

Carving Out A New Life

Litchfield Publisher Arthur Carter Sculpts Because He Has The Ways And Means

September 30, 2001 | By KEVIN CANFIELD; Courant Staff Writer

The Litchfield County Times is a pretentious but handsome and often well-written weekly -- the kind of newspaper that wins a lot of awards. In July, judges in a national journalism competition named it the best small paper in the country.

At one time, the now 20-year-old County Times was on newsstands in New York. Arthur Carter, the paper's publisher, recalls hearing from urbanites who would buy the small Connecticut broadsheet in the city and troll its real estate pages in search of a little place in the woods.

"People would see a house and they'd buy it on the phone," says Carter, who, like many of his readers, divides his time between New York and Connecticut. "Stephen Sondheim told me he bought his house over the phone."

But no matter how many prizes it wins, no matter how many celebrity readers it has, The Litchfield County Times will always be Carter's other paper.

That's because its sister is the New York Observer, the snarkier-than-thou salmon-colored weekly that is to Manhattan's self-obsessed media and publishing worlds what the Sporting News used to be to baseball, what Rolling Stone once was to rock music.

Carter believes the Observer, which has a circulation of about 50,000, is read because it's "edgy but with some humor."

"We don't take ourselves too seriously," said Carter during an interview at his home on more than 1,000 acres of former farmland in New Milford. "Or we pretend we don't."

"For a small but influential group of New Yorkers it is important to read," says Kurt Andersen, a New York novelist and co-founder of Spy magazine and Inside.com.

"Basically it is for two audiences, which is to say well-to-do uptown people, especially Upper East Side people -- a disproportionately powerful and influential group of people in New York. And it's also read by people in media and

publishing and the press, who are obviously disproportionately influential as well. By sort of targeting those two audiences, which overlap somewhat, it was a shrewd paper to start."

Brash and mouthy, the 14-year-old Observer is hard not to like. It does the right things, the things people are -- or should be -- talking about.

Weeks before the New York Times put Jonathan Franzen's masterly new novel, "The Corrections," on the cover of its Sunday book review, the Observer published a long, funny excerpt from the book. The same Aug. 27-Sept. 3 edition featured Jason Gay's fascinating profile of David Rosenthal, a debatably sane screenwriter-turned-playwright; the estimable Andrew Sarris' take on the new Woody Allen film; and the type of less-than-subtle editorials Observer readers have come to rely on. (One was headlined "Al Sharpton, National Joke.")

It's the editorials, come to think of it, and the paper's unstated but unambiguous mission of taking the wind out of the city's phonies that makes the 69-year-old Carter's relatively recent entry into the art world a bit curious.

A decade ago, emboldened by his experience with the design of the clean and smart-looking County Times and the wholly different but equally attractive Observer, Carter realized he wanted to be a sculptor.

A boyhood interest in geometry had turned the adult Carter, who has been married for 25 years to his third wife, Linda, into an inveterate scribbler and sketcher. But he was in his 60s before he decided to do something real with the shapes he saw in his head. So in a way that only a millionaire former investment banker could (he could afford to buy equipment and material, and hire help), he made himself an artist.

His sculptures are big and unusual. One, called "Triad," is a narrow 10-foot-tall piece of stainless steel split down the center. "Mathematika" consists of two square pieces of polished aluminum resting atop a third. "Morph" is, in essence, an 8-foot-tall piece of bronze bent and stretched to resemble a wayward S.

"I think a lot of it came about from collecting art and studying art and sculptors," says Carter, sitting near an original de Kooning that hangs on his wall.

"It's a significant part of my day-to-day life and work and energy," he says. "You like what you do if you do it well. It turns out I could do some of it reasonably well, and that's what I like about it."

Carter's reputation has grown steadily since he began making sculptures -- one of his pieces has been displayed in front of a General Motors building in New York, another is at an entrance to Central Park, and a third has been commissioned by George Washington University.

How much of the actual "sculpting" Carter does is tough to tell; he employs several workers, who apparently do most of the actual construction of the pieces he sketches. (There is not as unusual as it might seem. Since the Renaissance, artists have paid craftsmen to carry out their concepts. It's a practice employed today by artists as prominent as Jeffrey Koons and Sol LeWitt.)

Lance Esplund, who writes for, among other publications, "Art in America," has written, "Carter's sculptures have the figure-ground, graphic punch of the front-page headline or the modern poster, and his background as a graphic designer and publisher ... has a great deal to do with his sensibility."

But has Carter's fortune and station in life bought him status as an artist?

"It certainly comes from a different place than artists who struggle to keep body and soul together as young people," said Andersen. "It's certainly in a physical sense easy for him. He's got the money and, as you say, can just hire the people to do it and does. It certainly is true that the New York Observer, for instance, would probably be skeptical of him as an artist if he didn't own it."

That said, Andersen, who recently had Carter on his radio show to talk about the business of art, said the publisher takes his sculpture "very seriously." Meet Carter, who also owned The Nation magazine from the mid-'80s till about seven years ago, and you might be excused for thinking that he'd be a difficult man to work for.

A New York native and onetime regional circulation manager at Newsday, Carter says he is thoroughly involved in the Observer's daily workings and even helps write editorials if they lack the requisite amount of bile. But during an interview at his home, he acted like someone who, by virtue of his ownership stake in three papers (the East Hampton Star of East Hampton, N.Y., is the other) is in journalism but not of it. He refused to let a reporter tape an interview, and most of his answers were platitudes. (Why did you start a paper in Litchfield County in 1981, Mr. Carter? "I thought it had some really interesting demographics.")

Though they sometimes clashed, Antoinette Bosco, former executive editor of the Litchfield County Times, says Carter knew when to back off from the daily job of running the newspaper.

"He really left the publication of his paper in the hands of the professionals he hired, for the most part," says Bosco.

And it must be said: Carter has been generous with his earnings. He has been a major donor to, among others, New York University and the University of Connecticut, and he has given hundreds of acres to a Litchfield County land trust to ensure that the property will never be built on.

But despite his artwork, despite his philanthropy, it's the papers that drive Carter. After all, why else would a man who has the money and time to devote to all manner of leisurely pursuits keep a regular schedule at the office? Why else would he hang in there with a paper (the Observer) which, he says, loses millions of dollars each year? Why else would he run the type of publication that alienates many of the people a man of his stature would be expected to cultivate as friends?

``Everyone is not going to like you, particularly if you're in the newspaper business," he says. ``You don't say something nice about everybody all the time. If you do, you're not running a damn good newspaper."