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Silvia Davis

Swedish, b. 1957

Before she steps into her studio, Silvia Davis has to prepare her body. Because her artwork demands as much physically as mentally, she stretches her muscles and exercises to stay fit. “I love to hike in the morning and move through nature,” she says.

Fortunately, she doesn’t have far to go. The two-acre property that she shares with her husband, painter Paul Davis, lies just outside of Capitol Reef National Park in central Utah and is surrounded by ranches in the rural town of Teasdale (population less than 200). “The desert and mountain landscape feeds into our work and is conducive to our focus,” she says, referring to her sculpting and Paul’s painting. “I restored a farmhouse from the 1890s,” Silvia says of her studio, whose windows open up to views of red rock cliffs. Her tool room houses a chain saw, table saw, band saw, planer, joiner, sander, and flex shaft. But, she says, her best tools are her eyes and hands. “I create very complex wood sculptures that can have color, texture, pattern; and they’re all derived from direct observation, meaning I look closely at the world around me.”

In terms of subject matter, Silvia tackles both the organic animal world and inanimate objects, the former being inspired not only by close observation, but also personal connection. “There are horses running around in the back pasture. They come up close to me and I look at their eyes blink. It infiltrates my nervous system in such a clear and powerful way that I stop and examine it. “Cats are always teaching me a capacity for stillness, for being patient,” she says. And one look at a still life she creates of a cat sitting at a curtained window bears proof. “As a result of paying attention to little moments — a coat hanging on a wall or a dog coming up to greet me — that’s my well, that’s the richness that I pull from.”

Among her still lifes, which include coat racks, she loves sculpting mechanical objects, such as a gumball machine or a typewriter. “I wonder if, genetically, it was wired in my brain to appreciate them because my father was a great mechanical engineer,” she suggests. Taking the sculpture of an animal as an example, Silvia describes her process: “I start by creating a pattern with different colors of wood, laminating them together. I won’t go any further until the head is done; because if the expression isn’t working, there is no use putting it on a body. I fit pieces back and forth; I am very willing to chop it up and turn it inside out a couple of times until the surface becomes rather surprising to me. “For some reason, I never get it right the first time,” Silvia says with a modesty that doesn’t show in the result. “Sometimes I will chop a piece three or four or five times before the expression, color, and pattern

come together. Sometimes the expression will suggest a gesture in the body, so then I will build a [laminated wood] block for the body and put the head on and move it into different positions until I find where the expression is the most satisfying. Then, with my chain saw, I move it to greater clarity, bringing out the anatomy.

“There is a lot of emotion that goes through the process, because you think you have failed when you don’t like it and have to destroy it. I have to be very willing to take a deep breath and trust it will come back faster and better the next time,” she says. “I also polish and clean things up, especially with exotic wood, to bring out the color, so the finish work is really important and time consuming. “Exotics provide a possibility of color that I can’t resist, even though they are very challenging on me physically,” Silvia adds, noting that the resins in exotic wood take a toll on her lungs, eyes, and nose. Sometimes, she sculpts with barn wood, not just to get away from resins, but also “because it already lived a life and has its own story to tell,” she says, noting that cracked and rugged surfaces — “full of time and weather” — lend themselves to certain subjects, like a motorcycle, an old coat, or a guard dog.

Because working in wood is so labor intensive, Silvia, who earned a master’s degree in fine art from the University of Utah, also casts sculptures in bronze, a skill she developed while making fossil molds for the Utah Museum of Natural History. To support her time in an old warehouse in Salt Lake City that she converted into a studio, she began painting backdrops for theater companies, which then asked her to carve sculptures for their productions. From 1995 to 2008, she made sculptures for theater and opera company productions, as well as for the Showtime and Disney channels. “It was a means to pay for studio time, but I was quite good and fast at it,” she says. “And it helped develop my skill set.”

Her earliest commission came from The Sundance Institute for a mechanical-object sculpture to be exhibited at the 1987 U.S. Film Festival. Other commissions and public art projects include sculptures of a life-size firefighter for a Salt Lake City fire station and liturgical work for St. Elizabeth Catholic Church in Richfield, Utah.

As an artist married to an artist, Silvia calls her life with Paul “a really fabulous partnership.” “I think we have made each other better,” she says. “In some ways, we have similar work processes in that we both build up and destroy our work. Fortunately, we feel like equals, so there is no competition but just great dialog at the end of the day. I can also say, ‘Paul, this head is not working. Can you give me a fresh eye?’ And I can do the same sort of thing for him.”

Silvia believes the best compliment she can receive about her work lies not in words but when someone “gets still with a piece and gives it time to unfold and reveal itself to them.”

She describes herself as “fairly athletic” and “a pretty good golfer.” She further claims she has talents for cooking and remodeling a house. But, she says, “I was just born an artist. My earliest memories are when I was 3 or 4 and would sit under a tree and make something. The impulse was so strong. The longer you go on this journey, the richer it becomes,” she says. “Each piece suggests another five pieces of possibilities to examine.”

Statement

I think that the act of re-creating a form, by hand, in a different, transformative material enables us to experience that object again ... as if for the first time. We see its true form as interpreted by the artist and not just its utilitarian identity.

I search for clear ways to reduce and reassemble the chaos and complexity of my subjects. Because this process, the back and forth of creation and destruction, is actually visible in the sculpture, we are able to observe the artist's mind at work, and share the visual consciousness of another.

Resume

Education

1993 M.F.A. Sculpture University of Utah

1980 B.F.A. Sculpture University of Utah

1978 Snowbird Summer Arts Institute

Exhibitions

2014 Artist's of Helper - Four Person Show, Coda Gallery, Palm Desert, California

2013 Annual Spring Salon, Springville Museum of Art, Springville, Utah

2012 Silvia Davis and Wendy Chidester -Two person Show, Coda Gallery, Palm Desert, California

2008 "Paul and Silvia Davis" - Two Person Show, Coda Gallery, Palm Desert, California

2007 Annual Spring Salon, Springville Museum of Art, Springville, Utah

2006 Featured Artist, Group Show, Gallery "B", Lexington, Kentucky

2003 "The Animal in Art" - A group exhibition, Utah Museum of Fine Arts

2002 "Utah Art 2000" -Norman Building, Salt Lake City, Utah (Catalog Show)

2002 "Women Without Borders" - Art Access Gallery, Salt Lake City, Utah (Catalog Show)

2002 "40 Eyes See"-Avenues Branch Public Library, Salt Lake City, Utah

2002 "Animals, Animals" - Phillips Gallery, Salt Lake City, Utah

2000 "Reinventing the West" - Kimball Art Center, Park City, Utah

2000 "The Animal in Contemporary Art" - Stremmel Gallery, Reno, Nevada

1998 Three Person Show - Torrey Gallery, Torrey, Utah

1997 Three Person Show - Coda Gallery, Park City, Utah

1996 One Person Show - Works in Wood & Bronze, Phillips Gallery, Salt Lake City, Utah.

1994 Sculpture for the Garden - Works in Bronze, Phillips Gallery, Salt Lake City, Utah.

1993 Faculty Show - Peterson Art Center

1993 M.F.A. Graduate Thesis Show - Alvin Gittins Gallery, University of Utah

1992 Invitational, "April Salon" - Springville Museum of Art, Springville, Utah

1991 Invitational, "Artists of Salt Lake" - BYU Art Museum, Provo, Utah

1991 Invitational, Utah Sculpture and Craft Show - Union Pacific Depot, Salt Lake City, Utah

1991 "Toys by Artists" - Courtyard Gallery, Salt Lake City, Utah

1991 Group Exhibition - Dooly Gallery, Park City, Utah

1991 "75 Years of the Salt Lake Art Center" - Salt Lake City, Utah

1990 Two Person Show - Coda Gallery, Palm Desert, California

1990 Group Exhibition, Sculpture - Pierpont Gallery, Salt Lake City, Utah
1990 "Collaborative Art" - Pierpont Gallery, Salt Lake City, Utah
1989 One Person Exhibition - Pierpont Gallery, Salt Lake City, Utah
1988 "Pierpont Tapestries" - Group Show, Salt Lake Art Center, Salt Lake City, Utah
1988 "Local Motion", Kinetic Group Show - Pierpont Gallery, Salt Lake City, Utah
1988 "Wreaths by Artists", Group Show - Salt Lake Art Center, Salt Lake City, Utah
1987 "The Best of the Loge" Group Show - Loge Gallery, Salt Lake City, Utah
1986 Two Person Exhibit - Phillips Gallery, Salt Lake City, Utah
1985 "North American Sculpture Exhibition", Juried Exhibition - Foothills Art Center, Golden, Colorado
1985 "Henry Moore with 6 Utah Sculptors" - Phillips Gallery, Salt Lake City, Utah
1984 "Women Artists of Utah", Invitational - Springville Museum of Art, Springville, Utah
1984 "Utah 84", Juried Exhibit - Salt Lake Art Center, Salt Lake City, Utah
1984 One Person Show - Loge Gallery, Salt Lake City, Utah
1983 "Utah 83", Juried Exhibit - Salt Lake Art Center, Salt Lake City, Utah
1983 "North American Sculpture Exhibition" - Foothills Art Center, Golden, Colorado
1982 "April Salon", Juried Exhibit - Springville Museum of Art, Springville, Utah

Awards

1983 North American Sculpture Award, Foothills Art Center, Golden, Colorado

Work Experience

2008 Sculptor for "A Light in the Piazza" Pioneer Theatre Company, Salt Lake City, Utah
2005 Sculptor for "Peter Pan", Pioneer Theatre Company, Salt Lake City, Utah
2004 Sculptor for Showtime Channel, "The Maldonado Miracle"
2004 Sculptor for Disney Channel, "Don't Look Under the Bed"
2003 Present Private Workshops sculpting the Human Head in clay
1999 Pioneer Theater Company, Sculpture for "A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum"
1999 Houston Grand Opera Company, Monumental Figure sculpture for "A Little Night Music"
1997 Utah Opera Company, Nine larger than life figure sculptures for "Coronation of Popea"
1995-1996 Sculptor for Utah Shakespeare Festival, Cedar City, Utah
1993 Present Instructor, Petersen Art Center, Life Drawing & Sculpture
1994 Instructor, Woodworking, University of Utah
1994 Sculptor, Consultant, Edwards and Daniels Architects
1993 Architectural Relief Sculpture for Lowell Construction, Eric Smith Architect
1984-1985 Sculptor, Fossil Preparator and Casting Technician, Utah Museum of Fine Arts
1988 Instructor, Sculpture University of Utah

Commission Work

1994 Wood Sculpture of St. Elizabeth for St. Elizabeth Catholic Church, Richfield, Utah
1994 Percent for Art, Life size Firefighter carved in mahogany for Fire Station, Salt Lake City, Utah
1992 Liturgical work St. Elizabeth Catholic Church, Richfield, Utah. Sculptures of the Stations of the Cross
1992 Collaborative Designer and Sculptor for Public Block 57 Project, Salt Lake City, Utah. Works in Bronze and Cast Iron
1992 Percent for Arts Project, Public Sculpture for Fairmont and Warm Springs Parks, Salt Lake City, Utah. Bronze
1992 Percent for Arts Project, Interior Sculpture for Arts Council Offices. Wood Sculpture

1991 Interior Wood Sculpture commissioned by FFKR Architecture for University of Utah Genetic Engineering and Research Building

1988 Collaborative Designer and Sculptor for Pierpont Gallery, Salt Lake City, Utah

1988 Sculptor for "Pierpont Walkway", Bronze

1987 Commission by The Sundance Institute for the U.S. Film Festival. Interior Wood Mechanical Sculpture