

RUSSELL WHITING

Hot Steel and Angels in St. Martin Parish

BY *John R. Kemp*

ON A WARM AFTERNOON IN RURAL St. Martin Parish sculptor Russell Whiting sits out in his studio putting the final touches on a new work titled “Dreamer.” Scattered around him are scraps of metal slag, tools, acetylene gas tanks and unfinished statues. Comet-like trails of sparks fly as his 5,000-plus-degree torch cuts deep into the hot metal.

“My art is the only reason I am alive today,” he says, glancing at his work. “I would have gotten into serious trouble had it not been for art. It’s my life.”

Whiting is a gifted artist inspired not by the sugar cane fields that surround his home and studio but by hot steel, angels and the spirits of ancient heroic mythologies that appear like specters in his imagination. The soulfulness of his work often transcends reality and moves viewers to respond in a personal way.

“What I love most about Russell Whiting’s sculpture is that over and over again his pieces capture tensions of spiritual balance,” says former Louisiana Poet Laureate Darrell Bourque. “His figures exist in the balance of grace and distress, chaos and order, the world of forms and the world beyond form.”

Over the last three decades, the 62-year-old, self-taught artist has gained national recognition for his remarkable life-size and sometimes larger than life welded steel sculpture that have won awards and appeared in shows across North America from Montreal to California. His list of commissioned work includes a full-size steel buffalo for New Orleans art benefactor William Goldring and a nine-foot-tall steel rooster for the E. & J. Gallo winery in California. Gallo is Italian for “rooster.”

Another dramatic work depicts the Greek mythological winged “Icarus” that now stands perched over the Tennessee River in Chattanooga’s River Gallery Sculpture Gardens. Closer to home, Whiting’s 24-foot-tall, 5,000-pound steel statue “Man Conquers Chair” stood on Poydras Street

in New Orleans from 2012 to 2014 as part of the Helis Foundation’s Poydras Corridor Sculpture Exhibition. He is currently making a life-size statue of the proclaimed father of Zydeco music Amédé Ardoin for the St. Landry Parish Visitors Center at I-49 north of Opelousas.

The creative incubator for his art is located on five secluded, wooded acres east of Breaux Bridge where Whiting lives with his wife Michelle Vallot, a retired federal public defender, and founder-operator of Zydeco Foods. Their house, set in a large garden with a pond, rusting sugar kettles, round millstones, and his statues, is itself a work of

art built in the 1960s by landscape architect Russell Dupuis. Outside, Whiting has a large open-air studio that could easily be mistaken for an industrial metal fabrication shop.

Whiting’s journey to acclaim and to this little corner of the Acadiana is a classical existential story of self-destructive choices and self-redemption. Born in 1955 in Bastrop, Texas, at 16, his mother shipped the restless young Russell off to New Orleans to live with his sister and her husband. Two years later, twisted fate changed his life forever. Whiting killed a man in a fight when he tried to stop the older man from beating a woman.

Russell Whiting of Breaux Bridge, La., is inspired not by the sugar cane fields that surround his home but by hot steel, angels and the spirits of ancient heroic deities. Just as painters use brushes, paints and canvases, Whiting uses oxy-acetylene torches to carve graceful figures from three-inch steel plates salvaged from local scrap yards.



“I knew her and had never seen that kind of behavior,” he says. “It freaked me out, no one else was going to do anything so I felt like I couldn’t abandon her. I was a peaceful hippie but things just got out of control, I was 18.” He was convicted of manslaughter and sentenced to 12 years in prison. In 1981, he received parole after serving eight years at Angola and correctional facilities in Pineville and Dequincy.

During his prison stretch, Whiting took college courses, taught himself mathematics, studied art and learned how to weld. He also enjoyed carving small wooden figures that he gave to other inmates. Upon release, Whiting went on to good-paying welding jobs in shipyards in South Louisiana and offshore drilling rigs. When those jobs dried up, he moved on to other shipyards along the Gulf Coast.

Then in 1986, he was in trouble again, this time in Georgia where he was convicted of possessing LSD. Facing a 20-year

sentence, Whiting knew he had to change his life. He remembered a man who made a living selling his pottery at art fairs across the South. Whiting decided that when he got out of prison, he would hit the art circuit with his woodcarvings. That opportunity came sooner than he planned. In 1987 he was paroled after serving just one year, when Georgia’s governor launched a crusade to clear the prisons to make room for DWI convictions.

Free again, Whiting returned to Louisiana to live with his sister and husband in New Iberia. There he launched his new life and career, selling his carvings at art shows. Along the way, he came across an artist cutting out steel figures and realized that he could create art with the welding skills he learned in prison and honed in the shipyards. Beginning in 1990 he was back on the circuit with his “carved” steel art that not only sold but impressed gallery owners who offered to represent him.



EXHIBITIONS AND EVENTS

THROUGH NOV. 12 COVINGTON

Three Rivers Art Festival. This two-day arts festival features all media from artists across the South. Nov. 11-12, Downtown Covington. 985-327-9797, threeriversartfestival.com.

THROUGH DEC. 7 LAKE CHARLES

McNeese State University, Shearman Fine Arts Center Annex’s Grand Gallery, “Annual Faculty Show,” features work by McNeese State University art faculty held in conjunction with the citywide Annual Gallery Promenade 2017. 4205 Ryan St., 337-475-5060, mcneese.edu/visualarts.

THROUGH DEC. 30 LAKE CHARLES

Historic City Hall Arts & Cultural Center, “150 Years of Lake Charles.” Exhibition featuring the history of Lake Charles, 1001 Ryan St., 337-436-9588, cityoflakecharles.com.

THROUGH JAN. 7, 2018 SHREVEPORT

R.W. Norton Art Gallery, “From Alaska to Zimbabwe: Don Edwards Paints the Wild Side.” Exhibition features the work of naturalist/artist Don Edwards and his wildlife paintings from across North America to Kenya and South Africa, 4747 Creswell Ave., 318-865-4201, rwnaf.org.

THROUGH JAN. 20, 2018 ALEXANDRIA

Alexandria Museum of Art, “Refining & Defining a Nation: From Impressionism to Regionalism.” Through historic paintings borrowed from museums across the nation, this exhibition explores how late 19th and early 20th century American artists visually defined rural and urban America. 933 Second St., 318-443-3458, themuseum.org.



Since that time, Whiting has developed a painterly style of cutting and working steel unlike anyone else. Just as painters use brushes, paints and canvases, Whiting uses oxy-acetylene torches to carve graceful figures and mythological deities from three-inch steel plates that he purchases at local salvage yards. Each project begins with a concept either drawn from his imagination or commissioned.

"These images are all in my head," he says. "When I was a kid, I went to the cinema all the time. I was always in a fantasy world. When I got to prison, they were the figures I thought of most. I would escape to those times and places."

Once Whiting has a concept, he cuts out a series of silhouettes of that design in three-inch steel plates. He then layers one over the other and welds those layers into a single block. Next he uses his torch to carve the image from the metal block. He describes the process as a "fusion of classicism and contemporary execution." To achieve that fusion, he lets the torch decide what the finished work will look like.

"It's like magic," he says. "There's nothing like the torch."

Thinking back over his troubled early life and his successful art career, Whiting notes the irony of having his art stand among 14 other nationally renowned sculptors in the Helis Foundation's 2012 Poydras exhibition.

"At one time I was in Orleans Parish Prison," he says, gazing into the garden. "Now I have 'Man Conquers Chair' on Poydras, standing victorious. I made it back. I'm OK now."

For more information about Whiting, visit whitingsculpture.com ■



▶ Whiting is a gifted, self-taught artist who has been on a remarkable journey of self-redemption through art. Over the last three decades, he has gained national recognition for his remarkable life-size and sometimes larger than life welded steel sculptures that have won awards and appeared in shows across North America.



EXHIBITIONS AND EVENTS

THROUGH JAN. 27, 2018
LAFAYETTE

Paul and Lulu Hilliard University Art Museum, "Lin Emery: A Movement, 1957-2017." Features the art and career of New Orleans-based sculptor Lin Emery, who gained international acclaim for her graceful kinetic sculpture inspired by the coastal breezes and currents of the Mississippi River, 710 East St. Mary Blvd., 337-482-0811, hilliardmuseum.org.

THROUGH FEB. 4, 2018
NEW ORLEANS

Ogden Museum of Southern Art, "Photonola Currents 2017." This annual show features the work of 15 contemporary photographers who are members of the New Orleans Photo Alliance, opens Dec. 7, 925 Camp St., 504-539-9650, ogdenmuseum.org.

THROUGH FEB. 4, 2018
BATON ROUGE

Louisiana Art & Science Museum, "Alyce Simon: Atomic Art." Exhibition explores New York artist Alyce Simon's radical art work created with the use of a particle accelerator, 100 River Road South, 225-344-5272, lasm.org.

THROUGH FEB. 11, 2018
BATON ROUGE

LSU Museum of Art, "Broken Time: Sculpture by Martin Payton." Features local artist Martin Payton's steel sculpture inspired by New Orleans jazz musicians and the influences African musical traditions. Shaw Center for the Arts, 100 Lafayette St., 225-389-7200, lsumoa.org.

THROUGH FEB. 25, 2018
NEW ORLEANS

Prospect New Orleans, "Prospect 4: The Lotus in Spite of the Swamp." This citywide art show, billed as one the nation's largest triennial art exhibitions, features artwork by 73 local, national and international artists from 25 countries. opens Nov. 18, prospectneworleans.org.

Reflections Of the Season

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Supported by a grant from the Louisiana Division of the Arts as administered by the St. Tammany Commission on Cultural Affairs.