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JULIE SPEIDEL | SCULPTOR



“What’s a nice girl like you doing in a place like this?” reads the caption for a Seattle Times pictorial depicting artist Julie Speidel (Cornish College of Arts, Art ’67-68) standing in the back of a pick-up truck, collecting scrap metal for her sculptures. The photograph was taken in 1972. Crafted from bronze, stone and steel, and often taller than the artist herself, Speidel’s iconic sculptures have since seen wide exposure – from her gallery affiliations in Seattle, New York, Sun Valley, and San Francisco, to commissions that site her work throughout the Pacific Northwest and across the country.

In downtown Seattle, you’ll find one of Speidel’s sculptures on Fifth Avenue: four nearly-square bronze pieces sit in a row, their rounded sides swelling. Measuring four feet wide by four feet tall, each work has one or two curving pieces cut out of it and then reattached. Situated in front of what was once the Federal Courthouse and across from the Koolhaus library, these organically-shaped pieces offer a bit of visual respite from all the surrounding straight-edged architecture. They look a lot like puzzle pieces or rocks that have begun to crack and fall away from a larger stone formation.

Born in 1941, Julie Speidel was raised in Seattle and spent part of her childhood in Great Britain, exploring the sites of such ancient stone monuments as Stonehenge and Avebury. “I can’t remember seeing Indian totems as a child, but every Sunday in boarding school we would be taken on long walks, and once we went to Avebury,” explains Speidel. “I

remember the shadows on the stones, being in awe of them, walking around them.” Early exposure to these archeological artifacts shows its influence in her works, which often bear the same time-smoothed, organic feel as these monoliths, while also giving a nod to the human form.

Speidel’s sculptures take organic forms within sometimes stacked geometric shapes. She is inspired by the standing stones found around the world, which often bring a sense of the spiritual to the physical realm. Often, these monuments are ancient, and the stories behind their creation have long been lost. Using modern forms, and sometimes painting her works in hues of primary blue or red, Speidel brings a modern sensibility to what some might consider her contemporary monuments.

Asked about her time at Cornish, Speidel reminisces, “it was really wonderful, taking classes in that beautiful old building on Capitol Hill.” She studied painting and drawing with the renowned Northwest artist, Bill Cumming, at what was then called The Cornish Institute, from 1967-1968. “He would get in and help you with your sketch,” Speidel explained of Cumming. “He would draw right on it. And he would sign it, too, next to my name. It was always lively. It was very permission-giving.”

Though these foundation classes took place many years ago, Speidel’s experience with a loose, open approach to art-making can still be seen in her process. She possesses an enormous amount of discipline, as well as a sense of playfulness, both of which come through in her artwork.

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Speidel Studio encompass the complete creative process required to generate her larger-than-life sculptures, from conception to completion.

Her “clean room” is a studio with an enormous table, many art books, and a collection of natural objects that the artist manipulates to generate ideas for the sculptural pieces that take form in the machine shop, under the welding torch, and in the cutting and polishing of stone. Speidel will draft big, loopy sketches from items like horns, a set of nesting salad bowls, wooden children’s toys, or the spine of some long-dead animal. Informed by her lessons at Cornish, these sketches are the jumping-off point for pieces that are then realized in solid form. Even when the drawings are made solid, first in wood or cardboard, and then in pieces of copper or steel, it might not be apparent how the parts will connect.

“There is a certain play in figuring it out,” Speidel explains as she fits one metal shape into another, balancing them, and then reversing the orientation. Speidel works with expert machinists to craft her finely wrought sculptures; and though she is no longer the woman wielding the torch, she does not send her sketches out to be fabricated off sight. Speidel is very much in charge of all the creative decisions that go into her final pieces, as well as the many negotiations that go into running a successful art business.

This summer Speidel visited Carnac, in Brittany, France, to pay witness to the largest megalithic site in the world. It possesses 3,000 prehistoric standing stones, and is said to date to 3300 B.C. Speidel is working on a private commission, and travel to this site will inform her work on that project. “I have had the incredible fortune to be thrust into these experiences, but also to choose them,” Speidel remarks. “Travel is always exposing yourself.”

Although travel plays an integral role in the generation of new work, Speidel keeps to a rigorous production schedule. The artist generally works four ten-hour days a week in her studio, in preparation for an average of two solo exhibits a year, as well as several public art projects and commissions. Some of Speidel’s pieces were recently exhibited at San Francisco’s Caldwell Snyder Gallery, and her work can be seen in Seattle at Winston Wächter Fine Art gallery (as well as in that gallery’s New York location), among other venues. If you happen to be a patient at Swedish Hospital’s orthopedic wing, look outside for one of Speidel’s largest basalt sculptures: a series of stone vertebrae laid out on the lawn, creating an oversize asymmetrical spine.

Since 2005, Speidel has been an active member of the Cornish Board of Trustees, serving both as an artist and a businesswoman. “In terms of Cornish,” Speidel explains, “anything that is permission-giving in terms of art is just incredibly important to me, and I will support it in any way I can.”

by Adriana Grant

Photo credit: Julie Speidel at her studio. Image by Peter Mumford.

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