

THE ASPEN TIMES

The Aspen Times 02/26/2014

The Aspen Times | Wednesday, February 26, 2014 | A3

Businessman turned artist brings emotion to form

Karl Herchenroeder
The Aspen Times

It wasn't until Mark Yale Harris was in his late 50s that he met two Native American artists in Santa Fe, N.M., and began using a talent that he largely had neglected since childhood.

At his parents' request, instead of accepting an art scholarship, Harris studied business at Ohio State University, where he balanced a lousy grade point average by taking arts courses.

After school, in 1972, Harris used his business background to co-found Red Roof Inn, a chain of hotels that allowed Americans to "sleep cheap." When his partner and good friend, Jim Trueman, bought him out, Harris started his own economy-hotel brand, AmeriSuites, which he eventually sold to a company in Dallas. Using capital from both transactions, Harris began dealing real estate in Austin, Texas, where he had been living with his wife and kids. Despite all financial success, Harris felt a sense of emptiness.

"I really wasn't getting a lot of emotional satisfaction from it," Harris said while sitting inside his Glenwood Springs studio Thursday.

Searching for greater fulfillment, Harris spent nights and weekends at art workshops, where he tried his hand at drawing, painting and sculpting. Because of its intricate tools and painstaking process, Harris fell in love with stone carving, which led him to the art of Bill Prokopiou, a protégé of Chiricahua Apache sculptor Allen Houser. After Harris bought a few of Prokopiou's pieces, he called the artist to see if he'd be willing to teach him the craft.

Prokopiou balked at first but then agreed. His price? A bottle of vodka and a steak dinner.

"I was just enamored with the world of art and his skills, and his friends were also artists," Harris said.

By the mid 1990s, Harris was pursuing his art full-time. Prokopiou began suffering from health problems, and he moved to Southern California, allowing Harris to use the Santa Fe studio. However, Prokopiou's landlord was not happy about the arrangement, which led Harris to Prokopiou's Native American friend Doug Hyde, also a Houser student. Harris worked at Hyde's studio for six months until the winter, when Hyde needed the studio all to himself and his staff.

"So I said, 'What the hell?' and found my own studio space," Harris said.

While splitting time between Austin and Santa Fe, Harris found a gallery in

Santa Fe to represent him, as well as galleries in Taos and Houston. Slowly, he began to wean himself away from Austin, where his first marriage had ended in 1991. A friend of Harris' ex-wife, Claudia Lauer, whom he had known in his 30s, came to New Mexico to visit her children. Soon they were together as a couple. The decision was to move to either Ohio, where Lauer was from, or to the Roaring Fork Valley, where her children and grandchildren live.

"So I picked up everything in Santa Fe and moved to Carbondale," he said.

On display in 18 American galleries between Oregon and Florida, Harris' work has been accepted at London's Royal Academy of Arts, where Michelangelo's "Taddei Tondo" is on display.

From the start, Harris has enjoyed working with marble, alabaster, limestone and onyx. His discipline can be attributed to Prokopiou and Hyde, who would stare at a block of stone for three or four hours, sometimes as a group, visualizing the end product.

"There's something wonderful about putting your hands on that material and trying to bring something out of it," Harris said. "I think it's Michelangelo that said you're bringing out the figure within."

Harris' work, which predominantly features bears, bulls and human figures, is also on display at the Aspen Art Gallery. Tim Huber, who works at the gallery, said Harris' pieces sell significantly more often than any other sculptor's.

Standing across the room at Harris' studio, Huber said the reason for his popularity is "anthropomorphism."

"What the f--- is that?" Harris asked.

"Anthropomorphism," Huber replied, "is attributing human characteristics to non-human things. Of all the sculptures, people always want to touch his because they feel the energy. The first thing I notice is they all smile."

Huber recalled one German customer who commented on Harris' work.

"Look at them," she said of one piece.

"They're so in love."

"She was enamored," Huber said. "She kept fondling it."

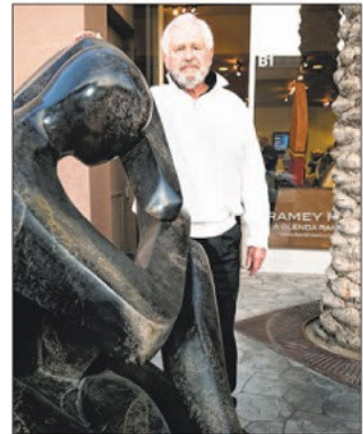
Harris said it's very difficult for him to verbally express what he creates with his hands and why people find it appealing. He said it's not his intent to express detail but to express emotions in form.

"I like form — the geometric form," Harris said. "I'm trying to express in the forms, figurative or animal, the energy, the anxiety, pleasure, romanticism in the animals that are pretty humorous. They're fun. They make you smile."



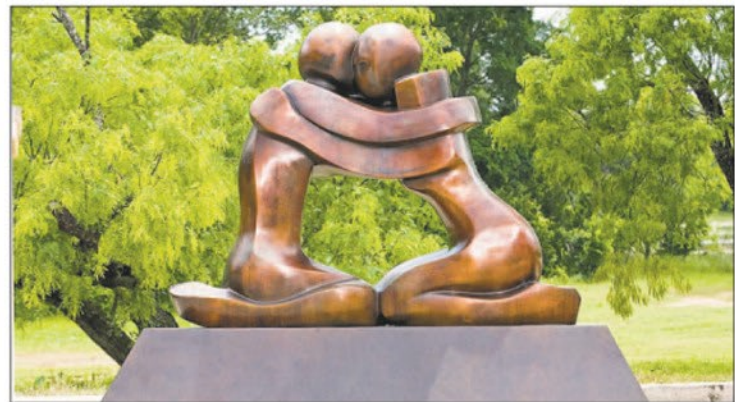
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Artist Mark Yale Harris works a block of onyx in his Glenwood Springs studio on Thursday. His work is featured at the Aspen Art Gallery on Mill Street.



KEVIN STEELE/COURTESY PHOTO

Mark Yale Harris stands with his bronze piece "Monument."



COURTESY PHOTO

Mark Yale Harris' bronze piece "Crush."



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Harris likes to work with marble, alabaster, limestone and, pictured here, onyx.