



Last Chance is the Charm

BY MELANIE LUNDHEIM

Sculptor Tom Christiansen lives in layers of meaning. His studio, Last Chance Fabricating, located just off Highway 61 in Lutsen, illustrates: When he moved from Minneapolis to the North Shore in 1994, he considered it his last chance to make a living as an artist. The studio also represents “your last chance to stop at an art foundry before reaching the Canadian border,” he laughs.

Christiansen’s artistic gamble paid off. He now spends his days sculpting steel and bronze into a variety of fanciful objects. “I love the idea that these materials are so seemingly resistant to bend to one’s will, and yet with the proper application of knowledge, they become very pliable,” he says.

His attraction to metal casting began when he was a boy watching his uncle weld at his implement repair shop in rural Nebraska. “I was fascinated by the activity of fusing metals together,” he remembers. “It helped that it was kind of scary and you had to wear special stuff to do it.”

He first studied at the Minneapolis College of Art and Design, and then at the University of Minnesota, where he earned a B.F.A. in sculpture 19 years and two children later (including the author, Melanie Lundheim—*Editor*). To Christiansen, sculpture is a skill best learned from direct

experience guided by a teacher. “Wayne Potratz taught me how to honor the process and our predecessors,” he says. “And the late Paul Granlund believed in me.”

Until 1986 Christiansen worked full time to support his family and sculpted on the side. Encouraged by his wife, Marcia Hyatt, he began working for himself in 1986. Twenty years later, commissions keep him busy year round.

His work shows welds, grinder marks, and other evidence of the creative process. “I believe we are too separated in our modern world from the industrial activity of making objects by hand,” he says. Not that he takes himself too seriously—each spring he plants a sculpture garden outside his studio. Likewise, his cardboard figures cast in bronze reveal a well-developed sense of humor. “Visual contradictions,” he says. “Human conceit rendered in cardboard, transformed into bronze.”

His work can also be seen at The Grand Hand Gallery in St. Paul, his Web site (www.lastchancefab.com), and during the annual Crossing Borders Studio Tour in the fall.

“With the help of friends, family, persistence, and dumb luck, it seems my last chance has worked,” he affirms.

MELANIE LUNDHEIM IS A TWIN CITIES FREELANCE WRITER. FOR MORE INFORMATION ON RESOURCES FEATURED IN THIS STORY, PLEASE TURN TO PAGE 196.