

Miguel Horn sculpts an expanding career

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Artist Miguel Horn, founder of Traction with a giant head made of c and c cut cardboard. (ALEJANDRO A. ALVAREZ / Staff Photographer)

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A.M. Weaver, *For The Inquirer*

POSTED: Tuesday, September 1, 2015, 3:01 AM

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The Inquirer

Five years ago, Miguel Horn returned to Philadelphia after living and working in Mexico as the assistant to acclaimed sculptor Javier Marin.

An ambitious artist with Colombian and Venezuelan roots whose vision spans multiple communities and continents, Horn finds himself today, at 31, at a crossroads and immersed in determining the direction of his career. While public-art commissions punctuate his practice as a sculptor, he balances his portfolio with individual sculptures that express his inner psyche.

Horn is known for his large-scale figurative sculptures and conceptually derived public artworks and is currently featured in an exhibit by the collective Traction Company at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, the Rasco Gallery in South Philadelphia, and the Comcast Center's gallery, Art at the Center. A solo show is scheduled for next year for Taller Puertorriqueño.

Raised in Philadelphia, Horn at an early age worked at his father's antique-clock shop, tinkering with gears, springs, and weights to make or repair intricate ornamental clocks - which ultimately influenced him to make art.

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"Helping my dad taught me to work with my hands and sparked a mechanical interest in engineering. I learned how things were built, when craft was king," Horn recalls. "It was a time in which things were built with attention to detail, and objects were made to outlive us."

It's no wonder then that Horn switched from painting to sculpture at PAFA. After completing his studies, he was hired to apprentice with Marin, an artist with a substantial reputation internationally who masterfully models the human form, often casting in bronze. Notable is the angst and tension evident in his dramatic, classically derived sculptures.

Marin's strong influence can be seen in the coiled flourishes Horn adds to his figurative sculptures, which often refer to love and alienation. The student and master artist share an aesthetic that leans toward monumentality in concept and size, creating works that convey the struggles of the human spirit.

Horn reflects on his experience as an apprentice. "It was incredible to land . . . the opportunity to work with Marin," who he said introduced him to "a wealth of practical tools for art-making and the business and logistics of the international art world. It broadened my perspective on contemporary figurative art."

In developing public works and commissions, Horn uses strategies similar to a community organizer. He first learns

about the people in the community, their histories and concerns, and then identifies key leaders. While considering the type of art for a specific site, Horn also researches the topography and ecology of the area, including local industries and challenges present within the environment.

A recent example of this approach was the groundwork he and Charles Landau laid in planning their installation for the 2014-16 Vancouver Biennale in the most densely populated municipality in Canada. Landau and Horn launched a 13-foot funerary canoe into the Squamish River. In deciding to make a canoe for the site, they took into consideration the life of the Squamish First Nation peoples of the area, their belief systems, and their lore.

The interior of the canoe was a topographic map of the Howe Sound made of wood pulp. The center of the canoe served as a scrim for an animation of waterways and the night sky calibrated to interface with the map.

Barrie Mowatt, executive director of the Vancouver Biennale, cited a moving acknowledgment of Horn's ability to interact with diverse populations.

"A 400-year-old first-growth log was given to Landau and Horn for their project as a gesture of appreciation and honoring their work with the Squamish," said Mowatt. "Half of this ancient log was given to Chief Ron 'Chum' Newman for his grandchildren's canoe.

"Horn was invited to become part of their dialogues" - at the Totem Hall, which serves as a community center and site for preparation of the rites-of-passage ceremonies for youth in the community - "which was a great honor."

Horn's multiplicity of roles - artist, organizer, coordinator - also includes collaborator. He finds inspiration in the collaborative process as evidenced by his work with the collective Traction Company. Horn is, in part, responsible for the group's mammoth truss installation at PAFA's Hamilton Building, an integral part of the Traction exhibit.

"There are multiple reasons the Traction Company's exhibit was a fit with PAFA's agenda," said museum director Harry Philbrick. One part included "the opportunity to showcase recent tendencies of artists to work collaboratively yet maintain their solo practice, like a band. We wanted to give a snapshot of that."

A natural fit was Traction Company's works installed in July that related to the physicality and architecture of the Traction studio, an old trolley-manufacturing warehouse in West Philadelphia on Haverford Avenue. The danger of losing their studio is at the crux of their presentation.

Horn's collaborative spirit also encompasses a lifelong exchange with Hugo Marmugi, an animator and videographer; and DJ Juanderful, a.k.a. Juan Bustamante, a local DJ known for Tropicalismo nights held at various venues in Philadelphia. Interested in documenting the life and work of Latin/Hispanic

artists in Philadelphia, Horn, Bustamante, Marmugi, and Drew Saracco, another freelance videographer, are launching a Web-based series of interviews with Latin artists titled "Entre Vistas."

"I've always been interested in the [art] of contemporary Latin America, which encouraged me to link with that world in Philly and see what people are doing that connects back to the world," says Horn. "There are people doing cool things in Philly, and I think there is a connection made to their home country. And also I am trying to identify who is doing what in the Latin American art. . . . This series was designed to seek and identify that community."

Rafael Damast, curator and visual-arts program manager at Taller Puertorriqueño, says Horn's art connects with authenticity.

In this year's Philadelphia exhibit, Damast said, Horn was "the only sculptor [who engaged] form and space. *Guardian* [a miniature bronze sculpture of a riot cop], placed above eye level, conveyed authority and power, but also danger. *Callejeros* [sculptures of street people] were on the floor; power was taken. In this depressed community, what he was depicting echoed in some ways the community's feelings of powerlessness."

Horn says his recent collaborations with Landau and Traction Company have expanded his interest in sociopolitical elements and "the history of materials and how they can be

used to address communal themes and issues."

Rather than narrowing his focus, his projects are widening his possibilities.

"I don't know the exact direction," he says, "but I think each project ushers in new ideas."

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