

Autobiography: 2004

GORDON BECKER SCULPTOR

My life in art began at the age of eleven years in the small Canadian village of Wellesley, an ethnic German farming community in southwestern Ontario. We were shown, at school, a film of an Eskimo carver in the process of creating a sculpture. He was filmed finding a large piece of soapstone and carrying it back to his skin teepee. There he began working on the stone with a hatchet, then rasps and files and finally something like sandpaper. At the conclusion of the film he smiled and held up a figure that radiated magic and power. I was totally captivated and knew that I had to be a carver and a sculptor. My parents encouraged creativity in their children and for Christmas that year I received a small set of good quality carving tools. Of course, I knew nothing of technique and there was no one to teach me, so I just started on my own. That is a pattern that I still carry today. I had many accidents and needed many deep cuts sewn up over the next few years.

In the schools that we attended in those years education in art was considered an unnecessary distraction and a waste of time, so I was by and large left alone to find my own direction.

My father was a mission pastor in the Lutheran church and that meant moving to different parishes around the country with a fair degree of frequency. The longest we ever stayed in one place was five years in London, Ontario.

Prior to living in London we lived in the place that probably left the strongest impression and formed the foundations of what I would become as an adult. Brodhagen is a farm community in the gentle and fertile region between Lake Huron and Lake Erie in southwestern Ontario. As always we were surrounded by German immigrants and their descendents. In Brodhagen they were all farmers. It was there, around the age of four or five that I climbed to the top of one of the gateposts in front of the church with the intention of standing on it with my arms spread out like an angel. I fell, landing on my head on the cement sidewalk. The post was around three metres high, so it was a terrible fall and I was lucky to have survived it. I was to remember that fall many years later and base a sculpture on that memory.

My sisters, brother and I spent our summers and holidays for a number of years with a childless couple in the community who doted on us, particularly my older sister, Kathy who closely resembled their own daughter who had died as a very small child.

Martha and Milton's farm was small, humble and very simple. There was no electricity or central heating in the house, and the barn was serviced by a single line that lit a few low-power light bulbs. Upon our arrival for the summer months we would rush to the barn to see the new calves and piglets, which we would adopt as our own for special attention and

feeding. Milton still used horses for the heavy work. These huge creatures were stabled just inside the door to the barn and we had to sidle past them every time we entered or left. As we got bolder we would place our tiny white hands on their great auburn bellies to feel the heat of their bodies under the coarse hair and the skin that would quiver at our touch as if we were flies. The barn was always in twilight even on the brightest days and in the early mornings and evenings when the chores were done, oil lamps were moved about, creating pools of golden light in the umber gloom. The rumps of the cows with their jutting hip bones and swishing tails lined the centre aisle of the barn with fantastic, living shadows and shapes as the lamps were moved among them for the milking. This chiaroscuro time was the magical climax of each day. When I saw, years later, photographs of the images on the cave walls in southern France and in Spain, I was back in that barn and I felt the most profound kinship with the creators of these masterpieces.

While in London my two older sisters and myself were selected from our classes at school to attend special Saturday morning painting classes at the city art gallery. I didn't really understand what was going on there. The teacher would play music that I think, looking back, must have been Igor Stravinsky. We were told to smear around with finger paint what we felt when listening to the music. My older sisters seem to have understood what was going on, but I was completely mystified. All I wanted to do was to draw pictures of horses and tractors, so that's what I did.

While in grade two, at the age of seven, I was offered chewing gum or candy by my classmates if I would draw horses for them. Of course I always obliged. I actually hated gum, but it was forbidden and therefore a prize.

When I was nine years old my parents bought a tiny cottage on Lake Papineau, in the Granite hills of the Canadian Shield, which, when we first arrived was sparsely populated by cottagers. Nature still prevailed. The calling of the loons echoed across the mirror surface of the lake morning and evening, and the water was pure enough to drink. The surrounding forest was cleared just enough for the cottage and a long, steep driveway down from the road.

We now split our summer holidays between the farm and the lake. In a row of five cottages there was a tribe of fifteen children all in the same age group and we had the extraordinary privilege of a second summer paradise.

A year later, when I was ten, we moved to Wellesley, a village of seven hundred people, divided about equally between Lutherans and Mennonites. After my initiation of schoolyard fights I found a best friend. Floyd was from an Amish Mennonite farming family. He had eight or nine brothers and sisters and they were the handsomest people I have ever seen, with deep brown eyes, black hair, strong features and expressions of genuine good will and generosity. I became almost another member of the family. Now I was living in a year-round paradise.

Still a child, but able to range great distances with my friend and becoming aware of the world as a larger place, I was, at the age of eleven, in a rare, perfect place.

That was when art claimed me.

My father had grown up in Winnipeg, the largest of the prairie cities at that time, and when he was offered a parish there he happily accepted. I was twelve, in love with life in Wellesley, and deeply dismayed to be leaving it.

Winnipeg proved to be worse than my worst fears. We moved in the middle of winter from the soft, deep snowscape of southern Ontario to the harsh, bitter deep freeze of the prairies. Our new house, on a bleak suburban crescent, was the last house at the south end of the airport runway. When we stepped out the back door the wind from the north would freeze our sinuses with an audible snap.

The school that I went to seemed to be populated entirely with boys who weren't really boys at all, but small, mean men with greased pompadours and gangster tendencies. I was beaten up very badly almost daily for the first few weeks.

A kind neighbour who had been a commando in the Canadian army during the second world War saw my plight and quietly taught me a few moves that would very effectively put an end to a fight almost before it got started. Thanks to Smokey I gained a reputation that kept the bullies at a distance. I was left alone and I was alone.

I turned to drawing and making for comfort. I drew countless cartoon scenarios of battles and Chinese rice-pickers, populating large sheets of paper with hundreds of little figures, all doing something that struck me as funny. I developed an enthusiasm for making model cars and airplanes and would spend hours in a corner of the basement making a world for myself. I made tiny houses, weapons, boats, cars and airplanes. I made an exquisite miniature bow and arrow and shot hundreds of holes in part of the basement ceiling with it.

I came to hate school and did poorly there. The year that I was fifteen I played truant to the point of losing the year on the basis of poor attendance. I was spending my afternoons in the pool hall but not ever getting any good at the game.

I had always loved reading and devoured books with a passion now fueled by loneliness and rage. My marks in grade ten were terrible, and it looked like I would fail the year. In a panic of studying I managed to pass all of my exams except history. Passing my English exam was a revelation. Feeling that I had no chance of getting through due to such poor marks throughout the year, I threw caution to the winds and just wrote what was in my heart. I actually wrote with joy and passion and complete recklessness. I needed to get close to a perfect mark to come up to a passing average and that is what happened. I had my first lesson in learning to trust in my own vision.

It was during this time that I had my reverse epiphany and second lesson. Attempting to pray for forgiveness after some particularly vile sinning I was seized with the absolute certainty that the God that I had been attempting to pray to was something entirely unknowable and to talk, or even think about "him" was utterly futile. The great weight of being judged and measured for salvation or damnation that had squatted on my shoulders since infancy lifted and with the metaphorical speed of light dwindled to an infinitely distant speck in the universe. I felt a freedom and a relief that that left me stunned, elated and certainly frightened. I was fourteen and had just been confirmed in the church and was about to enter into the father-son war for my life and I had just, unwittingly, won the first two battles. I kept this part of myself secret from my deeply religious parents for the

remainder of their lives. I suspect that my mother knew and may even have sympathized, but she never said anything.

The summer that I was fifteen I was sent to work on a farm near Emerson, Manitoba on the American border. "Making a man of me" nearly became the unmaking of a farm. I managed to plough up a section of county road. I destroyed a good portion of the potato crop by tilling too close to the plants and I removed a section of the barn while learning to drive a large truck in reverse. In the evenings I helped with the building of a new house. There I actually showed some aptitude and enjoyed swinging a hammer. I was surprised on one occasion to catch my reflection in a large mirror and see a creature that resembled a young man instead of the tall boy that I was used to. The farmer was a harsh man and would kick me in the backside when I made mistakes. I took a lot of kicks to the arse that summer. I was paid depression-era wages for my summer of effort and we parted with much relief on both sides.

For a brief time I embarked on a career of petty crime with a small group of my peers.

Deliverance came with yet another move.

Deep River did not look like deliverance on the map. It is a small dot on the Ottawa River one hundred and sixty kilometres north west of Ottawa. In the middle of nowhere, it looked like a logging town. Logging towns in Canada are notoriously rough places and I looked forward with absolute dread to Deep River.

My first surprise was at how pretty it was. The town faces the river, which is five kilometers wide at that part, like a big lake. The Laurentians rose in great, forested hills on the Quebec side. The high school is situated on the banks of the river and is a few metres from a beautiful sandy beach. Our house was a short walk through the forest to another even more picturesque beach. The entire town is nestled in a forest of great mature pine trees.

My first day at school was the second surprise. No one challenged me to fight. The students appeared to be more attractive and civilized than any I had ever seen. The girls were especially pretty. Before coming here we had been told something about a research facility, but hadn't paid much attention. Now it began to dawn on us that this was a very special place. This was a town built to house the researchers at a huge atomic energy research facility, and had been designed to attract and be home to scientists from all over the world. It was very important to keep an extremely well educated and sophisticated population happy in a relatively isolated area. The best teachers were recruited for the schools and cultural events that would normally be seen only in large cities came to Deep River on a regular basis.

The first person to speak to me at school has remained my closest friend to this day. I had been delivered after all. It was a huge relief to abandon my anger.

Art education, however, did not exist in that high school, so when I took up oil painting I was again on my own. I copied pictures from The National Geographic magazine and did small still-life works of ordinary household objects. What amazed me was how difficult it was and how much I loved it. I also began spending more time carving, largely imitating the

folk carvings from Quebec that were available in the local tourist shop. That same shop took two of my carvings and actually sold them. At school I drew merciless caricatures of my teachers and more interesting fellow students. My school notebooks were galleries of drawings and my grades took a poor second place to my artistic output except on a couple of occasions when I would write a story or an essay with complete reckless abandon, without any thought about marks or of pleasing anyone but myself. Then I would get very high grades, but I was still a very long way from trusting in myself.

My friends Fred and Tiny, a huge fellow, introduced me to the thrilling business of going into “the bush” with rifles and I surprised us all by being a very good shot. Fred was raised catholic and took morality and fair play very seriously, even in hunting. It was considered fair to shoot, with a .22 caliber rifle, only for a partridge’s head, which is a very small, elusive target. Shotguns were considered an unfair advantage, so we never used them. I brought home quite a few birds, which my mother obligingly cooked if I cleaned and prepared them.

My sixteenth birthday gift from my father was a social security card and a part time job he arranged for me at the A&P grocery store. At the time I thought it was a pretty lousy gift, but it freed me from having an allowance. I could buy my own clothes, go to the movies as often as I liked and sneak away on Saturday nights to an isolated hotel on the Quebec side of the river to drink too much beer among the lumberjacks, make a fool of myself and throw up before creeping back to my bed in the small hours of the morning. Sitting through church the next morning with my father’s interminable sermons and the half-hearted mooing through the hymns by the largely tone-deaf congregation were atonement and punishment, so, the score was even.

I spent my summer at eighteen working in the bush cutting trees for pulp. The work was brutally hard, the heat and flies were all but unbearable and I didn’t make nearly as much money as I expected, but I was awfully proud to be doing such manly work. I took on a strut and bearing that I felt reflected my new status. My parents had been away on a trip and when they returned they were shocked to find that their sensitive, artistic son had metamorphosed into a large, coarse lumberjack. I was facing a new and unexpected round in the father-son war. My father challenged me to arm wrestle, which struck me as absurd, considering what I had been doing all summer. I didn’t have the grace not use my new strength to slam his arm over in an instant. We were both shaken by that little event and I felt badly for him.

With high school finished I desperately wanted to attend Art College in Toronto, but my parents couldn’t afford to send me and I didn’t have enough savings to pay my own way. My father helped me one last time to get a job. I became laboratory technician at the nuclear research facility at Chalk River. I would be able to live at home and save for my schooling. Living at home didn’t work too well any more and I eventually moved into one of the staff hotels that the Canadian Government provided for single people from overseas doing research at the plant.

The work at the lab involved the analysis of all the gasses and liquids in two nuclear reactors and from the buildings that housed them. I had to learn how to handle many hazardous materials, including radioactive material from inside the reactors. It was to be a strange year of working night shift, sunbathing and swimming at the beach during the day and compiling my portfolio for the entrance qualifications to The Ontario College of Art.

I was accepted into Art College at the beginning of the 1968 term. I finally left home for good and moved to Toronto. I loved the city from the moment I arrived. I took up residence in the Campus Co-op, which is a student owned and run collection of older houses around the University of Toronto Campus. My fellow residents were a collection of students from several universities and colleges and ranged from first-year art students to articling Law students and everyone in between.

The Ontario College of Art was, at that time, in the throes of a major change of direction and was attempting to rid itself of some of its older and most beloved drawing, painting and sculpture instructors in favour of those who would bring a more cerebral approach to art. The school was deeply and very angrily divided. The intellectual crowd accused the other side of being mere technicians and craftsmen. The hands-on crowd, in turn, accused them of being self-indulgent baffleball con artists. As a first year student my focus was on the courses. The politics of the ultimate direction that art should take was of no interest to me. I wanted to draw, paint and sculpt and I wanted instruction and guidance. The arguments that were swirling around the college were similar to the theological arguments that I had been born into and had been immersed in for my entire life. I found them tiresome and resented the intrusion into the education that I was seeking. To my surprise I realized that I didn't like my fellow art students very much and was much more at home with students of law, forestry, philosophy and engineering. Despite all of this I did very well in my first year. I enjoyed the challenges and was especially successful at life drawing and sculpture.

The need to finance my next year at college prompted me to go where I could earn a great deal of money in a short period of time. A friend who was working on his doctorate in philosophy consented to join me on a wild adventure that I had cooked up. We hitch hiked five thousand kilometres to the Yukon in search of high-paying jobs. We arrived in May, well before the end of winter and before any work was being offered. After a few desperate days of job hunting we managed to get taken on by a Russian building contractor with very dubious credentials. When we were in Whitehorse he gave us lodging in a windowless plywood box with two filthy mattresses on the floor and at one point we got severe food poisoning from the meals he provided.

We were sent out in an ancient panel van loaded with numbered poles, which we were to erect every mile along a new road that had just been built through the Anvil Mountains. The truck was dangerously decrepit, the road was totally isolated and we were delirious with laughter and recklessness. At the mine site that the road had been built to service I jumped at the chance for much higher paying work constructing houses for the future mine workers. By the time I had returned to Whitehorse, quit my job and returned to my new job, a forest fire had burnt the entire new town to the ground. In a desperate scramble to get the town rebuilt before the onset of winter we worked extra long hours and earned huge amounts in overtime pay. My second year tuition was covered and I had money to spare.

While we were in the north, completely cut off from the rest of the world, some American men had walked on the moon and a lot of Americans of my age had been to Woodstock. We heard nothing of either event until our return and we had a sense of having dropped in from another world. My own experiences had been so intense and had required so much stamina

that I had difficulty in joining in with the excitement of these events. I found myself always off to one side, observing. I was actually quite content with my separateness. From earliest childhood my artistic development had always been my own business and I was beginning to realize that it might always be that way.

I remained friendly and polite to my fellow students and worked hard at my assignments, but I never really felt a part of the community. The head of the sculpture department, Mr. Bowie, took me aside one day and suggested that I might be one of those people whose talent could be ruined in an institutional setting. I should give some thought to working on my own. I wanted my diploma and felt sure that I could pick my way through the political mess that the College then was, but part of me had already become addicted to adventure and longed to escape.

When an acquaintance committed suicide with a high-power rifle in a room down the hall from where a group of us were gathered, I was shocked into making a decision.

I would go.

I packed up my tools and headed for the West Coast, thinking I would return to the Yukon. Instead, I spent the summer moving among the hippie communes in the small islands between Vancouver Island and the mainland. Despite my best efforts I was a dismal failure as a hippie. I was just too industrious and dope made me feel like a dope. My efforts to belong with the hippies ended when a local man took me out one evening to see if we could bag a deer. We spotted one a long way off in a cornfield. He handed me a .22 caliber rifle and suggested that I try a shot just for fun. Knowing that the shot was impossible I adopted a nonchalant stance, did a few mental calculations and placed a bullet into the brain of that poor lovely creature. I helped him to butcher it and smoke the meat, but I hated what I had done and wanted to be gone from there as soon as possible. I joined a psychiatrist friend who was driving back to Toronto and began preparing for a trip to Europe. My preparations consisted of getting a passport, some inoculations and selling my camera to pay for my airfare. I would have no money when I got there, but that didn't bother me, as I was prepared to take any kind of work once I got there. I planned to buy a bicycle for my travels.

My friend Doug, with whom I had gone to the Yukon, was spending a year in Europe and we planned to do some travelling together. When the arrival of his flight was changed, we had no idea how to find each other, so I was on my own.

On the informal street market I bought a very fine hand-made bicycle from an American fellow who had ridden it from London to Dover and Back and figured he had worn it out on such an arduous journey.

I knew nothing of long-distance cycling and really suffered through my first day, getting to Oxford in a state of complete exhaustion. The next morning, as I was waddling up the road with my heels on the pedals and my knees banging my elbows, a real cyclist went streaking past me. He turned around and in an act of great generosity helped me to adjust my bike to fit my size and then spent all of that day and part of the next teaching me how to use the gears and my own strength to maximum advantage. Transformed from a form of torture, the bike became a real pleasure to ride and I pedaled happily off through Wales and around

southern Ireland. In 1970 there weren't many Canadians cycling around Ireland and I was a great curiosity to most of the people I met. The question I was most frequently asked was "Is it true that in Canada people ate corn straight off the cob, like pigs?" I was treated to many a Guinness in the pubs where I went in search of a meal. Finding my equilibrium on the bike the following morning could be quite a challenge.

Money, actually the lack of it, would soon be a problem, so I headed for Dublin, thinking that I might find work there. I didn't find any work, but I did run into Doug on the street and we had a fine time comparing adventures.

While exploring the city one day, I wandered into a churchyard that looked interesting. A tall white-haired gentleman materialized at my side and offered, for a shilling, to show me around. He took me deep under the church to a crypt that had the very unusual distinction of being completely bone dry. The bodies buried there were remarkably well preserved. I was ushered to the farthest back corner where the body of a giant warrior who had been to the crusades lay on a stone slab. His skin was dark and leathery, but mostly intact. If I were to shake his hand I would be blessed with good luck for the rest of my life. I grasped the huge hand with its two-inch fingernails and gave it a respectful shake. The charm works now and then.

We both needed money and decided to try our luck at the docks in Liverpool but were informed very quickly that a closed union shop was no place for a couple of Canadian kids to be job hunting.

Doug was able to cable home for funds and decided to do that and head off to Paris to study French. I did not have that option, so, acting on some advice that I had picked up in a youth hostel, got on my bike and headed back to London. After two days of hard riding I was at the door of an employment agency for foreign workers where I was told that if I could get to Peterborough by six o'clock the next morning I would have a job picking potatoes. I had enough money to take the train about halfway there and rode my bike through the night for the remainder of the distance. I reached my destination at four in the morning and was preparing to sleep behind a shed when the police spotted me. When I had told my story they showed me to the quarters on an airforce base where the farm labourers were billeted. After an hour of sleep I was shaken awake by a fellow with the worst skin and the biggest ears I had ever seen. I was the only North American on a crew made up of South Africans, Rhodesians, Australians and New Zealanders. These were serious travelers and adventurers. Some of them had been working their way around the world for ten years or more, working where they could find a job to finance a mountain trek or a safari to some exotic corner of the globe. They were a tough, good-natured bunch and I liked them a great deal.

Our workday was twelve hours long and our workweek seven days. Every week we switched day and night shifts. The farmer who employed us needed reminding that slavery had been abolished more than a century earlier and this was certainly the crew to do that. The battle for improved conditions that developed was a complete shock to the farmer and he attempted on more than one occasion to bring in the police to enforce his work rules. The police, wisely, stayed well out of our disputes, except on the occasion when we disrupted a foxhunt by pelting the horses with potatoes and the night when we supplemented a particularly inadequate mid-shift meal with some pheasants from the hedgerows. We were

needed to finish the harvest, so were kept out of prison for these offences. I'm sure the local gentry would have been happy to see the whole lot of us hanged.

At the completion of the harvest and one final dispute with the farmer, which we won, over being short on our wages, we all went our separate ways.

From London my beautiful bicycle retraced its original journey to Dover, but this time crossed the Channel.

With winter approaching I felt that I should move on quickly to find a place to shelter for the season. I thought Paris would be a good place. Paris was not a good refuge. I was able to get some work for a day here and there washing pots in little kitchens for extremely meager pay.

I was told that Germany might be a better place to try. After using the train to cross the border, I was back on my bike, working my way towards Munich. The Breweries along the way would often offer samples of sausages along with beer after a tour of the facilities. On a number of occasions this was my daily meal. Always hungry, but remarkably flatulent, I farted my way across South Western Germany. There was no work for a foreigner in Munich so I turned south towards the Alps. I was finally offered a place in Oberomergau as an assistant to a carver. This was too good to be true and I was prepared to stay as long as possible to study with the master carver. He was willing to take me on as an apprentice, but the authorities had different ideas and I was politely requested to maintain my status as a tourist. With very little money left I had to move on. Not being able to afford train fare I pedaled my way on to Switzerland, often requesting shelter for the night in the local police station. A few very kind Austrian policemen took me to their homes for a warm meal and a bed.

In Bern I found an agency that hired hotel workers, but they took only married couples. An American girl and myself presented ourselves as a couple and were sent that same day to a ski resort called Anzere. Mrs. Taylor, the Hotel manager saw through our ruse immediately, but hired us nonetheless. Karen, no longer my wife was sent off to the rooms as a chambermaid and I was sent to the kitchen to wash the dishes and pots.

I was warm, dry and getting three great meals a day and as happy as a lark. I zoomed around the kitchen cheerfully scrubbing everything in sight, singing and whistling. The chef hated me and I couldn't understand why. It wasn't until years later that I found out that it's bad luck to whistle in a kitchen.

The couple who ran the laundry had to leave the country to get their visas renewed and I was sent, with an air of apology to take their place in the laundry. With my long arms and lack of knowledge about the time-honoured ways of doing things I found a way, using all of the very advanced Swiss equipment at my disposal, of doing all of the laundry in about one hour a day. Mrs. Taylor found me reading a book in the laundry room early one morning and demanded to know what I was doing. I pointed out the piles of clean, folded sheets and towels and assured her that it was that day's workload. The next day, after watching me perform she proposed a deal. I was asked to promise to stay for the full season and help with the other jobs around the hotel as the season wore on and staff started to drift away, leaving

the hotel short of staff. In the meantime, I would only have to do the laundry and could spend the rest of my time on the ski slopes. I was also offered an increase in wages and upgraded accommodations.

The most delightful winter of my life began that day. With the employee discounts I was able to afford skis, lessons and a wardrobe. I was without a doubt, the happiest person on the mountain. An Englishman who owned a chalet there noticed me and he introduced himself and his wife and invited me to dinner. I trotted along, expecting a quiet little evening with an elderly couple. The party that I entered was populated by the elite and titled who holidayed in that part of the Alps. They adopted me as sort of a mascot, and I spent a season skiing and partying with people I could never have imagined knowing. The climax to the season was being asked to sculpt the centerpiece for the banquet table for a dinner honouring Carl Gustave, the crown prince of Sweden.

I kept my promise and stayed on to help wherever I was needed in the hotel, even in the kitchen with the chef whom I had now offended twice, not only by my whistling but also by having upstaged him with my table sculpture.

From Anzere, I did a leisurely tour, visiting with friends that I had made on the slopes and in the early summer of 1971 I returned to Canada.

I spent a year in Toronto studying books on woodcraft and practicing the use of hand tools. I was able to sell enough handcrafted furniture to eke out a very modest living. I needed some capital to start building a proper workshop for myself. The Yukon came to mind. The idea of adventure was still very appealing as well.

After visiting my sister in Vancouver I reached Whitehorse in a series of harrowing rides through the Rockies with an insane cowboy, five drunken Indians in a stolen car, a one-armed lumberjack and two speculators from Florida taking a truckload of watermelons to Alaska.

Immediately upon arriving I was conscripted to fight forest fires. The gang of conscripts to which I was attached were dumped into an ancient airplane and flown to Dawson City from which we were shunted by helicopter to a location in the mountains somewhere near the Arctic Circle. Within hours of setting up our first camp we were chased out by a huge blaze that destroyed all of the pumps and hoses that we had just set up. Our second camp lasted three days before being burnt out. We finally settled in a place that was surrounded by small lakes and got down to the business of fire fighting.

Fighting fires in the far north has two crucial components. The first is to get acclimatized to the mosquitoes. The swarms of these little tormentors are so dense that you can only view the world through a constant shifting, whining haze. In my first few days before I became dirty and smokey enough to be a little less appetizing I was bitten so often that I actually became inoculated and now have a life long immunity to them.

The second component is the realization that fires are an essential part of the forest ecology and your main job is stay out of their way and survive to tell about it. We found that panning for gold in the creeks was an excellent and relatively safe way to spend our time.

If a fire is put out on one mountain, lightning or the centuries-old underground fires will ignite another one somewhere else.

It is important to protect villages and settlements but by and large the fires will have their own way.

In the Yukon, sending out fire crews got all the riff-raff off the streets and out of the bars for a few weeks and gave the Indians some pay with which to outfit themselves for the winter.

Once we were cleared out and sent back to town I found work with a fellow who I called Foul Mouth Jim. Jim and I were to build five bungalows, one at the end of each of the five roads in the Territory. We spent that summer in some of the most spectacular and isolated places in Northern Canada. Yukon summers are very short and there is light twenty-four hours a day during the height of the season. We worked like demons to get the job done on time.

When we were finished and returned to Whitehorse to claim our wages the contractor claimed not to know who we were and refused to pay us. This man had been hiring and cheating students out of their wages for years. He took advantage of the fact that they had to return to school and couldn't remain in the north in order to claim their wages in court. He had misjudged with Jim and me. Jim liked to spend his winters in New Zealand, but was willing to stay behind and pursue justice. I too was willing to stay. The labour board had been hoping for a long time for someone to make a case against this man, so when we stepped forward they went after him with a vengeance.

Our case didn't come up until just before Christmas, so I flew up to Inuvik, on the arctic ocean and spent a couple of months assembling prefabricated houses. Inuvik in the winter is dark. The sun doesn't come up at all and the cold is almost incomprehensible. The stars and northern lights are spectacular, though. Curiosity took me there and once I had experienced it I was awfully happy to leave again.

In Whitehorse Jim and I got all of our pay plus a penalty payment. Whitehorse was just as dark and almost as cold as Inuvik and held no charm for me. It was time to head for warmer climes.

I flew to Vancouver to see my sister and have a bit of a break from constant work. I spent a good deal of time in Stanley Park doing pen and ink sketches. I bought my first car, a fifteen-year-old Volvo and had a wonderful time touring the lower mainland. More for fun and interest than out of need, I got a job as a research assistant to a Ph.D. Student at the University of British Columbia building an enormous apparatus to simulate landfill sites in locations throughout the province.

I met a girl from New Zealand who was looking for a companion for an overland journey through the west coast of the United States, Mexico and Central America to Panama, where she intended to board a ship for her home. It didn't take me long to decide to accompany Fran, at least as far as Panama.

One day, on a holiday weekend, my old car burst into flames on a busy bridge. I spent a couple of weeks repairing and repainting it and after I had sold it for something slightly better than scrap Fran and I set off on our journey. Initially we traveled by bus, but once clear of the border we hitch hiked.

Hitch hiking in the U.S.A. is considerably different than in Canada. Almost everyone who gave us a ride produced at some time, a handgun just to show us that they were prepared for us should we turn out to have criminal intentions.

We reached Los Angeles without being shot and stayed for a few days with some of Fran's friends at their house at the beach. We opted for the bus to the Mexican border, where our visas were promptly torn up and thrown in our faces. The American fellow behind us helped us sort out the problem. The Mexican Customs agent was furious that we would dare to arrange our documents elsewhere and deny him his fee. We paid our fee at that border and took it as a valuable tip for getting through all the rest of the Central American borders. There were lots of little informal formalities to be paid for along the way.

Traveling by rattley old trains, buses of every vintage known, cars last seen thirty years ago at home and at times on foot we spent three months moving through a world of astonishing beauty, poverty, graciousness, sleaziness and noise.

Numerous attempts were made to separate Fran from me for purposes we were afraid to think about.

More than once we watched our dinner being killed beside our table to prove its freshness.

On one occasion I climbed a mountain just to escape from the constant attempts to sell me some trinket or other only to have a man pop up from behind a bush, at the summit, with a little green stone carving to sell. I bought it and afterwards spent a quiet afternoon admiring the view.

In 1973 not many travelers ventured south of the Guatemala border on overland journeys, and the farther south we went the fewer gringos we encountered. El Salvador and Honduras were still at war over a soccer match, which made for a very interesting border crossing.

There had been a dreadful earthquake in Managua, Nicaragua shortly before we got there and what was left of the city reeked of putrefaction from the thousands of victims still buried in the rubble.

A German-born professor and his Nicaraguan wife whom we had met on a bus in Guatemala invited us to stay at their home in San Jose, Costa Rica. They were charming hosts and provided a very welcome respite from the constant alertness required for this kind of travel.

Panama City was a central hub for smugglers, con artists and misfits from two continents. It was a completely wild and lawless town. We stayed on the open roof of a hotel where poles were set up on which to hang hammocks. The cost was ten cents a night and the roof was crowded with ragged adventurers. The parapet was always lined with vultures, which I

thought was an appropriate symbol for the city. We heard some amazing stories about travels in the Andes and the Amazon basin.

I would have liked to continue on into South America but my funds were getting low. I had enough money to return to Canada or to purchase passage on the ship that Fran was taking to New Zealand. Although Fran and I were getting pretty sick of each other I chose the ship. I liked the sound of New Zealand.

A three-week sea voyage on a passenger liner is an exercise in fending off boredom. There were movies, games, and constant planned activities but after our adventures getting to Panama it was all so very tame and silly. Many of the passengers were retired British doing the dream world tour that they had saved for all their lives. They did not take too kindly to a bunch of disrespectful young travelers without proper dinner attire. They tried, without success, to have us banned from the dining room because of our clothes. I have to admit that we exaggerated our wild personae for them. Eventually some of them began approaching us in the hope of some shocking stories from our travels. We delighted in cooking up fantastic tales for them.

After about ten days at sea, the surreal mountains of Tahiti came over the horizon. We anchored there for two days and nights. The beauty of the place is almost too much to absorb. Rather than hang around in Papeete, Fran and I went to the road and stuck out our thumbs. The very first car stopped. The driver was a Frenchman who had lived there for twenty years and was starving for some outside company. He drove us to all over the island, cooked meals for us in his home, loaded us with gifts of seashells from his collection and wept when he had to say farewell as we boarded the ship again.

New Zealand is, in the Maori language, “The Land of the Long White Cloud” and that is what you first see as you approach from the sea. My first sight of the land was a bit of a disappointment. I had expected tall green peaks not unlike Tahiti. Instead, we sailed for hours along a coastline of brownish barren looking low hills. Wellington, however, encompasses one of the most beautiful harbours in the world. The city is built on seven hills and ornate, white, Victorian homes perch on the steep slopes among the lush greenery.

Perhaps because I arrive by sea, like so many who immigrated from the British Isles, I was granted, without any questions, landed immigrant status, which meant I was free to stay for the rest of my life if I wanted to.

My first, urgent need was to find work. I had spent my last few coins on a pint of beer to toast the sighting of land.

We had arrived on a Sunday afternoon and Fran’s family assured me that I could stay with them until I got settled.

I spotted a new house under constructed on a nearby hilltop, so the next day I presented myself as an experienced carpenter’s helper and was hired on the spot. The frantic pace of home building in the Yukon does not apply to New Zealand. In what struck me as an incredibly leisurely manner Nick, the carpenter, and I gradually finished that house. We did

everything except the plumbing and wiring and I really enjoyed the finer aspects of the finishing work. Over the four years that I spent in New Zealand Nick and I built five houses. I attended night school and obtained my trade papers as a journeyman carpenter.

I moved into a small house with three New Zealanders about my own age. The first requirement for sharing the house was that I had to cook a decent meal one night a week. I had thought that I had some rudimentary cooking skills, but they definitely weren't up to the standard of my housemates. One of the few times in my life when I found television of any real use was watching the weekly cooking show and trying to duplicate the meals presented there. Eventually I became quite confident in the kitchen and even managed to present quite a few meals for a house full of guests. New Zealanders like to entertain, and in my four years there hardly a weekend would go by without either attending or hosting a dinner party.

The Kiwis are an extremely active people. They hike in the mountains, swim or play rugby or do whatever sport suits them. My housemates were hikers and I joined them with full enthusiasm. I got a shock on my first hike. The group who met to climb some smallish mountains contained a couple of slightly heavy women, who I was sure would be slow and hold us back. I was the slow one. After climbing mountains on a daily basis as a firefighter for weeks at a time I considered myself pretty fit, but I couldn't keep up, at first, with any of the Kiwis.

It was easy to save money, with my food and lodging taking only a very small portion of my earnings, so within a short time I was the proud owner of a pre-war Citroen luxury saloon car. To me it was an exquisite antique; to everyone else it was a jalopy. I loved that car, and toured all over the country in it. I also acquired a good bicycle for my intended bike tour of the entire country.

My first bicycle trip was down the west coast of the south island, across the Alps at the famous Haast Pass, which was a gravel road and on to Queenstown where I would rest up and earn a bit of money before the next leg of my journey. I began my trip with a companion, Carolyn, who had insisted on inviting herself along. Carolyn had been my girlfriend in my first year at art college and had been shadowing me ever since. She gamely tackled the first climbs, which were in the three hundred-metre range, but when we hit hills that were two to three times that height, on our second day, she opted for hitch hiking. I caught up with her in the town of Nelson, which, like most New Zealand towns is very pretty and hospitable. To my knowledge she still lives there.

Over a period of three summers I cycled most of the country, logging tens of thousands of kilometres and falling deeply in love with the place. Sometimes I would be accompanied by Mike, one of my housemates, but mostly I went alone.

In 1974, I decided to pay my student loans back to the Canadian Government. At that time it was not possible to send currency out of New Zealand, so I would have to make the money in Australia and send it from there.

I chose mineral exploration as my target for a job, and within one day of my arrival in Sydney was on my way into the outback. Small airplanes are the most common form of transport in that area, and after landing at Bathurst I went for a six hundred-kilometre taxi ride to a spot called Mineral Hill.

I was to be the assistant, cook and general labourer for Ted, the geologist. Ted was logging the core samples from a diamond drilling survey and was to set up a number of other surveys in the area. We lived in a very primitive cabin and had gas for cooking and a small generator for electric light. We did not have a shower, but could drive one hundred and forty kilometres to Condobolin for a bath from time to time. After teaching me how to split core samples and log them for analysis and assigning me to set out a grid of numbered stakes over a ten-kilometre square, Ted disappeared and never came back. I called the office in Sydney to find out what I should do. They instructed me to just carry on, alone, with my assigned tasks.

Australia is rich in wildlife. Kookaburras woke me before sunrise with maniac laughter; the bushes were alive with countless varieties of brilliant parakeets and other little members of the parrot family. Big red kangaroos bounded out of my way as I walked my survey lines. In the branches of the spare silvery eucalyptus trees Iguana lizards shifted to keep out of sight as I approached. It was winter, so the snakes, much to my relief, were mostly asleep. There had been gold mines in the area in the early years of the twentieth century, and the ground was rich with artifacts that had simply been left behind when the mines were abandoned. It wasn't rich in much else and I was eventually instructed to clean up all traces of the current program, sell all the vehicles and the house in Condobolin and return to Sydney.

The company that I had been working for did not have another place for me but as they had liked the way I had handled the situation at Mineral Hill, recommended me to another company as expedition manager.

I was on my way to Darwin on the north coast, twelve degrees from the Equator and on the edge of the shallow, warm Timor Sea. Stepping off the air-conditioned airplane was like stepping into an oven. The lowest temperature that I saw in Darwin was 31° C. in the coolest time of the night. Daytime temperatures would often be in the forties, and near the coast the humidity was always close to 100%. Wild life on the north coast of Australia is incredibly abundant. The sea is full of deadly sea wasps, a type of jellyfish with the most potent venom known. Poisonous snakes, spiders and ants are abundant and must be constantly watched for. All of these creatures have very colourful nicknames depicting the manner of agonizing death they can mete out. My personal rule was that if something moved it would most likely bite you and if it bit you it would most likely kill you. Where your skin folded; at the elbows, knees and places like that, it had to be watched for tropical ulcers, which could very easily become infected. There are lots of palm trees and beaches, but unlike the pictures in the brochures they are more like hell than paradise.

My job was to set up and maintain exploration camps to suit the requirements of the geologist in charge. I had to hire the crews, arrange for their transportation, housing and all of the supplies they needed. Some camps could be supported with a crude road cut through the bush; others required air transport for everything. Arranging all of that was my task.

I drove thousands of kilometres every week through trackless bush, finding transport corridors. During these travels in the labyrinths of huge red rock escarpments that make up that area, I came upon galleries of Aboriginal rock paintings under the overhangs. Some of these galleries could be up to a kilometre long. Some of the paintings looked quite fresh and some were barely visible and throughout all of them were handprints made by filling the mouth with pigment and spraying around the hand, leaving a negative imprint. The age of these galleries is still being debated but some experts talk about dates going back fifty thousand years or more. It is impossible to describe how awestruck I was at these sights. I did not take any photographs, feeling that it would be a serious violation of something sacred, but I have incorporated the images into any thinking that I do about art and artists.

Because I gave so much business to the charter airline companies, from time to time they would offer me a seat on the plane if they were going anywhere interesting or especially exotic. This way I had visits to Bali, East Timor and the highlands of New Guinea.

I had a brilliant young truck driver for road deliveries, who was unfortunately a heroin addict. Johnny could repair a vehicle in the worst of circumstances and was invaluable when he was capable of working. During one of his spells of sickness it was necessary for me to take a load of meat, kept frozen on dry ice, out to our main camp at Jabiluka, about three hundred kilometres east of Humptydoo where the road turned off the Darwin highway. About three-quarters of the way there, the road ran along the bottom of the East Alligator River. The crossing was quite shallow and I had done it many times. This time there had been a rainstorm far away up river. As I started the crossing, the water was at its normal depth, but soon began to rise. At about mid-river it was high enough to stop the engine. Now I was stuck. I couldn't get out of the truck for fear of crocodiles, and as the water continued to rise, I was in terror of drowning in the cab. I had to let the cab fill with water in order to prevent the truck from floating, which would have meant rolling and the certainty of drowning. The river level peaked with about six inches of air space under the cab roof. I sat, in a mess of my own shit and piss, alternately panicking, raging, weeping and assessing my life for twenty-two hours until the water receded again. Eventually, thanks to the extra batteries with which I made sure all of my vehicles were equipped, and the starter motor, I was able to jerk the truck close enough to the edge to use the power winch to get out of the river. I was still, justifiably, terrified of being taken by a crocodile as I hooked up the winch. The crocs did not get me but they did get all the meat, about a ton, which had thawed by that time.

My East Alligator adventure prompted some very serious introspection. I finished my contract with the mining company, paid my student loans, turned down the offer of a permanent job in the exploration business and returned to New Zealand.

The day that I arrived back in New Zealand, Darwin was hit by Cyclone Tracey, which wreaked terrible damage to the city, destroying most of the homes and leaving a large death toll.

On the ship from Panama one of my tablemates was dyspeptic German of about thirty named Jurgen. He revealed little about himself as he glared about the dining room cursing the ship, the middle class bourgeoisie and the seasickness that was making him truly

miserable. There was something about him that I liked and when we left the ship I got a phone number from him where he could be reached in Wellington.

Eventually I looked him up and was invited to pay him and his companion, Vivien a visit. Their home was a veritable museum of artifacts that Jurgen had collected in Central America, Peru and the Amazon. The walls were covered with exquisite prints that they had both made while studying printmaking in New York and Hawaii.

I revealed that I had studied art and considered it my avocation, even though I was building houses. I was a frequent visitor to their home after that and we became good friends.

On my return to New Zealand from Australia I moved with Lynn, a lovely woman to whom I had somehow become engaged, into a flat on the second level of the very large house that Jurgen and Vivien occupied. With their encouragement I began to focus very seriously on finding my way to my own creative expression.

The profound terror of my experience in the East Alligator River had made everything that I had done before seem shallow and derivative. I had been, in a sense, de-educated. The only thing to do was to start over again from the beginning. The first pieces that I carved were similar to what I had done as a high school student, but more technically proficient. I moved fairly rapidly to a style that had a strong flavour of Giacommetti.

I still had to support myself and think about the responsibilities of marriage. I couldn't reconcile marriage to Lynn with the kind of sacrifices required for a life as an artist and after a short, tearful discussion about what I really had to offer, she was gone.

I took a series of part time jobs in order to buy time for my carving. They didn't pay enough so I returned to working with Nick, building houses. Nick had made a very serious error in trying to take advantage of a client with perceptual problems that meant he couldn't read. He had no problem with numbers and was far from stupid. He asked me if I would consider taking over from Nick and finishing the project. As Nick had pocketed quite a lot of money that he had claimed, to the client, as going to me, I agreed to the change. The result was that I suddenly found myself the proprietor of a small construction company. This worked perfectly as the part time work to support my art. By resurrecting the urgency and speed that I had learned in the Yukon, I was able to earn a very adequate living with about four months of work a year. I also moved back into my first New Zealand home with my friends at a huge saving of money.

My friend Vivien was teaching printmaking at a technical college and I signed up as a student. I still enjoy printmaking but my focus on carving has not allowed me to develop it as fully as I might have. A number of years later, back in Toronto, I followed up with more printmaking courses at the Ontario College of Art, but as before, carving has predominated.

In September of 1976 I entered a juried competition for an exhibition of sculpture and printmaking at the National Art Gallery of New Zealand. One of my tall, segmented sculptures was accepted and I had my first public exhibition of my work.

My piece received quite a lot of attention and I was emboldened to approach some commercial galleries. None of them were interested.

At this time my mother wrote to me telling me that my father was having a health crisis that he might not survive.

Knowing that a return to New Zealand would be unlikely, I sold what I couldn't take back to Canada, packed what I couldn't bear to part with and flew back home in time for Christmas 1976. Leaving New Zealand broke my heart and it took me the better part of two years to get over it. My father had had a nervous breakdown but was in no imminent danger. I was furious at having been tricked into returning. To my utter astonishment and dismay, he took up the old battle positions that I thought had long been abandoned. His first words to me were to the effect that he would pretty soon take the wind out of my sails. I hadn't traveled so far and struggled to learn so many hard things to be easily deflated and I let him know that.

Shortly after my arrival back in Toronto I had a stroke of luck that has resonated through my life ever since. I found a master woodcarver, Peter Cserhati, who was willing to take me as an apprentice.

Peter had fled the communist regime in Hungary, and starting with absolutely nothing except the love and support of his wonderful wife had built up a business supplying the carved components to furniture companies throughout Ontario.

I have no particular love for ornately carved furniture, but I was determined to take my skills to the highest possible level in order to match the vision of the art that I wished to create.

Learning to carve professionally was amazingly difficult. Peter had judged me to be at the seven-year level of the fifteen years required to become a master carver. My speed was insufficient to earn enough to live on, so we approached one of the vocational colleges in Toronto to see if we could obtain some financial assistance. We were extremely fortunate to have hit on a rare, tiny window when the Canadian government was not cutting back on educational programs. They agreed to fund a one-time, one teacher, one student program.

I thought I knew what hard work was but now I was in an entirely new league of effort. Most of the work we did was in red oak, which carves very well but requires a lot of strength, not just in one hand. To be an effective professional carver you must be completely proficient carving with either hand. Nothing had ever felt so clumsy as my beginning attempts at left-handed carving. By working at a furious pace for very long days and weeks I was able to reach the point, after about four years where Peter began to address me as Maestro Gordon. This was very rewarding, as such acknowledgement from a master carver is not lightly or frivolously offered. During my years with Peter I built up a set of around two hundred carving tools and had built a hard-maple carving bench. This equipment is the treasure and centre of my work-life. On that bench, with those tools I had carved literally miles of ornate furniture fittings, constantly developing in speed, finesse and professionalism. We filled orders for work in a number of styles, Renaissance, Egyptian, French provincial and even Congo African. I could carve roses in minutes and large crowns

in less than an hour. Although I finished most of my workdays in a state of complete exhaustion I was very happy, indeed, with what I was accomplishing.

We were not always busy with furniture orders and I used that time to work on my own sculptures. With the skills that I now had I was able to work with a degree of confidence spontaneity that has always been the preserve of painters or sculptors working in clay.

The western world was going through a series of recessions, which affected the demand for high-end, carved furniture, and Peter was not able to provide full-time work for me, so I was forced back into carpentry work for a time.

I met, courted and married Jan in a very short period of time in 1981. Our marriage was based on a mutual love of adventure, sport and play and couldn't really stand up to the tougher realities of life. We had a wonderful time for five years and as suddenly as we had begun, it was over. I had been trying to balance my desire to create sculpture with the necessity to make a living as a carpenter and to support Jan through her continuing education. We both worked too hard and the marriage was the casualty.

During the agonizing process of the collapse of our marriage I woke in the middle of the night from a dream in which I had a total recollection of the fall that had nearly killed me as a child in Brodhagen. I remembered with absolute clarity climbing the stone column, standing on the stone ball at the top, losing my balance and hitting the ground. The sound of my head hitting the concrete was like the sound of banging rocks together under water. The shock, like being on fire, which suffused my entire body, came back with all the force of the original event. I even recalled crawling to the church steps where my parents found me. I left our bed, rushed down to my studio and made sketches for a sculpture of a baby on the point of taking a bad fall. The piece that resulted is "First Flight". The baby is balanced on the back of a rocking chair, poised on the brink of falling, with a smile of joy and innocence on his face, and his arms raised in a gesture of reaching out. This sculpture opened the doors to the series of dance sculptures, all related to themes of flight as a creative force, that I am still working on to this day. It was also the first piece that was done entirely from the forces and passions of my own life with no acknowledgement of outside artistic influences.

Divorce had left me devastated and without the energy or spirit for the fight required to be a self-employed entrepreneur. The film business was just beginning to grow into a major industry in Toronto and in 1986 I found a haven of work at a place called Hot Sets. We constructed sets for small movies, television series, and countless product commercials. My sculpting skills began to be noticed by various art directors and production designers. Knowing that they could get sculptures done for their projects they began designing more sets that could make use of the talents that I had to offer. Gradually, over a period of about ten years, and with a shift to working on large-scale feature films, the amount of sculpture that I was commissioned to do for the industry took over from my work as a carpenter, and for a number of years now, has provided the bulk of my income.

Shortly after the end of our marriage I moved to the country, to an estate called Glen Streams. An enormous tract of land had been expropriated for the construction of an airport northeast of Toronto. The airport had never been built, and some beautiful farms that had been emptied and boarded up were taken over by artists, who fixed them up and built

studios in the barns. Eventually the government acknowledged their presence, ceased trying to evict them and set up a corporation to manage and maintain the properties. Glen Streams was one of the most beautiful of these farms, with two small rivers embracing the house and barn. The place had originally been the site of a mill and the house had been the seat of considerable wealth. I was offered a place at Glen Streams and gladly accepted. There are a number of buildings providing homes for a small group of creative people. I was sharing the main house with Eva, also an artist, who was to become a close friend.

Glen Streams offered solace and healing. We had a tennis court and swimming spots in the river, and during the summer months friends visited on most weekends. We had many feasts on the spacious front porch, which faced the rising sun and the rising moon. I spent a great deal of time looking after the very extensive lawns and cleared walking trails along the edges of the streams. Small herds of deer would graze on the edges of the lawns in the early mornings, and at night the only sounds were the trickling streams and the soft hooting of owls.

The studio space in the barn was difficult to heat during the winter months, and with the demands on my time by my film work, and my chores about the property, I had a period of very little sculpture activity. Something was gestating and I was content to let it develop. One night a large maple tree, quite near the house, had been blown over in a violent winter storm. I grabbed my chainsaw and cut a large piece from the main trunk and dragged it into the barn. Working only from a strong inner urge in the freezing cold barn over a period of just a few days I carved the piece I call "The Centaur". A small, naked, blind raging figure, wearing the skull of a horse as the top of his head emerged. I had no idea where that had come from. Thinking of it much later, I made the link to having survived in the East Alligator River. The pain of divorce had awakened the savagery within that is the essence of survival. I had made the piece in a burst of savage energy.

I was called to my parent's home very shortly after this and was informed that my father had inoperable cancer of the pancreas. He was not given very long to live. During that visit, which was intense with emotion, I glanced at a magazine article about a dance performance in Toronto. The photo of the dancer, caught in mid flight, with her hair standing on end somehow resonated deeply and perfectly with the intensity of the moment. I had not been in the habit of revealing my inner life to my father, but I felt that we had very suddenly gone past the game of emotional hide and seek that we had been playing for so many years. It was time for honesty and openness. I showed him the picture and said that this would be the inspiration for my next sculpture and that it was related in some very powerful way to his illness and my feelings about it.

With the momentum of energy released with the carving of "The Centaur" and recklessness unleashed, as when writing my grade ten English exam I began cutting discs from a stack of red pine that I had bought from a small local mill. I stacked them up to make a torso. I let longer boards shoot out from the body, like blades to form the skirts of the dress.

I needed, immediately, a studio where I could work year round, and with the help of my sister, Kate, who lived in a building full of studios in downtown Toronto, I leased a space in the same building where I could set up a space where I could live and work.

I moved from Glen Streams, grateful for the healing and peace that it had offered and plunged into completing “the Red Dancer”. I was finding my way, having to invent methods of laminating wood so that I could express the dynamism of the dance. I had to free myself from the restriction of carving from the log. I began gluing wedge-shaped pieces of wood, very carefully planed for perfect glue joints to change the direction of the grain to follow the direction of the action of the figure. I found that this method also gave me the ability to reflect the action of the muscles under the skin. By very careful selection of wood for grain and colour, I could enhance the dynamism by making the wood grain reflect the tension and counter-tension of the musculature. The technique that I was developing required all of the skills that I had learned in becoming a master carver as well as many of the technical aspects of advanced film-set construction. It also required confidence and a sense of exploration. I do not follow the grain, or in any way let the wood lead me. Once I have begun a sculpture I impose my will on the materials and only surrender to the spirit of the personality of the piece as it grows in strength. The work eventually has the final say, if it is a successful piece.

For most of the years since my return to Canada I had somehow been holding myself back for fear of hurting my father by surpassing what he had accomplished with his life. I had kept my head down and kept my work small. The wind, in fact, had been taken out of my sails but I had been the one doing it, not him. His illness and approaching death were a kind of permission to stand up to my full height and roar. In a period of fourteen months I pulled out all the stops and finished five life-size figures. He died shortly before I completed the fifth piece and a few days before his death I had poured all of my feelings about his dying into the expression on the face of the piece “1956 in Hans Hoffman’s Studio”.

In 1995 I had a one-man show of my dance sculptures at the Dell Bello Gallery in downtown Toronto. The response from the public was extremely encouraging but no one was buying. Igidio Dell Bello counseled patience, suggesting that a second show the following year was necessary to achieve credibility. Building a public profile was to prove to be much more difficult than making the work. Dell Bello died within a year, so my second show in his gallery never took place.

During this time I had not given up on my outdoor activities. I had continued to hike and to take long trips on my bicycle. In time for my thirtieth birthday, in 1978, I had a custom bicycle made in and shipped over from England. After assembling it I rode, over a period of twelve days to Halifax, on the East Coast, a journey of close to two thousand kilometres.

In the autumn of 1994, on a hike in the Caledon Hills north of Toronto, at a stile, I was offered a cookie by a very pretty and dynamic young woman. She was with an obviously jealous man who we both ignored as we joked and bantered. I didn’t forget her, although I would not see her again for almost a year. We met again on a bicycle day-trip and more frequently after that on various cycling trips. Finally, in March of 1996 I asked her out and from that date on Barbara and I have been together.

In 1997 I rented a small storefront very close to Barbara’s house and transformed it into a sculpture studio. Shortly after that I began to be approached by galleries for exhibitions. A number of solo exhibitions and group shows followed each other in rapid succession. In 1998 I joined The Sculptor’s Society of Canada and in my second year of membership was elected vice-president.

Beginning in 1997 the number of commissioned sculptures for feature films increased dramatically, and I began to find my services in ever-increasing demand. It became necessary to start turning down work because I was too busy.

In the autumn of 2001 I was part of the team that won an Academy Award for our work on the film Chicago

My mother died of cancer in November of 2001. My three sisters, Annie, Kate and Helen and my brother David and his wife Kathy, and Barbara and myself stayed with her for her final days.

Through the next year I continued to exhibit my work in both commercial and public galleries. In the autumn of 2002 I received, out of the blue, an invitation to exhibit my work at the Biennale Internazionale Dell'Arte Contemporanea in Florence, Italy. At first I thought it was just another of the many art venues that cities put on and that are open to all who are willing to pay. Upon reviewing the list of jurors who had been instrumental in selecting the participants and consulting with someone who had participated at the previous event, I decided that I would make the very large investment required and send two of my pieces.

The logistics required to send large works to an event like this are daunting to say the least. Without Barbara's expert assistance in matters of export, transportation and tax law I would have been totally overwhelmed. As it was we both worked very hard during the year leading up to the exhibition and thanks mostly to Barbara everything that was my responsibility to accomplish went very smoothly.

Once the show was mounted and opened to the public, my work was quickly singled out for above average attention. A great many of the 891 artists present told me that mine was their favourite work in the show. As the show continued towards the climax and award ceremonies, more and more people, including some of the jury members expressed the opinion that I was in the running for the top prize. I was happy to accept the compliments, but kept my expectations low. It has been a very long time since figurative work has had the nod of approval from critics and academics.

As it was, I was awarded fourth place in the sculpture category with the top prizes going to work done in the minimalist/conceptual manner. Given the long-standing academic rejection of figurative work I am honoured to have been acknowledged by such a prestigious jury.

In April of 2004 my work will be heading back Europe for an exhibition at Galerie Wild in Frankfurt Germany.

