

In 1967 at a party at my parents' house, I spoke to one of their friends, an art lover, about my desire to learn to make sculpture. She told me that in her travels, she had found that Barcelona was the most exciting city for art. She gave me an introduction to a gallery there, The Sala Gaspar. That is how, freshly married with my wife, Kathy, pregnant with our son, I found myself in Barcelona. At the Sala Gaspar, they gave me the address of a sculptor, Enric Gelpi, who had a studio in the Barrio Gotico. Enric made most of his work on commissions from Churches. He restored art works and made new ones, statues and wall reliefs of biblical themes and even giant statues, Els Gigants, for religious festivals. Enric taught me to carve wood. I spent many hours of practice carving "culs d'ou" or "egg bottoms" to master all the ways of carving across the grain in any direction.

I made a number of wood sculptures while working with Gelpi, including a standing couple, the woman clearly pregnant, to celebrate the birth of our son, David; and a squatting figure of a boy, inspired by a newspaper photo of a Biafran child, a victim of the civil war in Nigeria.

Gelpi was an activist for the Catalan cause. Before I met him, he had just spent six months in prison for the crime of printing flyers that said "Català a l'Escola" *"Teach Catalan in the schools"*.

We enjoyed many good things living in that beautiful city, but eventually we felt it was hypocritical to be enjoying that life while our local friends were suffering cultural and political oppression. If we raised our voice, we might get expelled, while our friends experienced prison or worse. After a year and a half, we moved to Rome. In Rome I began to make art and had time to develop my own style. Kathy enrolled in the Scuola Fersen where she studied acting, in Italian, from a master. I made abstract ceramic pieces and continued carving wood. By the end of almost 2 years, I had produced enough work to have an exhibit at the A-Dieci Gallery in Padova.

Late in the summer of 1971, we participated with other American ex-pats in a large demonstration in Rome against the Viet Nam war. One of the young kids, the son of an American sculptor who lived in Rome, helped organize a group of us to lead the march, in an attempt to prevent a group of Maoists from taking it over and provoking violence. Once again, we felt our efforts were misplaced, this time expressing our voice in the wrong place. At the time, in 1971, Americans living abroad didn't have the right to vote in American elections. It was time to go home.

Kathy and I had met in college in California, and we were thinking about returning there. However, our mentors and former professors were arguing that we should go to New York, the center of the world of Art and Theater and to try to establish our professional lives there.

When we returned to the United States, we were daunted by the idea of living in New York City. A friend encouraged us to settle in Woodstock NY, saying it was close enough and had a lot of cultural and artistic connections to the city. While we were there, I was able to learn to carve stone from a local sculptor, Stuart Kreisel. I also built, with my own hands, a studio on the

property where we lived. I'm proud to report that the building still stands and has been converted to a year-round dwelling. But we soon grew familiar enough with the New York City to understand we would rather live and work there.

In 1973 when we moved New York, it was a city in crisis, but also a center of much creative activity. I found a space in Soho at 64 Grand St. in the Grand St. Artists coop, on grounds floor, suitable for carving Stone. My influences were Moore, Hepworth, Brancusi, Laurens, Lipchitz, David Smith and Eduardo Chillida. The first pieces I made in New York reflected the influence of those artists. Eventually the city itself drew me in. I began noticing the abandoned debris in the street, at first as a source of materials; stone from destroyed buildings, limestone from demolished post offices, and endless supplies of wood. Later I started to see interesting objects in the gutter - shards of broken bottles. These became my models to interpret. The modernist idea of direct carving needed a beginning step, a mark on a canvas, and these shards provided that. Eventually I made my models out of pieces of paper, bent or torn in various ways. I began to make these shapes in stone and experiment with the notion of scale.

The city provided more than shards in the gutter. There was a community of artists immediately available when I arrived in New York. Only weeks after finding a space on Grand Street I had met and joined a collective of young sculptors who were starting a small cooperative gallery in a Thompson Street store front called 14 Sculptors. We shared the rent, scheduled shows, did our own publicity. It was an exciting time to work together. On West Broadway, just around the corner from my studio, there were a dozen important art galleries.

Many of us (the men of course) were influenced by the macho sculptor culture. David Smith was one of our models. He had been a welder in the shipyards. He had a mythic presence like Vulcan. We were proud of working with our hands, doing heavy work. Direct carving in stone while discovering new ideas, is a slow process.

I got my stone directly from the quarries, Danby, Vermont or Southern Indiana. I would rent a big box truck and at the quarries, they would load the damaged blocks for free... well, for a tip. At Grand St. Oleg Sohanievich, a colleague in the gallery who made what he called Stress Sculpture, would help me off load the enormously heavy blocks into my studio. We used a portable cable winch to lower the blocks down the ramp slowly to the floor. From there I was able to move the block using only 3 pipes as rollers, moving one pipe at a time, and switching the back pipe to the front in rotation. The stone was always on at least 2 pipes. I had a portable gantry with an I beam and large web straps to lift the blocks. To avoid blowing stone dust freely to the outside to settle on peoples' salads in the sidewalk cafes, I installed a dust catcher, a flexible pipe which led to a manifold under the ceiling from which hung 6 canvas filter bags to catch the dust. I made a Lazy Susan carving table with a large central bearing, which I could rotate as needed to keep the direction of the dust stream from my grinders and sanders always aimed toward the hood which collected the dust drawn to the filter with a powerful fan.

The 10 years I spent making sculpture in New York were some of the most productive years of my life. But there was a downside to being a solitary studio artist. I was yearning for more

interaction with the world. I spent many long hours sanding and polishing stone while listening to the Watergate hearings on WBAI. I was yearning to be more connected. I was a hermit while life was passing me by. I began to take courses at Columbia in Anthropology.

I lived on the Upper West Side. Riding on the subway downtown to my studio, I saw the pieces on the train. Inspired, I started roaming the elevated lines with my camera taking pictures of “other peoples’ art” on the trains and walls of the Bronx and other neighborhoods. About this time, I became a member of the Sculptors’ Guild, a venerable organization of sculptors who were mostly working in the modernist style, a comfortable fit for me. The galleries in Soho, were showing minimalist and conceptual art. The truth-to-materials movement was exhibiting work produced by industrial methods, not by the human hand. I learned from a review of my work in the Soho Weekly News that I was an illusionist, because I was making the stone pretend to be something that moved like a broken glass bottle or a folded piece of paper.

I met a curatorial assistant at the Whitney Museum, who introduced me to Ivan Karp, the director of the OK Harris gallery. Karp visited my studio and politely described my work as beautiful but not within the contemporary canon.

A year later, I showed Karp my graffiti albums and he invited me to show my photos in the gallery for 2 weeks in September of 1980. That exhibit marked a serious jump in my creative life, as many, perhaps hundreds of graffiti writers attended. Karp was prepared. He strolled about among the crowd, with the muzzle of his pistol just visible below his sport jacket. For a while my two worlds overlapped. My studio was a large ground floor space. It became a kind of museum and destination for the graffiti art movement. I had already accumulated enough images to fill three substantial albums. Writers came to see their art, compare notes, meet other artists. Eventually as the culture grew, visitors came from a wider international group of graffiti artists and aficionados.

The core of my creative life has always been New York City. Here I found myself and my work. The energy of the city always drew me in and pushed me forward.

Henry Chalfant  
Brooklyn, 2023