

Style

Sculptures With Rhythm

"Change is necessary. An artist must be the same and new. He must change, yet remain himself."

By Denise Lohser

For the Swiss sculptor Jean-Jacques Porret, the evolution of himself and his sculptures are his life's journey.

As a child, Porret, born in 1941, remembers being surrounded by the art, furniture and antiques collected by his parents in their Neuchâtel home. "I lived with art," he says, explaining the development of his keen artistic sense. He attended the normal, required art classes in school, but nothing more. Manually skilled, Porret decided to apprentice as a mechanic, and later continued his education, acquiring an engineering degree at the Bienne Institute of Technology.

Anxious to learn English, Porret moved to the United States, in 1967. He arrived in New York, but decided to settle in Chicago. It was here that he first began to create art. "One day I simply decided to begin," he says. Wanting to create with his hands, he decided on sculpture. Porret investigated sculptural techniques, looking for the most challenging one. The first, to start with nothing and build something up, was a favorite technique of Auguste Rodin. The second, to chisel an image out of an existing mass, usually stone, was preferred by Michelangelo. The third, to

collect objects and combine them to create something new, was Tinguely's method.

Porret decided on the first technique. His idea was to create from the ground up, using the ancient lost wax casting technique. Clay is formed into a sculpture, a wax mold is made, and then bronze is poured in. This method is difficult and expensive, but the results are spectacular. Porret has been working with this method for over 20 years, and is still happy with his decision. "Bronze is responsive and sweet to the touch. This is the right way for me. Knowing that my sculptures will outlive me provides a comforting whiff of immortality."

Today, his works can be found in private and corporate collections around the world. He was commissioned to create a bronze statue for the American-Swiss Friendship Award, awarded yearly to an outstanding individual commemorating

the positive relations between the two countries. His universal themes of life and movement give it broad appeal. Porret says his sculptures "aim at pleasing the senses," but are

not purely aesthetic. "They also possess a spiritual vitality. All the pieces that I make represent, in essence, the human body. However, I can't free my emotion by copying an object faithfully. I work without any preconceived idea, and continue instinctively, with one shape leading to the next, until the figure is simply rhythm in space."

Porret uses various textures of bronze - patina, rough, or polished form - to give interesting contrast to his work. Curved lines add motion to his works, even if they portray a still figure. For increased depth, Porret uses granite to form shadows behind the metal. He also experimented with granite on its own in pieces such as "Interlace" (10/92). "I took sheets of granite and just started to cut, to try and see what it would give." These pieces, though two-dimensional, still evoke the human



"Interlace," granite sculpture. 7x3x10.5". Edition of 5. Oct. 92.

entire sculpture process - "the beautiful part" - is opening the mold. "That part is always a surprise." His inspiration is a mystery, even to the artist himself. "I don't know my main influence. Often I just wake up in the middle of the night, and start drawing or sculpting." Sometimes it takes a lot of soul-searching to get a sculpture right. He later named a particularly difficult sculpture "Relentless" (Bronze and Granite, 1/93).

Porret prefers to work alone, even though he knows many other sculptors. "I don't want to be influenced. I want to be myself. If I am with other people too much, it will affect my style." In his formative years, artists such as Henry Moore greatly influenced his work. Porret stayed with Moore for a short time, sharing philosophies and ab-



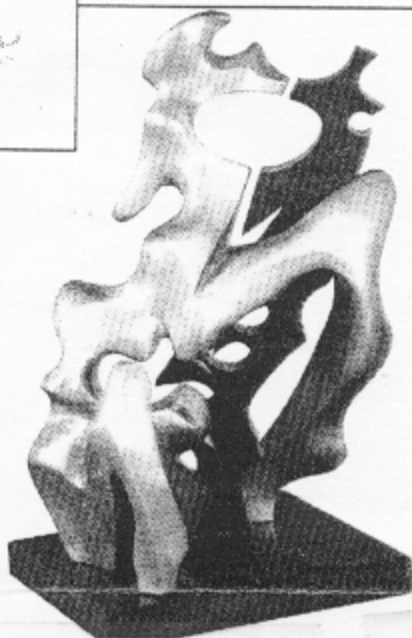
The original sketch of "Relentless."

tra Hall. Another work, "Odyssey" (6/94), portraying a twisting girl, was designed for the plaza in front of the Hancock Building in Chicago.

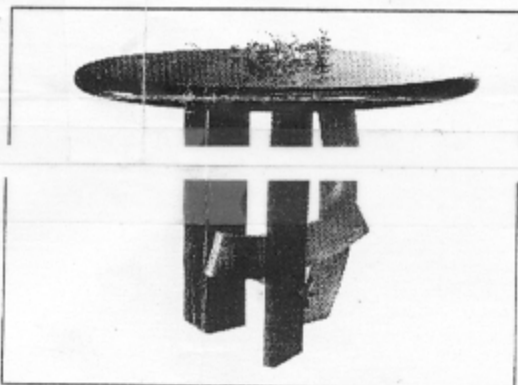
Porret has kept his ties to Switzerland, and returns fairly often. But he has no im-

ago, he bought marble from a dilapidated church on the South side of Chicago, but was unhappy with the supply of sculpture bases, so he bought his own marble and granite company.

Porret is constantly working on various kinds of creation. "I design all the time." In addition to sculpture, he designs furniture, and finds that even cooking can be creative. Porret is very attached to his sculptures, and began photography, "out



The final bronze of "Relentless," by Porret. 9x9x17". Completed Jan. 93.



Porret's granite and bronze dining table. Diameter 48". Height 30".

sorbing all he could. Today, though, he follows his own road. He sculpts for himself, but often imagines a destination for his piece. "Plein Vent" (Bronze, 3/87) was designed for the lobby of the Detroit Orches-

tra Hall. Another work, "Odyssey" (6/94), portraying a twisting girl, was designed for the plaza in front of the Hancock Building in Chicago.

mediate plans to move back. His wife, a former stage actress, is American. Also, he says, "here there are more opportunities to sculpt than in Europe. It is more expensive

of necessity," feeling that only he could capture his own sculptures accurately.

The future holds great promise for this Swiss sculptor. Movement and change are important elements not only in his sculptures, but in his life. "Plant a new tree," says Jean-Jacques Porret, "but in your own forest."

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