

THE ART OF

Walter Redinger

Great artists are interpreters of life's meanings, pointing the way to new perspectives for those who take an interest in their creations.

Walter Redinger has worked at his artistic interpretations with honesty, passion, and steadfastness from his West Lorne studio for the past 50 years. We are delighted to have this opportunity to celebrate one of the bright creative jewels in our midst.

Walter's work may resonate, as he has lived within and been influenced by the particular landscapes and times of rural Southwestern Ontario, elements which are familiar to many of us.

On a late-winter Sunday afternoon, Walter, his wife and art manager Marion, and long-time family friend, photographer, and often-time artist's assistant Albert Sugarman, chatted with Relish Elgin in the Redingers' home in West Lorne.

A Lifetime of Artistic Expression

Walter was one of Canada's best-known sculptors in the 60s and 70s. His works were exhibited in prominent galleries, museums and public spaces across Canada and around the world. He was most recognized for his series of large-scale, rounded, fibre-glass sculptures, dubbed "Organic". At just 23, he had his first solo exhibition at the Avram Issacs Gallery in Toronto. (Issacs was the influential dealer who helped establish Canadian artists such as Michael Snow, Joyce Wieland and Greg Curnoe in

the 1960s.) In 1972 Walter was chosen to represent Canada at the 36th Venice Biennale, a prestigious international exhibition of contemporary art.



Walter notes, "I think the early years (60s and 70s) were beautiful years. Somebody handed me the ball and I just started to run. The work already had kind of an outer space thing to it, you know. People couldn't believe that."

Always true to his own search for meaning, Walter entered a period of re-evaluation in the 80s, and faded somewhat from view of the 'art world'. Says Walter, "I didn't want to be employed by the art community to make points about making art. I had this cockamamie dream that art was supposed to mean something, even if it was abstract."

In the 90s, however, Walter began to produce volumes of sculpture, drawings and paintings again. His work, including several impressive "boats" appeared in various galleries. In 2007 the MOCCA (Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art) in Toronto brought "Ghost Ship" to public view. It is a truly remarkable work—seeing the 42-foot "Ghost Ship" is most likely to put into the beholder's psyche a memory that will last a lifetime. It was exhibited again last year at Museum London, along with many of Walter's drawings and other sculptures.

At 70, having survived cancer and living with Parkinson's, Walter continues to create his swirling, energetic, mainly large-scale paintings and drawings.

Apparition, 2010, 116" x 75" acrylic on canvas, Artist's Collection



A Life in Elgin County

Through fifty years, Walter has stayed true to his artistic intent to delve boldly into the meaning of life and reality and has done so with incredible energy and drive. He is a product of his own unique personality and of the influences of growing up on a tobacco farm near West Lorne in the 40s and 50s.

Walter relates one important childhood incident like it was yesterday. "There was this kid running along the back of a field. We were hoeing tobacco in the back field. We were so glad it was the end of the day, we could hardly see straight. I was the kind of kid that was always dancing around, into things. I got ahead and it gave me time to eat thimble berries, which my mother didn't appreciate cause I got purple all over me. A favourite uncle and aunt were visiting and staying overnight on the way to Windsor and I thought that was pretty neat. We were going to have a good meal, and there would be lively conversation. I get ahead and leave the big field and enter the small barnyard that's boxed off

and I get so carried away I start pulling on a horse's tail. It's just the thing I would do. I manufacture my humour now. I think in those days my humour was just natural. The horse says 'get off' and he flung me off with a kick, right square in the soft spot of my stomach. I went up in the air and came down on my back and I couldn't get my breath. As a little boy, five or six, I remember knowing I had gone too far. That's the time I really took on adult wings. Life wasn't just finding berries. Old dad had a pretty strong psyche and he knew his boy was in trouble. He picked me up..." Walter remembers the trip to the hospital and the operations that followed.

"Anyway... that's the transition thing from the subject matter. Where do you place art in that. It's like a good story, something that's cherished. Some of those ugly things, those positive and negative things counter point themselves. I probably came that far from being dead. I grew up a bit. I never forgot that experience of landing in that dirt, and the dust flying."

Those who know Walter know that he exudes energy. It's not hard to picture him as a child of irrepressible exuberance, coming to sudden realization that on a perfect, sunny afternoon full of expectation, life may suddenly deal an earth-shattering, visceral blow to the gut.

West Lorne has been a good place, Walter thinks, to grow up, live and work as an artist. Life on the tobacco farm no doubt gave him a feel

for the seasons, the organic processes of nature, and the ingraining of a good dose of work ethic. The Redinger home was a place for lively discussion of science and politics and a nurturer of Walter's natural curiosity, one which has led him to delve beyond the visible landscapes to ones of cosmic and microcosmic proportions. Both home and school (a one-room schoolhouse for public school) placed value on excellence as Walter was encouraged to



Eclipse, 2010, 54 3/16" x 44 3/8", acrylic on canvas, Artist's Collection

pursue art, and his brother medicine. Walter loved to listen to music on the radio, particularly southern blues and country; he continues to appreciate the earthy, guttural aspects of both and the opportunities he has had in more recent years to make his own music with the Redinger band.

"His motivations and his materials are fixed to the thin strip of communities along the North shore of Lake Erie and the cycles of life there."

Sylvia Curtis-Norcross, in her essay, "The Centrifugal and Other Forces of Walter Redinger", expressed eloquently Walter's relationship to the land: "Growing up one of 6 children of an immigrant tobacco farmer imprinted on Redinger an instinct for process of a certain nature, namely one that is subject to external forces, is cyclical, and it is slow, it could, he says, 'be measured in billions of years.' He works with complete trust in the relevance of his intuition because it is connected with the

ground beneath his feet. . . His motivations and his materials are fixed to the thin strip of communities along the North shore of Lake Erie and the cycles of life there. This is where Redinger learned viscerally Schopenhauer's description of reality: 'This world that appears to the senses has no true being, but only a ceaseless becoming.' For Redinger this lack of certainty in the realness of things is not a cause for self deprivation but rather a source of wonder to be explored."

Walter's natural talent revealed itself at an early age (he remembers being able to draw when he was four). He trained at Beal Technical School in London, spent some time at the Ontario College of Art and then the Miensinger School of Art in Detroit Michigan where he was awarded for drawing excellence.

Back in West Lorne following his art education, Walter continued to work on his father's farm. As so many local young people did, Marion worked in tobacco, and that's where she and Walter met. Says Walter, "It's a love affair and a working partnership that has lasted 50 years."

Marion and Walter will celebrate that milestone this summer with a Garden Party. Walter explains that a Redinger Garden Party "represents my music infatuation. The parties have to have a spiritual quality about them. Unfortunately we have gone about four or five years without having one. It has to be a party that excels in not just knowledge, but in energy. I take my parties pretty seriously."

Fellow artist Ed Zelenak has been a friend of Walters since childhood. Both of their fathers grew tobacco;

Left: *Caucasian Totems #3*, 1971, mixed media, each unit up to 21' x 3.5' x 2', Artist's Collection; Right, top: *Skeletal*, 1995, mixed media, 6'6" x 4' x 1'9", Artist's Collection; Right, bottom: *Spermatogenesis #2*, 1968, cast fibreglass & urethane paint, 10' x 5' x 4', Art Gallery of Ontario





Ghost Ship, 2003, mixed media, 42' x 9' x 12', Artist's Collection. Photograph courtesy of MOCCA.

they went together to public school and later to art school in Toronto. Walter, Ed and Marion built the substantial studio on their property on Silver Clay Line.

Walter values the comfortable sociability and peer contact he finds at the local Tall Tales Café in Wallace-town. He smiles, "It is where you go to tell tall tales."

Walter's work has been a predominantly solitary pursuit. He derived inspiration from his observation of landscapes visible and beyond. He hasn't, for the most part, been influenced by artistic trends or schools of thought. He has, however, had some help over the years, which has been vital to accomplishing some of the back-breaking labour that has gone into his sculptures and also to continue working as

he has dealt with cancer and Parkinson's disease. Walter mentions two people, in particular. The first was artisan Bob Manchester of Dutton. In his early career, Walter worked with massive amounts of clay which he bought in 45-gallon drums. Says Walter,

"People were intimidated by [Ghost Ship], but those same people, including little kids in grade four said, 'yeah, that's the way it is'. They agreed with me. That was sort of fun. They agreed with this gruesome shit, all this tough stuff."

"Bob worked with me for 12 years, and he could work. If I had somebody who could work, I was in business."

Neighbour Al Sugarman played a large role in

helping Walter complete "Ghost Ship". Al moved in across the road from the Redingers forty-one years ago and became a friend soon after. Al says that he knew nothing about modern art, but quickly became intrigued as he talked to and learned from Walter and came to appreciate the impact a sculpture can have. When Walter began to "deconstruct"

(saw apart) the "boats" he had exhibited in the 90s, Al expressed alarm, but Walter was undeterred. He moved ahead on his "Ghost Ship", a project that was to last a decade. Al says, "We used to go out to the lake with a pick-up truck and find driftwood and different things that were used in the boat. Often we would sit and stare at it. And sometimes I would add my two cents worth."

Of "Ghost Ship", Walter says "It's probably one of the most aggressive, gruesome pieces I ever did. Consequently I got away with a lot with that. . . because people were intimidated by it, but those same people, including little kids in grade four said, 'yeah, that's the way it is'. They agreed with me. That was sort of fun. They agreed with this gruesome shit, all this tough stuff. It's a myth about a guy who's floating around the earth, or whatever, and he's trying to get out of where he's been and he was having a damned hard time. I like that kind of presumption."

One article by John Bentley Mays (Canadian Art, March 2007) is intriguing, describing Walter's role as mystic. Said Mays, "Like Redinger's drawing, which rapidly surrenders all pretense to art-historical resonance or philosophical depth, Ghost Ship becomes at last less a depiction of anything in the real world than the abstract expression of a raw state of consciousness and spirit, bruised and extreme, radically uncompromising, quixotic."

Walter's art continues to reflect an outlook that jumps from cosmos to microcosm and various stops in between, with that keen awareness of life's inevitable kicks to the viscera, but also with an irrepressible enthusiasm, energy and sense of humour.

Last year, Walter won a grant/award from the Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation in New York. These grants are awarded in recognition of the quality of an artist's work and that artist's dedication to his/her work over a period of years. Find out more about Walter at www.walterredinger.com. (Photos courtesy of Walter Redinger)

*On April 17th, the St. Thomas Elgin Public Art Centre will present **Artist 2 Artist: Walter Redinger. Ron Kingswood. Al Sugarman.** It is their first in a new series featuring well-known artists from our community. The speakers will share insights about their careers and inspirations, and welcome audience participation and questions.*

Connie Greger, a gifted local artist herself, conceptualized the idea for the series and donated the proceeds from her show "Standing Silent" to help make it happen. Connie has valued her own conversations with artists and recognizes the considerable benefits of community engagement with artists and their stories. Connie, along with Sherri Howard, (Education & Program Coordinator at STEPAC) have collaborated extensively to bring the series to the Centre and all the staff there has taken on the idea with enthusiasm.

The event takes place Sun April 17, 2-4pm at 301 Talbot Street, St. Thomas and admission is free.

New Universe #2, 2010
48" x 45 1/2" acrylic on canvas, Artist's Collection

