that morphs between wind and wave (in which a dove resides and some Hebrew words are carved). The sculpture encapsulates several ethnicities of man (African, European, and Asiatic) and likewise of earth (animal, wind, and water). The effect is all the more enhanced by the artist's instinct to smooth some areas to a high-shine, but leave others textured, almost brittle.



Entering the studio, "Here is where I happen," he says giggling half with pride and half with modesty. You're immediately confronted by an écorché that stands quietly in homage to the very thing about Levine you can't place but know upon meeting him: patience. "You won't see too many of these," he adds with the same modest pride. Écorché is kind of a lost art. To properly execute one takes immeasurable perseverance, detailing and confidence. In explaining the importance of the 2ft. lay replica, Levine says, "I built a human being inside-out, modeling every bone, and then every muscle, from the point of origin to the point of insertion just so that would familiarize myself [with the human body]." And he shows.

In everything about Levine and everything he does.

Like a wood carving in black walnut standing nearby at about 2.5 feet tall. "This piece I've been working on since 9/11, and it's my reaction to 9/11." And the gasp caught on the tongue of the sculpture's figurehead exactly reflects the anguish and disbelief of any of the day's witnesses. The "tie" hung around the figure's neck is in fact a sword, and the "body" of the "tower" is comprised of an interplay of figures in a way that is reminiscent of those in Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights*. True to form, Levine's explanation is a direct and lucid one, "I started to carve these figures going into flames and these are the folks that...perished in 9/11. But instead of treating them as people, I said, 'gee I might as well treat them as beautiful bodies...this is actual flesh! This is somebody's person!' and I started carving these figures...it's just everything kind of melding."

The peace Levine feels with the world, meditated earlier through the mandalas and now through the slow, deliberate process of sculpture, lends him a stability that can only capture the deepest, most inexplicable emotions. A teacher himself for 25+ years, the Columbine incident did not wash lightly over Levine. In three sculptures, related, but individual, he depicts anger, "and then when you boil anger...you get rage...that...vein popping kind of rage...And then after rage, you always get tragedy and sadness and the slaughter of innocence that just happens to be in the tract."

So to the question of human suffering and woe (and of course, the "why me" syndrome), Levine again pulls together seemingly diametrically opposed components to formulate the most potent equations. "Job", cast in marble, sits almost Indian style, arms limp on legs, and hands and face slightly upturned in a defeated, suffering state. The face mirrors the resignation of the body. But the figure is anomalous in form beyond any emotional value being portrayed. "Job" is androgynous, weathered like a male and fragile like a woman, and exceptionally skinny. And his inner-demons, having taken their course, are manifesting externally, giving "Job" an identifiably demonic appearance.

Howard Levine is like the steady, thriving pulse of a drum, and his work emits such a celebratory affirmation of life, even when asserting wretchedness. Having started in art at a time when abstraction, modernism and the NY school were "it", Levine made concentric connections and moved back towards classicism and realism. By pursuing, whether consciously or not, a harmony of even the most opposing forces, his is thus the result of an instinctive godliness, bearing the "best of both worlds", whatever they may be.

To view Howard's work, or to get information on his upcoming show, call (631) 722-8084.



"The Spirit Man"  
(facing page)

"Moses"  
(above)

"Job"  
(right)

"Suddenly Alone"  
(below, center)

Howard's  
reaction to 9/11  
(left)

