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LCT Monthly

New Chapter For a Dynamo

By: Douglas P. Clement May 29, 2009



It is said that sculpture, when well executed, commands the space around it. That same attribute can be accorded to Arthur Carter, the Renaissance man known primarily in Litchfield County for his launch in 1981 of The Litchfield County Times.

Already by that point, he had flirted with becoming a classical pianist, had parlayed an MBA from Dartmouth College into Wall Street success-and fortune. In the two decades that he brought a New York City sense of style and sophistication to the country through the vehicle of a weekly newspaper, Mr. Carter also owned The Nation, the premier voice of liberal intellectualism, was a part owner of The East Hampton Star on Long Island, and founded The New York Observer, a salmon-hued broadsheet that aspired to be the classiest paper in the country and gave the world the column that inspired "Sex and the City."

While he has continued to own and enjoy a sprawling, hidden gem of a farm along the Shepaug River in Roxbury, Mr. Carter's profile may have ebbed a bit in this region since he sold The Litchfield County Times to the Journal Register Company in the fall of 2001. But faded away he has not, which is proven gloriously in a new monograph published by Abrams, entitled "Arthur Carter: Sculptures * Paintings * Drawings."

Fresh off a well-received exhibit of his work at Grey Art Gallery at New York University, Mr. Carter took time recently to reflect on his flourishing, later-in-life career as a sculptor and artist, and on the arc of experience that brought him to the place where lifelong passions-art, design and mathematics among them-coalesced in the birth of a new pursuit.

"It happened over a period of time," he said.

"Interestingly enough, it really started with The Litchfield County Times." In the early days of the newspaper that has been judged the best weekly in the nation, and whose walls abound with first-place awards for excellence, Mr. Carter recalls playing the role of graphic designer, working hand-in-hand with designer and photographer Gary Gunderson.

A reference by Mr. Carter to the notable graphic designers and publishers who evolved into artists, including the late Alexander Liberman of Condé Nast

fame, who had a home in Warren, a mention of his own stellar art collection, and the thread of aesthetics that has stretched through his endeavors clearly point the way toward art and sculpture. Easing the transition into fabricating sometimes monumental works-created in a barn-turned-studio in Roxbury-was the fact that Mr. Carter learned to weld while in the U.S. Coast Guard's Officers Training School during the Korean War.

Considering all of those factors, it should come as no surprise to those who knew Mr. Carter as the dynamic force behind The Litchfield County Times that he has gone on to create artwork that is widely judged to be aesthetically unique and advanced, while also intellectually rigorous.

Carey Lovelace begins a December 2008 essay published in "Arthur Carter: Sculpture and Drawings," which accompanied the exhibit at the Grey Art Gallery at New York University by writing, "At the heart of each of Arthur Carter's open-form, discreetly beguiling sculptures lies a conundrum. How can substantial metal appear so weightless? How can two linear, closed forms, against logic, intersect? Just as a Möbius strip doubles back on itself to create a trick of infinity, Carter's works, with the clarity of Euclidean formulae, subtly probe contradictions amid certainties."

Tracing his inspiration to the Constructivists, Ms.

Lovelace, writes, "Constructivists combined intuitive choice with ordering strategies. Similarly, Carter draws from mathematics, notably the Fibonacci series, in which, starting with the 'seeds' of 0 and 1, each number is the sum of the preceding two (1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, ...). It is the ratio shaping natural phenomena such as the spiral of shells, the shape of waves, or the branching of trees; it has been used by architects to determine harmonious proportions for lived spaces"

Meanwhile, in the new monograph from Abrams, an essay by Peter W. Kaplan, the editor of *The New York Observer*, is one of unabashed admiration that begins, "Arthur Carter is a man of devouring, scouring intelligence, furious deductive powers, and occasionally slashing wit. He can be reassuring, but rarely complacent; warm, but rarely tepid. Before he was a man of shapes, he was primarily a man of numbers, sometimes terrifyingly so: He can read a balance sheet and spit out the results like what we used to call a Univac."

A classically trained pianist who took a degree in French literature at Brown University, a Wall Street success story, a newspaper and magazine publisher and, now, a sculptor and artist, Mr. Carter is someone who has always reshaped the space around him.

Mr. Kaplan's essay goes on to describe Mr. Carter's process, and along the way it offers revelatory looks at

the man and his artwork.

The man who could leverage the world to his benefit was born within the shell of a boy. Speaking of a ritualistic lunch involving Observer staff members, Mr. Kaplan writes, "One of the salient stories he told was that when he was 7 years old, in Woodmere, he had found a house for sale and led his father by the hand to the place itself, where he decisively declared the family would be better off owning a home than renting the one they were in. Arthur's father bought the house. Arthur was confirmed. Thus the farm in Connecticut and the townhouse on East 64th Street."

When it comes to the artwork, beyond chronicling how he once observed Mr. Carter taking the measure of greats such as Anthony Caro and David Smith in the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller sculpture garden at the Museum of Modern Art, Mr. Kaplan notes that Mr. Carter will simply brush off questions about what his work is about.

Undaunted, Mr. Kaplan offers this: "And if the sculptures hold their space in this world and assert their meanings, it has something to do with an investment in the kind of agreeable security, even optimism, and even balletic friendliness, that is due to their pleasing proportionality." A bit later, after noting Mr. Carter's insistence that his pieces are not in the least narrative but purely abstract, Mr. Kaplan adds, "That's all very nice. But among those

triangles and helixes and chords and arcs and ellipses, there's an affirmation of the interrelatedness of things in physics and nature, a reverence for the shape of the universe, a real satisfaction taken from the geometry of things."

In that spirit, here's another take on Mr. Carter to be accepted or rejected at will by the sculptor and his admirers. The artwork, the result of what has been labeled his fourth career, is yet another manifestation of a singular devotion-editing. The 7-year-old boy who bought a house was editing his world for the better, the Wall Street aspirant took a red pencil to his résumé, lifestyle and demographic rank until it looked right, the publisher edited the world around him until it fulfilled its potential-while also literally editing publications-and the sculpture, through what Mr. Kaplan might call an exteriorization of the editing process, redefines space by filling it with objects of beauty and intensity.

"The process is very unconscious, but when I review the work it's very conscious," Mr. Carter said of his work at one point in our conversation-inspiration followed by editing.

The book that describes Mr. Carter's path, which also contains a scholarly essay elucidating the aspects and attributes of the sculptures, came about through art world serendipity. He was introduced to art book

publishers in Milan, and there was subsequent interest in putting all the work together in one volume. Those associations rippled into the American publishing world, and Mr. Carter was contacted by Abrams.

With a publication date of May 1, the new book, with a cover price of \$50, is short on Mr. Carter's most recent work. They are reliefs, pieces of steel and bronze, that might sit on a wall as a base. "That's work that I'll be doing for some time to come," Mr. Carter said. "I think that they are pieces that will be very, very attractive and pieces that people will want to acquire."

Whatever the particular form of the work, Mr. Carter explained, "The two dominant forces that are in play are the aesthetics and the originality." These are sculptures that originate with an intellectual impulse, find their initial shape in drawings and maquettes and grow to space-altering dimensions one at a time, by hand.

And soon, these works by Mr. Carter will be available for the public to view, and purchase, at a gallery at 50 East 78th Street in Manhattan. His Web site is www.arthurcartersculptures.com.

Any interview with Mr. Carter wouldn't be complete without two questions: Is there yet another career coming in the future for a man born in 1931?; and, does he miss the publishing business?

In response to the first issue, he said as long as he has new and exciting ideas that extend his sculptural range, "I'm going to certainly continue."

To the latter, he said, "I do miss the publishing business; it was part of my life for 25 years. It's a very wonderful connection to the community. I met a range of people I probably wouldn't have met if I hadn't embarked in that direction."