

Józef Sumichrast: Body Art



By Dina Daoud

When most people visit their local hardware store, they have home improvement on their minds, be it installing new window treatments or waterproofing their basements. When Józef Sumichrast purchases contact cement, sheet metal, corner clamps and polymer, it's the beginning of a work of art. The bronze-metal sculptor creates casts for his pieces from industrial laminated cardboard. He glues, clamps and laminates the cardboard until it takes on dense form, then covers it in plastic wood. "Industrial laminated cardboard is very flat, very smooth and very mechanical. It has the consistency of soft wood, like pine," says Sumichrast, 38, who works out of his home in Lake Forest, Ill. "Nobody else produces the original like this, using cardboard, sheet metal and polymer," the Chicago native says. "My work is a personal statement. Of course, I went through a lot of mediums before I found what I was comfortable working with." The progression to bronze has been a natural one for the artist, who has also made sculptures out of Terra Cotta, wood and plaster. After graduating from the American Academy of Art in Chicago, Sumichrast began painting with transparent dyes but quickly became bored with the medium. He didn't like the fact that his work would be behind glass showcases in exhibits, so removed from viewers. "People couldn't participate in the art, there was no emotion," he says. "Cast-bronze sculpture is the highest form of visual art. You can touch it. It's very inviting." Once he's finished shaping the cardboard, Sumichrast covers it with plastic wood and then sands, files and shellacs the model's shape and surface. Next, he sends it to a foundry in Loveland, Colo., where it's used to make the final sculpture. Human and animal forms are prominent themes in his work. One of his most recent, "Swimmer (2001)," was made in sections that were later bolted together to represent having a part of the human body removed and replaced, Sumichrast says. The artist himself had an accident that required him to have his legs surgically reattached at the knees. He would not reveal very much about the accident other than to say it plays a key role in his interest in anatomy. Others of his sculptures that focus on human and animal forms are Narrow Cat (1993), C Horse (1998) and H Torso (1992). The downside of sculpting in bronze is that the process can be exhausting. But Sumichrast says it's well worth the effort. "Sculpting is very dirty," he says. "I'm always cutting myself, getting dust in my lungs. I'm constantly working on a piece, filing or sanding it. But when it's finished, it's something incredible that will last a long time. There's a certain immortality in it." Sumichrast's work has been showcased at the United Nations building, Northwestern University, the Navy Pier in Chicago, the International Sculpture Biennale in Hokkaido, Japan and the International Art Exhibition in Cyprus. His sculptures can be seen at the Chicago Athenaeum through Sept. 10.