



THE NORTHERN ARTIST

Scott Fife and a taste of Seattle's art Scene: Part 2

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On the last morning of my Seattle art adventure, I joined the queue at Specialty's Café on 5th and Union, hugged by aromas from baking bread and hypnotized by chocolate dripping my coffee to mocha. Behind me was Charles Staadecker, real estate manager for a nearby building where an empty Brooks Brothers spelled a down-turned economy. Out of place on Staadecker, a natty gentleman in a belted raincoat, was a cheesy yellow scarf embossed with a logo for "Becky's New Car," a play by Steven Dietz. Like a new father, Staadecker told me he had commissioned the play for his wife Benita's birthday. Play synopsis: working mom in an auto dealership meets a millionaire who enlivens her stale marriage.

Paper cup in hand and using the spires of St. James Cathedral as global positioning, I climbed to the Frye Museum. In 1907, the Holy See made St. James its Northwestern cathedral with its Hutchings-Votey organ shipped from Boston in time to play some Bach. This Italianate monstrosity once lost an earlier dome to heavy snows and is definitely worth a peek when strolling by.

Its neighbor, the Frye Museum, opened in 1952 after collections were refused by the Seattle Art Museum and Harvard's Fogg. Charles and Emma Frye opened a butcher shop on First Street and a meat packing plant near Boeing Field. Their financial success allowed travel to Germany and acquiring realism from Munich – no Kandinsky, or Klee for them. Their home became a salon for aficionados like Alaskan artist Eustace Ziegler.

The Fries died without seeing their museum built. Attorney Walser Greathouse and wife Ida Kay oversaw the estate and eventual building project in spite of setbacks – during World War II, a B-29 bomber crashed into the meat plant. Although the Fries stipulated their collections



Seattle sculptor Scott Fife transforms sheets of cardboard into striking works of art, like this 2006 piece, "Geronimo."
Jean Bundy photo

were to remain intact, the Greathouses tweaked the rules and bought American – Sargent, Homer and Chase. Representational art remains the focus but invited artists stretch the point.

Hungry, I wandered into the Gallery Café where a regular lunch crowd seemed uniformly dressed in jeans, polar fleece and Nikes. Outside, the dingy parking lot and leafless shrubbery didn't spoil my garlic-tomato soup or curry chicken on potato bread, and the service was great.

The current exhibition was German Secessionists – Modernists who flattened compositions while maintaining the spirit of the Fatherland, robust figuration and verdant pasturelands. A few Americans like William Merritt Chase who worked in Europe got to be in the show, moving his viewers from the beaches of Long Island to Holland. I could feel the salt breezes blowing through the dune grasses as beiges capture the shoals that quickly deepen into white-capped green/blues. Smears of red direct your eye out to the windswept waters, returning once again to a beached boat with its tease of turquoise, and finally directing upwards to higher ground with impressionistic figuration.

The Frye is free, thanks to rent collected from warehouses – a good way to introduce sculptor Scott Fife, whose studio is nearby. Scott, a baby boomer in Carharts, manages the warehouse he uses to make art, where an artsy conversation can be cut short by a toilet paper crisis. Scott led me up unusual stairs of rough cut timbers; fire codes wouldn't allow this structure today. Outside, hydraulic elevators lifted containers from ships. Watery landscapes and mechanization merge giving Fife, a former architect, an invigorating place to work.

Turning infinite corners we got to Fife's workspace – dead coffee cups, clamps, an old boom-box. Most people think of cardboard as

packaging from the grocery store, the wine carton you painstakingly flattened for recycling. To Scott, shaping corrugated paper becomes his art form. Martial artist Bruce Lee hangs on a wall; a head of cardboard, glue, and sheet rock screws appears lifelike. Scott began assembling 3-D portraiture in the seventies of LA when abstraction dominated.

There he worked in a carriage house – wisteria around the pool. It is hard to get Fife to elaborate on how he begins to cut and sand, as process and he are one. Occasionally he employs a foundry, casting heads in bronze.

Blueprints and ink washes of work in progress are strewn about, as are Exacto knives ready to gouge the archival grey cardboard sheeting. A gigantic horse head hangs on another wall. A long screw pierces its neck cavity – I think The Godfather. Scott uses student-grade colored pencils to mark surfaces, mapping where to screw in more cardboard or rasp away something unwanted. The markings remain on the final work, giving permission to

recall childhood memories of cutting and pasting.

An oversized Geronimo is all too lifelike, clamped to a tripod with eyes and history piercing me.

Fife manages to put screws in a dimple or into the furrow of somebody's brow. People hanging his work panic when they can't differentiate between shipping damage and the artist's decision to remove material. Planned obsolescence or preservation for future generations becomes the conundrum.

Sculptural heads detached from their figurative bodies bring to mind a toppled dictatorship. Are Scott Fife's heads historical figures that were kicked aside or memorialized? Mies van der Rohe's head once greeted visitors entering the Frye Museum.

Special thanks to the galleries that promote Scott Fife: The Platform Gallery in Seattle, www.platform-gallery.com; Tony Wight in Chicago, www.tonywight-gallery.com.

For more information on the Frye Museum, visit www.fryemuseum.org

For more about "Becky's New Car," by Steven Dietz, contact PR for Seattle's ACT Theatre, jacquelyn.rardin@acttheatre.org.

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