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1997

## Von Allen-McGowan: Sculptor

Nora Eccles Harrison Museum of Art

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Von Allen-McGowan

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SCULPTOR

APRIL 8, 1997 TO JUNE 8, 1997



Figure 10  
**WALKER IV**, 1995  
Stoneware, 58 inches high

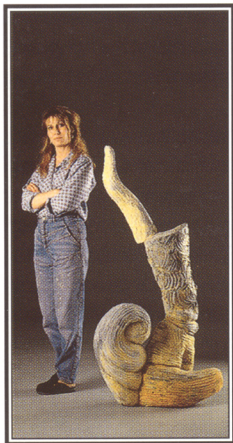


Figure 1  
 Photograph of the sculptor  
 with the work, **STANDOFF**



Figure 2  
**LARGE II**, 1987  
 Stoneware, 56 inches high  
 Lent by Linda Christensen



Figure 3  
**SPiral (LAPSE IV)**, 1989  
 Stoneware, 54 inches high  
 Nora Eccles Harrison  
 Museum of Art  
 Gift: the Artist

Steven Rosen, Museum Director: Your work as a sculptor has always intrigued me. During your visit to Utah State University in 1991 we discussed the possibility of an exhibition of your work.

Von Allen, sculptor: I also lectured to and spoke with students at the same time. That was a pleasure for me and the interchange gave me an opportunity to probe my current work a little more deeply. Self-examination is important to me because it helps line up the images in my mind -where I have been where I'm going and where I would like to be. It's part of a process that finds a place in my work with reference to changes in the way I feel about myself and the objects that I make.

SR:Since that time your work has advanced from pattern, texture on clay to pure sculpture. Where is this all leading?

VA:Clay is a wonderful substance to work with. So is wood and metal. As a sculptor I chose clay as my medium because clay is more easily manipulated, energetic and sensual. The inherent flexibility of the medium was immediately attractive to me because I was not interested in moving steel around or spending hours carving wood to create forms. The responses were all sensory—tactile, pungent, and varicolored. I currently have a small grant to work with bronze and think that my more recent work, especially the torsos, will be compatible with bronze.

SR:What do you mean compatible?

VA:Well, as much as I love clay, it too has its limitations which I think can be eliminated by using bronze. One of the problems with clay, and marble too, is that an extension such as an outstretched arm or a radically raised leg, can't be wrought from a single blob of clay or a stone. Historically, from Greek classical sculpture through the modern period, these gravity defying feats are doomed without internal support or attached components. Bronze on the other hand, allows the sculpture to conquer gravity and at the same time, remove the platform or staging device that holds the form in check. I don't think that I will ever forsake clay and see working in bronze as an extension of my visual experiences.

SR:Color in your work seems so important. How will the lack of it influence your sculpture in bronze ?

VA:Well, I guess I could paint the pieces! In all seriousness, though, and as much as I hate glaze formulation and the technical aspects of working with color, I'm looking forward to applying patinas to my work. This represents another step in my own development which in turn takes my work to another circumstance while still remaining consistent in my approach.



Figure 4  
**CLIP**, 1989  
Stoneware, 57 inches high



Figure 5  
**STEPPING OUT**, 1991  
Stoneware, 54 inches high



Figure 6  
**HOTPATH**, 1991  
Stoneware, 56 inches high

SR: Last summer, as part of the planning for your exhibition, you spoke at length about introspection and maturity. How have these two notions influenced your work?

VA: I'm at that point in my life where I know that I have to keep growing and exploring the ideas that I have worked with since I was a student at Edinboro State College in Pennsylvania. I like to look at those years in terms of continual crisis—the work is not good enough, achievement and stability were too limiting and, mostly, I had to keep moving as much from myself as from the few responsibilities I had taken on. My experiences, as they were projected in my work from 1987 to 1991, brought me to a series on conclusions that helped set the course of my work since 1994. As the work became more solid in a formal sense—"Clip" for example, compared with the "Torsos"—it became apparent to me that I needed to look for steadiness and commitment that is so evident in my three-dimensional expressions. Between '91 and '94, I had concluded, scaring myself into inaction at the same time, that what I was, was of my own doing and I had described my own fate without recourse to outside factors. I hope that I don't sound like a crazy person, but these kinds of revelations for a kid raised in the hollows of West Virginia, were truly beyond anything that I had ever imagined or had dreamed about. As we transform ourselves, we regain some of the innocence and freedom of our youth and we face the transcendent realization of our personal role in our own destiny.

SR: At the end of the day then, your works are truly autobiographical.

VA: Yes, of course. They all deal with struggles that I have had—those things that you bring upon yourself. The titles that I use express these notions and, while I don't want to go to lengths to explain each one, "Hot Path" and "Stepping Out" refer to a love relationship that didn't work out because the road to happiness or contentment was not to be found on the route that I had chosen. I'm so close to my work, like an author or a musician, that my moods influence the way in which I interpret my dreams, perceptions, and the world around me.

SR: Dreams? Do you mean in a surrealist context or as those sometimes disjointed and jarring occurrences that mark our sleep?

VA: Jungian stuff has always invaded my work and my latest sculptures are dream-based symbols of personal transformation. Dream analysis too, serious and not so serious, has influenced the outcome of my work. The sculpture entitled "Walker" represents Jung's core symbols for me. The work was the result of a dream sequence that found my legs tied to rocks. As I was walking along with a group of people, the rocks kept falling off. I asked everybody to slow down so I could reattach the rocks. This dream, as an experience in depression, provided a base for a new avenue to rethink problems. And from a depressed state come the icons



Figure 7  
**JUMPER III**, 1995  
 Stoneware, 56 inches high

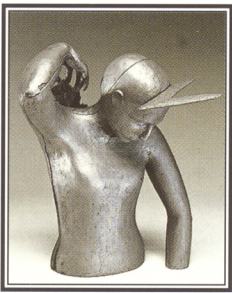


Figure 8  
**SHADOWWORK**, 1996  
 Stoneware, 16 inches high

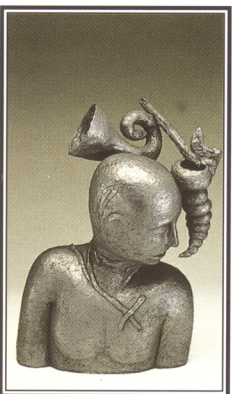


Figure 9  
**BIG TALKER**, 1996  
 Stoneware, 16 inches high

of continuing growth for me. In “Walker,” the coils at the bottom of the torso represent the rocks that in turn uncoil, offering liberation from my self-imposed difficulties.

SR: We’ve talked about your most recent work and its evolution from the mid-80s but how did you get to sculpture such as “Large 2,” “Spiral Lapse IV,” and “Coast”?

VA: After I received my MFA from Syracuse University, I was offered a job at Brigham Young University as an assistant professor and head of the ceramics program. So I packed my truck and headed west. By the time I got to Kansas and Colorado, I knew my life had suddenly changed and not only did I have a new job, but I was going to have to contend with a new climate, vast landscapes and what for me was a formidable amount of space. Once settled, I found that my works—small, finely detailed porcelain vessels—were not maturing stylistically the way I wanted them to. Some of the problems were mine but the arid climate forced the work to dry much too quickly so the shapes I was making cracked and became useless. This was the end of little vessels because I discovered Utah’s clay which, as I mentioned before, provided new sensory and aesthetic experiences for me. Also, I found a new attachment to arrows, you know, directional devices. I started making dozens of them pointing in all directions. Those that pointed straight up slowly became icons for me because up arrow references are rare. From upward pointing arrows came shapes that bent this way and that. Eventually, an anthropomorphic design emerged that included grounded attachments. These led to a series of columnar shapes that ultimately led to the torsos. Bringing it all together was influenced by my infatuation with 19th century French garden sculpture and pre-Rodin, Neo-Classical references. Symbolist pictures by Odilon Redon, Gustave Moreau and de Chavannes and writers such Maurice Denis have had an impact on my visual thinking. Most of all though, I think I owe a lot to Anais Nin whose allegiance to surrealism, Jung, and the notion of liberty as being transcendental rather than social contributed greatly to my perceptions and the way the work appears today.

SR: Let’s end this chat with your Fellini quote that “...in a sense, I see no line between the imaginary and the real, I see much reality in imagination”.

Thank you for a candid, articulate and informative afternoon. I hope you enjoyed it as much as I did.

VA: I appreciate the opportunity you’ve made for me to be part of the Museums’ activities.

## BIOGRAPHY

- 1990-1997 ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR, TENURED, HEAD OF CERAMICS PROGRAM,  
BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY, PROVO, UTAH
- 1991 PUBLISHED "DBAE/ART EDUCATION: RESPONDING TO THE 90S,"  
N.C.E.C.A. JOURNAL, VOL. 11, 1990-1991
- 1983 MASTER OF FINE ART, CERAMICS, SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY  
SYRACUSE, NEW YORK
- 1976 MASTER IN ART EDUCATION, EDINBORO STATE COLLEGE,  
EDINBORO, PENNSYLVANIA
- 1973 BACHELOR OF ART EDUCATION, EDINBORO STATE COLLEGE,  
EDINBORO, PENNSYLVANIA
- 1970-71 FULL-TIME STUDENT, ENGLISH LITERATURE AND PHILOSOPHY,  
LIVERPOOL UNIVERSITY, LIVERPOOL, ENGLAND

## SELECTED EXHIBITIONS, AWARDS AND GRANTS

- 1997 N.C.E.C.A. CLAY NATIONAL, MARJORIE BARRICK, MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY  
LAS VEGAS, NEVADA
- 1996 *CERAMICS USA*, NATIONAL JURIED, NORTH TEXAS UNIVERSITY, DENTON, TEXAS
- 1996 *20/20*, INVITATIONAL, SALT LAKE ARTS FESTIVAL, SALT LAKE CITY, UTAH
- 1996 *100 YEARS OF SCULPTURE IN UTAH*, INVITATIONAL,  
NORA ECCLES HARRISON MUSEUM, UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY, LOGAN, UTAH
- 1995 *CLAY ON THE WALL*, NATIONAL INVITATIONAL,  
SALT LAKE ART CENTER, SALT LAKE CITY, UTAH
- 1994 *UNCOMMON CLAY*, NATIONAL INVITATIONAL, GRAND VALLEY  
STATE UNIVERSITY GALLERY  
GRAND VALLEY STATE UNIVERSITY, GRAND VALLEY, MICHIGAN
- 1991 ARTIST IN RESIDENCE, BANFF CENTRE FOR THE ARTS, ALBERTA, CANADA
- 1991 ONE-PERSON EXHIBITION, OTHER GALLERY,  
BANFF CENTER FOR THE ARTS, ALBERTA, CANADA
- 1991 ALUMNI ACHIEVEMENT AWARD, EDINBORO UNIVERSITY, EDINBORO, PENNSYLVANIA
- 1991 *CLAY USA*, FLOSSIE MARTIN GALLERY, RADFORD UNIVERSITY, RADFORD, VIRGINIA
- 1990 N.C.E.A. JURIED MEMBERS EXHIBITION, TAFT MUSEUM, CINCINNATI, OHIO
- 1989 FOURTH ANNUAL MONARCH TILE NATIONAL COMPETITION, JUROR: BILL HUNT  
SAN ANGELO MUSEUM, SAN ANGELO, TEXAS
- 1989 TEACHER OF THE YEAR SELECTED BY GRADUATING SENIORS IN  
DEPARTMENT OF ART, BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY, PROVO, UTAH
- 1989 45TH ANNUAL SCRIPPS NATIONAL EXHIBITION,  
SCRIPPS COLLEGE, CLAREMONT, CALIFORNIA
- 1989 THREE-PERSON EXHIBITION,  
UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN GEORGIA, STATESBORO, GEORGIA
- 1988 ARIZONA COUNCIL ON THE ARTS,  
1988-89 TRAVELING EXHIBITION, WESTERN UNITED STATES
- 1987 CERAMICS '87, UNIVERSITY OF NEW MEXICO,  
ALBUQUERQUE, NEW MEXICO, JUROR: WAYNE HIGBY

## LIST OF WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

UNLESS OTHERWISE NOTED, SCULPTURES HAVE BEEN  
LENT BY VON ALLEN-MC GOWAN.

BACKED, Stoneware, 1988	SLIDE, Stoneware, 1990
JUMP, Stoneware, 1989	CLIP IV, Stoneware, 1990
JUMP II, Stoneware, 1989	CLIP V, Stoneware, 1990
UPSET II, Stoneware 1989	HOTPATH, Stoneware, 1991
SPIRAL LAPSEIV, Stoneware, 1989	STEPPING OUT, Stoneware, 1991
PICNIC, Stoneware	TWISTED, Stoneware, 1991
CIRCLE, Stoneware	WALKER II, Stoneware, 1995
BOAT, Stoneware	WALKER IV, Stoneware, 1995
LAPSE V, Stoneware, 1989	BIG TALKER, Stoneware, 1996
LAPSE II, Stoneware, 1989	SHADOWORK, Stoneware, 1996
CLIP, Stoneware, 1989	

### REFERENCE

This interview took place on January 28, 1997, between Von Allen-Mc Gowan, a sculptor working at Brigham Young University and Steven Rosen, Director of the Nora Eccles Harrison Museum of Art at Utah State University.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The staff of the Nora Eccles Harrison Museum of Art gratefully acknowledges the Utah Arts Council, the National Endowment for the Arts, the Marie Eccles Caine Foundation, and the Museum Membership for their important support of all our programs.

This exhibition was realized with the help of Von Allen-Mc Gowan and the Museum Endowment Fund for Special Exhibitions.

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