

Ars Gratia Arthur

By Peter W. Kaplan

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.

In many ways, Arthur Carter likes to present himself as a no-nonsense man, but as you have seen, there's plenty else going on inside. "Creativity," Alexander Liberman, the impossibly dapper Condé Nast publishing genius who was also a vibrant sculptor, wrote, "is the exteriorization of the life instinct." It is Arthur Carter's life instinct and his intellectual interior that can be seen in these pages.

Arthur Carter is also a human chrysalis; he has shown himself in a full set of life stages, from his earliest days on Long Island, through his years on Wall Street, through time as a business pioneer, through a period as a newspaper and magazine publisher, to this current position as a sculptor and painter. He has emerged over and over, each time surprising his friends and the city in which he lives, displaying an extraordinary combination of courage and adventure, as well as significant and well-earned self-knowledge.

Arthur Carter grew up in Woodmere, Long Island, a town with which I'm familiar, since it was the home of my grandparents—whom Arthur remembers—and where my father and uncle were boys. Arthur's mother and father were Rosalind and Eugene Carter: She was deeply cultured, a French teacher and valedictorian at Hunter High School and he was an IRS man for forty-seven years. Arthur once told me that he did Wall Street for his father, but the newspapers were for his mother. Woodmere was, in both pre- and post-war America, an upper middle-class community with high cultural aspirations; as a boy, Arthur studied classical piano. I asked him if he had any particular interest in art as a child.

"None," he said, rather dispassionately. He then went on to inform me just what he thought of the kids who took art classes at Woodmere High School. What *did* he like in high school? He thought, not very long, and perked up. "Geometry," he said, unambiguously, and then went on an extended disquisition about mathematics, about the twelfth- and thirteenth-century mathematician Fibonacci and the Golden Ratio, the mathematical proportion that was applied to everything from the Acropolis to the structures of Le Corbusier. "It gave me the closest thing to a core connection between mathematics and aesthetics," he said. "It was the very precision of it, the aesthetic of it that intrigued me," and when you look at the sculptures in this book, with their happy ratios and satisfying interchanges, you may find a little of the reassurance Arthur Carter found in their certainty. These abstracted relationships may create for the artist, and also the viewer, a kind of solid ground in a chaotic world.

Between Woodmere and Wall Street, there was a serious flirtation with classical piano and Juilliard, but mostly more hard-nosed choices: Brown University, the Coast Guard (he commanded a ninety-five-foot patrol craft and learned to weld), a few years at Lehman Brothers, then Tuck School of Business at Dartmouth. He said that if someone had told him, when he was on Wall Street, starting up what turned out to be the world-beating firm of Carter, Berlind & Weill—which spawned a Murderer’s Row lineup of partners that included Sanford Weill, Roger Berlind, Arthur Levitt, and Marshall Cogan—that he would be an artist someday, he would have told them “they were crazy.” Back then, Arthur Carter’s creativity was showing itself in business--buying public companies, restructuring them, taking them private--early versions of what entered the business culture as the leveraged buyout and private equity. But he did buy some art. Picassos, at first. But later, along came Leger, Kandinsky, Braque, Milton Avery, and Balthus. And then sculpture: Alexander Archipenko, Jean Arp, Henry Moore, and Aristide Maillol.

Next came the Arthur Carter who fused his business and intellectual ambitions as the editorially demanding publisher who bought and rehabilitated *The Nation* magazine, then founded and published two newspapers: an exquisite throwback country weekly near his Connecticut farm, *The Litchfield County Times*, and a broadsheet city weekly a few blocks from his Manhattan home, *The New York Observer*. He was determined to turn *The Observer* into the classiest little newspaper in America. It was this Arthur Carter that I met in 1994, when I became editor of the weekly. He was publishing *The New York Observer* from a red brick townhouse on East 64th Street—down the block from Kitty Carlisle Hart and Mike Wallace—a building whose intimate nineteenth-century New Yorkness seemed almost every day to embody the adage of Charles Foster Kane, “I think it would be fun to run a newspaper.”

His long, carpeted office on the second floor of the building was dominated by a few things, unusual to a newspaper publisher’s office, that held their ground: a George III desk, a pretty regal red paisley wing chair, a few good nineteenth-century sculptures, the walls ringed with black-and-white photographs of Thomas Mann and Albert Einstein, as well as portraits of his father, his mother, his wife, and various adorable Carter children.

The floor above that held the ad sales and circulation staffs; and one more above that, the fourth floor, held the impossibly crowded editorial offices, reporters stuffed around fireplaces and editors doubled up in former bedrooms, dueling daily with the New York City building occupancy code laws. The working bathtub on the fourth floor was filled to the brim with newspapers. Why do I bring this up in an introduction to Arthur Carter the artist?

He reveled in place and space. He leapt into the controlled calibration that is newspaper design. He chose the look—the aesthetic of his places and papers—as if they were art pieces. *The Observer* building was red, almost anthropomorphic. The newsprint of *The Observer* was, *what?* Salmon! Why? Arthur understood what the European tinted newspapers did: The paper made its own intrinsic statement. He was demanding and unyielding on matters of fonts, spacing, paper stock, point sizes, and leading: “It was only

with newspaper design,” he told me, “that I realized I was interested in making art, in an aesthetic.” Pages went in and pages went out, and Arthur would stare at redesigns and judge, as an architect, a couture designer, a gallery owner.

Something was going on in there. But the net effect was to convince us that the paper was the love of Arthur’s work life, and within *The Observer*’s particular screwball exteriorization, half Edith Wharton, half Howard Hawks, rationality ruled. Arthur’s particular chemistry was to meld instinct and pragmatism; the result was—we on the staff liked to tell ourselves at the time—a little newspaper that was both New York social instrument and Manhattan *objet*. It escaped nobody that the paper was an extension of Arthur Carter’s persona.

During the period I worked for him as the editor of *The New York Observer*, one of our self-imposed regular occurrences, a ritual that combined professional regimen and some transference and counter-transference, was the lunch we had together, once a week, like clockwork, a professional Scheherazade between Manhattan publisher and editor. Plenty of business was done during those lunches, life stories told: One of the salient stories he told was that when he was seven 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.

One day, he told me at lunch that he was buying a giant, bright-red outdoor sculpture for his farm; it was by Alexander Liberman, and it was called *Diablo*. “It interests me,” he said. Arthur had developed a kind of fascination with Liberman and was determined to meet him. Not too long after that, he showed up at lunch and asked if I’d like to join him to see the Jackson Pollock show at the Museum of Modern Art, which was closed that day, but somehow we were let in privately. Afterward, we went on a little stroll through the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller sculpture garden. He began speaking of Anthony Caro and David Smith—the garden had in its permanent collection the pieces *Midday* by Caro and *Cubi X* and *Sentinel* by Smith. He stopped at one of the Smith pieces in the garden and began speaking of Smith, of his materials and techniques, and of his life story, with complete admiration and fascination. I took it to be a collector’s crush, but it was something else: The more he seemed preoccupied, the more he seemed to be measuring the ground around the work of other sculptors. The more fascination he showed in materials and metals fabrication—from the brick-size gray rectangular clay slabs he began implanting with heavy metal wiring to tracking down trained personnel for the industrial-size project he began preparing—the more I began to guess that the consuming fascination he generally brought to the design of *The Observer* was brewing elsewhere. Reporting!

If you ask Arthur what his work is about, he’ll brush you off, as an artist should. He may bring up Mondrian and Brancusi, or Paul Klee, then move on to David Smith and Anthony Caro, then on to the materials, the bronze and the steel, and the fabricators, then

on to the installation, conveniently avoiding telling you what kind of satisfaction they give him.

“I’ll tell you what they’re not about,” he might say. “They’re not about two elves jumping over a nymph in a forest.” That’s fair; most of them have names like “Construction No. 23: An Arc Connected by Two Parallel Perpendiculars.” That’s not “Sunrise at Montauk” or “Stella by Starlight.” But for anyone who knows Arthur Carter, that particular structural certitude is an assertion of protective, comforting logic in a slam-bam world often stripped of rationality by its careless custodians. And if the sculptures hold their space in this world and assert their meanings, it has something to do with an investment in a kind of pleasing security, even optimism, and even balletic friendliness, that is due to their pleasing proportionality. Arthur Carter would either accept or reject this take, but it’s right there for the viewer, not only in their constructions, but in their persimmon reds and tungsten blues, their brushed steel and deep bronzes. Arthur Carter makes a great show of his unsentimentality, but for the viewer, there’s an assertive optimism in his work that is consistent with the artist’s world view, his ongoing belief in a merger of the pragmatic with an ambitious aesthetic.

“They’re pure abstracts,” he says, “There’s not a scintilla of storytelling in them,” and that’s a fair statement. And he makes a claim for their “existential nihilism. Art for art’s sake.” Or, as they used to say at Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, “*Ars gratia artis*.” If you ask him what he sees in his work, he’ll say, “I see a well-put together piece.” 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 shapes of the universe, a real satisfaction taken from the geometry of things.

And a respect for the materials, the metals, and the tints. And then in the human work that has been attached to fabricating them. Arthur Carter makes many claims for himself as an abstractionist; but the more you live with his work, and focus on it, the more infused with a world view and vibrant it seems. From the little maquettes he starts with to the graceful swoops, chunks, swirls, curvilinears, and hunks he completes, he may call them geometry, but they dance in place. They may be abstract, but they also assert life, quote the graceful laws of geometry, and state a human intelligence trying to find calm and make sense of the magic reliable ratio that brings some order to the madness of the world.

Abstract, it is. Nihilistic, not. It’s art, both thoughtful and surprisingly affirming, born welded from the memory and sensibility of this exertive, driven, complicated, literate, blow-torch sensibility, devourer of novels and budgets who finds shape and solace in numbers and nature. They are pieces that surely give back to the artist: *Ars gratia* Arthur.

But they give to us as well: Take a walk through New York City. It is, in many ways, still Arthur Carter’s town, the town where he built businesses and published a newspaper, but more than that, a town where he has left his massive steel and bronze markers on the street. At 90 Park Avenue South at 39th Street, you’ll find *The Couple*,

his pair of giant merging ellipses (see page 2). At 300 Park Avenue between 49th and 50th Streets, *Psyche* (see page 198). And down at NYU, right next to the Bobst Library, *The University* (see page 68). A few years ago, in the nineties, he had sculptures placed in a sculpture garden outside the General Motors Building. The outdoor pieces have no names listed, but they are indisputably Arthur Carter, in their strength, weight, and unpredictable rationality.

They are his legacy and, even in their abstraction, his autobiography. They speak to the sidewalk passers-by, but mostly assert their presence with a kind of impatience that comes right from the metabolism of the sculptor who inhabits these pages. And very much like him, they argue, dominate, and commune with the air and light of the city, whose confident constructions only occasionally yield to the laws and conventions of the street traffic's universe but more often attempt to scrape against time itself.