

Sculptural Pursuit

Summer 2009
DYNAMIC DIMENSIONS

JUD BERGERON

Installation: Sculpture & Poetry

The Life & Work of
Bruno Lucchesi

The Interplay of
Sculpture and Poetry

John Fisher
Stone Carving

GUILLERMO VALENTÍN
Cast Stone

Art Therapy's
Healing Process

Plan & Organize a Show

I Will Wait Quietly
Jud Bergeron

SUMMER 2009 Vol.8 No.2



US \$9 CAN \$11

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John Fisher

Classic Stone Carving with a Contemporary Edge

by Jonathan Noble

BURDEN OF ANGELS, limestone, 12' x 10' x 2'
Fisher completed this piece onsite at the Marenakos
Rock Center in Preston, WA during Stonefest 2008.
Photo by Charles Backus

Even to the untrained eye, John Fisher's sculptures reflect both his respect for the historical masters of figurative stone carving and his deep appreciation for his medium. Refined lines contrast with natural, jagged edges to create figures that seem to rise out of the stone. Fisher's work is the result of a lifetime of artistic experimentation and innovation that has taken him across the United States and Europe – a long way for an artist who got his start selling his art on the streets of Berkeley, California.

Fisher has been an artist for as long as he can remember. "I have drawings dating back to my early childhood," he says. "There was never any doubt in my mind as to what I wanted to do." But Fisher's interest in stone sculpture was piqued at the age of twelve when his father, an archaeology professor, took a yearlong sabbatical, and the

family traveled through Europe and the Near East. "During that year, I was exposed to all the great pieces of classical art," Fisher says. This was the beginning of what would be a lifelong fascination with historical stone-carving techniques.

Fisher attended high school in Claremont, California, where an experimental education program gave him the opportunity to major in art. "I was doing life-size sculptures and ceramic firing and all sorts of art as a teenager," he explains. After graduating, he wanted to go to art school, but his father disagreed, so Fisher moved to Berkeley and began making and selling art to support himself. Though he never formally attended college, he became a part of the artistic community at the University of California at Berkeley and learned a lot from his interactions with the students and professors there.



GENOVA, Carrara marble, 9' x 2' x 1.5'
Photo by E.K. Walker

His time in Berkeley was difficult, but it taught him to produce large volumes of art quickly. He would constantly create art in different media and take it to the park where he would sell it to passers-by. "It was a struggle.... I was trying to make seventy-five to a hundred dollars a week selling watercolors for a dollar a piece," he remembers. It may have been tough, but Fisher made enough money to cover his daily expenses, and his art continued to evolve. During this time he began carving stone. "I carved my first two little sculptures out of marble that I'd found in a junk pile," he says.

By the age of thirty-five, Fisher was ready for a new adventure. "I reached a point in my road where I needed to make a change," he says. "So I went to the park and sold all my paintings and sculptures and bought a ticket to Italy." Not long before he left, Fisher met Sandy Oppenheimer, a collage artist who lived next door to his mother. Oppenheimer joined Fisher in Italy several months after he got there and, for the next twenty years, the pair built a life for themselves in Pietrasanta, a Tuscan town and Mecca for stone sculptors worldwide. "We have been constant companions ever since," he says. "She's been a constant support and inspiration, and we have a really fun relationship as artists and parents and mates."

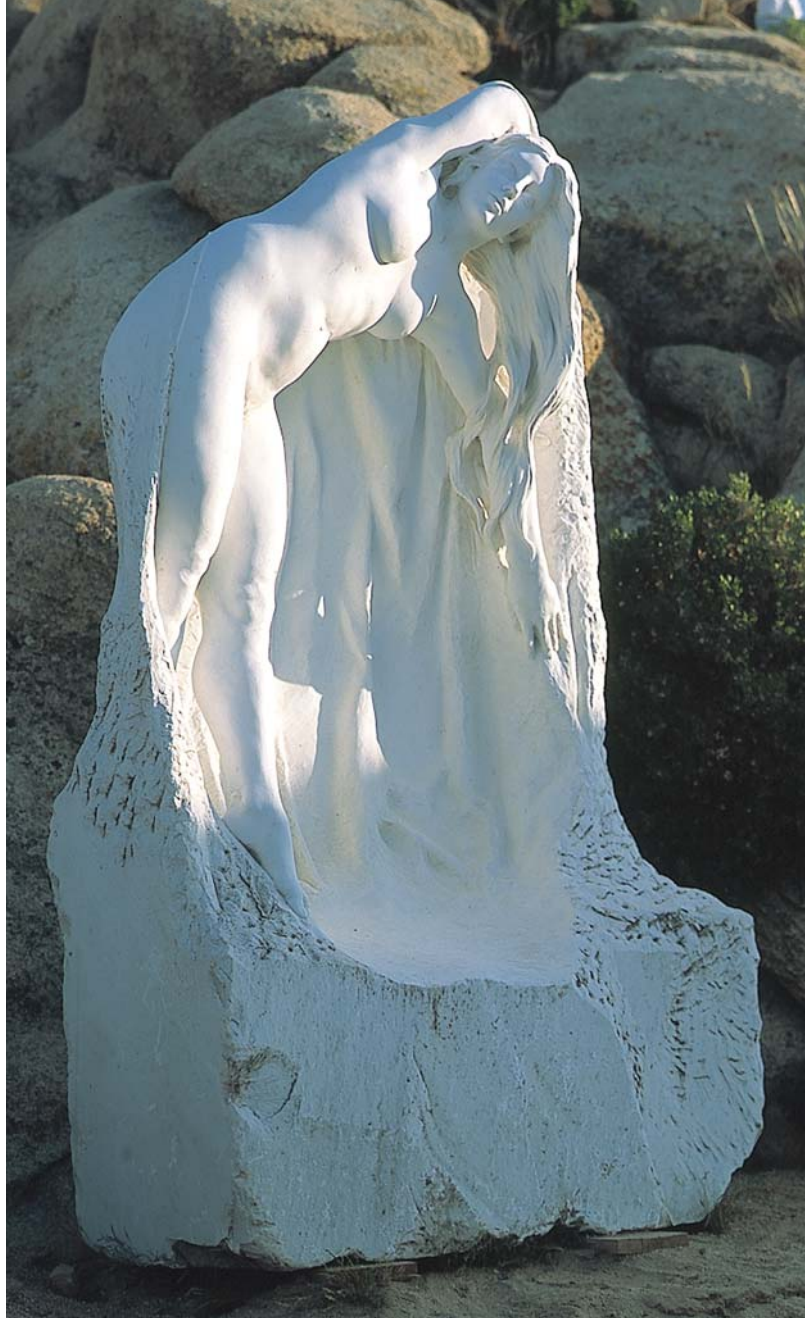
Pietrasanta, which is located near the famous Italian marble quarries in Carrara, was the perfect place for Fisher to develop his stone-carving skills. He made regular trips to the stone yards to learn how the stone was quarried and to familiarize himself with all aspects of the stone industry there. "In one of these small marble yards, I found a patron and a friend, Renato Leonardi," Fisher recalls.

NIGHT, Carrara marble, 8' x 3.5' x 2'
Photo by E.K. Walker

***Fear and control are
the worst enemies.***

*If you buckle under that
fear, you will
never get it.*

*You will get something,
and it may be
good quality, but
**it will never
be inspirational.***



Leonardi gave Fisher a studio space in which he could carve and, two years later, the pair decided to go into business together.

In 1990, Studio Leonardi opened its doors, becoming the first carving studio in Pietrasanta to be run by a non-Italian. The studio provided carving space for an international group of stone sculptors. "It was the only studio in the area where we spoke English. We drew people from everywhere." Fisher fondly remembers the Italian lifestyle and sense of community that bonded the sculptors at Studio Leonardi. "We had an Italian chef and had long lunches under the olive trees" with wine flowing into the evening.

The year after opening the studio, Fisher and Oppenheimer welcomed a daughter, Allegra, who became a source of inspiration for Fisher's work. *VAI CON DIO*, for instance, is a statuary marble piece that portrays a child flying out of the arms of its mother, representing "the idea that our children must leave us to follow their own destiny." Fisher started the sculpture not long after Allegra's birth and finished it ten years later with her help. It's just one of many sculptures Fisher has done of his daughter, but Allegra, now seventeen, is starting to want a little more input. "The last sculpture I did of her, she said, 'You gotta put clothes on me, *bobbo*,'" Fisher laughs.



VAI CON DIO, statuary marble, 3' x 2.5' x 2'
Photo by E.K. Walker

During his time in Italy, Fisher continued to be fascinated by the history of stone carving and wanted to learn everything he could about how the masters worked. “Historically, I wondered how did they carve and not get hurt without safety glasses. Scholars have shown me sixteenth-century books on sculpture tools without a word on how to use them. It must have been so understood, so basic, that it was not necessary to communicate, like writing with the point of the pencil and not the eraser,” he says.

Over the years, Fisher was able to develop a unique and artistically gratifying process for carving stone that employs both historical and modern techniques. He is a strong proponent of the direct carving method, so he doesn’t create a model – or even an image of the piece in his mind – before he starts carving. “Once you make the model, then you’re so tied to it mentally that you’re not open to change. The more fluid the experience the sweeter it is,” he says. “You continually have this ‘Aha!’ experience. I carve something I’ve never carved before, because I didn’t know what I was carving until I woke up that morning and started smashing away at that block.”

Fisher urges artists not to allow the fear of making mistakes to prevent them from direct carving.



OASIS, Carrara marble, 4' x 9' x 2'
Photo by E.K. Walker



SOLITUDE 2, Bianco Pi marble, 4' x 3' x 3'
Photo by E.K. Walker

"Fear and control are the worst enemies," he says. "If you buckle under that fear, you will never get it. You will get something, and it may be good quality, but it will never be inspirational."

Fisher's carving process, which consists of three phases, allows him to produce a lot of work quickly. In the first phase, he carves directly into the stone with little or no idea what form the sculpture will take. "If you start with an idea, you limit yourself from the beginning," he advises. "If you don't know what you are doing, you can't make a mistake. There is no wrong, so remove stone, enjoy it!" he encourages. As a general rule, Fisher removes thirty percent of each block of stone during this abstract stage, which is meant to be purely intuitive. "Abstract has to be pure abstract. I'm pretty hardcore about that – thirty percent on the ground, no imaging," he professes. He believes that the sculpture's shape will appear later "if you start abstractly and create a dynamic composition."



SUMMER, statuary marble, 28" x 54" x 27"
Photo by John Fisher



Top:
SELENE AND ENDYMION
statuary marble, 12" x 30" x 15"
Photo by Jason Deutsch

Above:
SELENE AND ENDYMION, detail
Photo by John Fisher

Fisher's second step is what he calls the imaging phase. Once he has removed thirty percent of the stone, the final image of the sculpture often comes to him quickly. He compares the imaging process to recognizing shapes in the clouds. "As you start to refine the forms you are seeing, the image suddenly comes to life, because you are right at the surface and don't have to dig any more to find it," he says.

The last step in Fisher's process is what he calls profile carving, a technique that applies the principles of drawing to sculpture. "The whole profile carving aspect of this technique is, I believe, how historically stone was removed from the block," he says. First, Fisher visualizes the profile lines of his subject, then he carves along the outside of the lines. "Holding on to my vision, sighting along my profile lines, I remove any stone on the far side of the line. Moving slightly reveals a new set of profiles to refine," he explains. Using this technique, Fisher often completes his sculptures with only one rotation around the stone. Profile carving helps Fisher focus when he's working. "When you are only carving a line, your decision making is very clear. Is that the line you want, or isn't it? If it isn't, change it to make it the way you want."

Fisher also believes that the great historical sculptors held their chisels differently to protect themselves from flying debris. Today, most



Sculptures currently in progress sit outside John Fisher's Fort Bragg, CA studio. Photo by John Fisher

sculptors position their chisels at a forty-five degree angle to the stone and look at the point from above, but Fisher positions himself underneath the chisel, holding it at a fifteen to twenty-five degree angle, and looks at the stone he is leaving intact, rather than the stone he is taking away. While this position may be less comfortable, he says it "cuts easier and holds an edge on the chisel longer, while bruising the stone less."

In 2001, Studio Leonardi's landlord wanted the property cleared, forcing the studio to close its doors after ten years in business. Fisher continued to produce and sell his work, but with an aging mother in California and a daughter about to begin high school, Fisher and his family had some decisions to make. "[Allegra] started high school in Italy, and we knew she'd fall in love with an Italian boy and it would just be hell. So we decided that our time in Italy hadn't come to an end, but to a transition. In 2005, we made an organized retreat back to the U.S."

Since moving back to California, Fisher continues to carve stone in his studio in Fort Bragg, but he has also focused his career on sharing both his art and his knowledge with the masses. "I'm really keen on teaching and getting the

message out and having people get demystified by the artistic experience," he says. His propensity for teaching and his experience participating in public sculpture symposia throughout Europe have led Fisher down a new path – public onsite carvings.

"During an onsite carving, a whole community is able to witness the magic of the creative process and watch daily as images emerge from a raw block of stone," Fisher explains. These public projects are truly inclusive and collaborative efforts between Fisher and the communities that sponsor the projects. "It's very gratifying and challenging," he says. "I get along with people and that's why the onsite carvings work. I feel most comfortable when I've got my hammer and my chisel and my block and people can see it happening."

Working with children is one of Fisher's favorite parts of his onsite carving projects. "The kids come and I always leave a corner for them to chip on," he says. Last year, during a project in Mendocino, California, Fisher remembers that one kid showed up every day after school to help carve. As the full sculpture evolved into a beach scene, the kid's carving – reminiscent of Wolfman Jack – didn't really fit with the



John Fisher works on an onsite carving in Santa Barbara, CA
Photo courtesy of The Council for Alcohol and Drug Abuse of Santa Barbara

theme. "I showed him how Wolfman could turn into a crawdad. He got it and I let him do most of the work and we left that crawdad in the sculpture. He knows he did that," Fisher recalls.

While many of Fisher's sculptures are life size or monumental, he also produces many smaller, less expensive sculptures that are affordable to any income bracket. He recommends that all artists do the same. In 2008, he created fifty sculptures and about twenty oil paintings. "Of the fifty sculptures I sold, we're living off of six of them. Many of them were just sold for my day's wage," he says. "We've always made our living selling those twenty-dollar items." He also gave away about ten sculptures last year because, to Fisher, sharing art with the world is an important part of being an artist. "I really believe that it's important that everyone have art, whether they can afford it or not. I believe art is for the masses."

You can catch Fisher demonstrating his techniques or teaching the basics of stone sculpture throughout California. He'll be at the Mendocino Art Center on May 16 and June 19-23, 2009. He also plans to teach at the California Sculptors Symposium and StoneFest 2009 before spending the Fall with his wife in Italy.

For more information on John Fisher and his artwork, visit www.fisheroppenheimer.com. ✕

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