

SCULPTORS AND THEIR FOUNDRIES

FINDING CREATIVE SOLUTIONS IN THIS ECONOMY

by: Tracey Fugami

In the midst of our severe economic recession, artists and art businesses are navigating familiar territory. In the United States, those who depend solely on their art career for income are used to long dry spells and month to month fluctuation of exhibitions and sales. Businesses who work with artists also feel the ebb and flow of revenue based on commissioned projects and art purchases. Sculptors and foundries have particularly prohibitive expenses due to their multifaceted processes, equipment, metals, and space needs. Yet in these circumstances, both artist and foundry have discovered innovative modes of working by researching alternatives, and seeking additional sources of cash flow in this unstable market.

Tim Shinabarger, a bronze sculptor who resides in Montana, received the C. Percival Dietsch Award from the National Sculpture Society in 2001. He has had an eventful year, with work in six galleries across the country and half a dozen exhibitions. Fortunately, in 2008, a private collector commissioned a large work that will give Shinabarger a foundation of income for this year. Despite this good fortune, sales have eased in his galleries, and he has diversified the sizes and prices of his works to offer more



Tribal Pride by Leon Richman, bronze, 28 inches high

opportunities to collectors.

Shinabarger remarks: "An economy like this does make it a little more difficult to manage inventory. I want to be careful, and make sure that my funds are put into the castings that are going to be the most popular. I think a sculptor has to be more careful with money in times like these. At the same time, I don't want to be too timid. It is hard to sell what you don't have to show." Artists with high production costs like Shinabarger must carefully forecast both expenses and monetary return. He is aware that if he cuts back too far he won't be able to fund his next project.

One key expense is materials. Between 2006 and November 2008, the cost of copper rose steadily. Artists, foundries, and galleries alike have felt the increase. When metal is on the rise, scul-

ptures are stolen, copper is shoplifted, and even electrical lines are damaged in hopes of a return. Not until December 2008, did prices start to decrease: copper, which cost around \$4 per pound in 2006, trades at \$1.50 per pound in 2009.

In addition to metal, foundries or artists pay for mold-making, casting, finishing, and labor. A life-size piece might cost as much as \$10,000. The prices of shipping, electricity, rent, and other overhead also affect the total cost of fabrication.



Flight of Fancy by Leon Richman, bronze, 34 inches high

The foundry that Shinabarger uses, Art Castings of Montana, located in Belgrade, began with twenty-one employees in 2001. The company fabricates roughly 100 bronze castings per month—from monumental to garden-size sculptures. Gary Turner, cofounder and now sole proprietor, just landed a few large projects, including a multiyear endeavor for the city of Calgary, Canada.

Turner was doing well and did not see a shift until last September, when business dropped between 30–40 percent. “Anytime there is a change you need to step back and reassess your practice. I am confident that all good foundries will make it through the rough patches if they look at how they are doing business.” Turner did just that. “I analyzed our casting process to get a better quality in the end, so that we were not spending labor on fixing casting defects. This increased our productivity by 20 percent.” To make up for the remaining shortfall, Turner had to lay off nine employees.

Fifteen hundred miles away, in North Hollywood, California, Decker Studios has seen steadier business. Sanford Decker, the owner and a consultant for the Getty Museum collection, has maintained his twenty-four employees. His 15,000 square-foot shop provides repair, maintenance, and full-service castings.

Production Manager Daniel Serfaty says that, while the volume of work has not decreased, the foundry still looks for improvements and cost savings. This year, Decker Studios has invested in new state-of-the-art kilns and a furnace, both more energy-efficient than previous equipment, and is working toward green certification. Through this process, Decker is finding ways to recycle water and metals, make its castings



Dancing Tree Nymph by Leon Richman, bronze, 22 inches high

lead-free, and create an ergonomic work environment for employees. The foundry will use less energy to construct the same amount of work, and thus spend less. Serfaty is excited by an upcoming project: “Once the kilns and furnace are in place, we’ll be working on a recycled version of Dr. Seuss’s *Lorax*, for Earth Day. It will be the first green sculpture of its kind in the United States.”

To avoid costly mistakes, the Decker team meets on a regular basis to talk over each project. Serfaty explains: “The finisher is never surprised, nor are the guys doing the dip. By the time you have gone into production, you lose money if you haven’t figured it out. Teamwork is the most important aspect to reduce costs. If you don’t communicate, mistakes are made.”

Leon Richman, an artist based in Santa Ana, California, casts his large-scale works at Decker Studios. Richman balances two successful careers as sculptor and commercial artist—working with clients such as Disney and Dreamworks—allowing him to maintain creative freedom with his popular figurative sculptures.

Richman began his career working in marble and moved into bronze. Richman believes that “no matter how much materials cost, or how much effort is required, you just can’t take shortcuts that will affect the quality.”

Richman explains that the economy has affected the way in which galleries are selling his work. “More frequently, buyers may ask for a payment plan or a discount.” Richman promotes his work by doing gallery demonstrations of how he sculpts. Richman predicts: “In these times people will still buy, but just more conservatively. Now is really the best time to buy art. Good art sells in any economy.”