Robert Schefman

After earning a BFA in sculpture in 1973 from MSU’s Department of Art, Art History, and Design, College of Arts and Letters alumnus Robert Schefman went on to grad school at the University of Iowa, where he earned an MFA in sculpture in 1975.

Today, nearly 40 years later, he remains a working and exhibiting artist, as well as professor and chair of the Foundation Department for the College of Creative Studies (CCS) in Detroit, Michigan.

“Foundation,” the CCS website notes “is, in short, the basics—the core skills students will build upon as they progress in their college and professional careers...Focused studies introduce essentials in drawing, design concepts, digital fundamentals, and materials and processes.”

HIS CAREER AND MSU

Comfortably relaxed and sitting on a stool in his West Bloomfield, Michigan, home studio in front of a large painting in progress—and flanked by his computer screens and several finished paintings to his left, and the natural light from large windows to his right—Schefman recently spoke with MUSES magazine about his art career and his time at MSU.

“What I’ve focused on for the past 30 years is narrative painting,” Schefman says. “To tell a story and talk about us; about human beings. Not just narrative, but also very tied to the way we see—making it as real as possible.

“But the object is not to make a perfect painting or a perfect replication. For instance, as you get closer to this large painting behind me, you’ll see it’s just a whole series of marks. It’s the process of taking an idea and developing it, and seeing where it goes.”
Asked about his own “foundation” coursework as a student, Schefman smiles before answering.

“People think I’m classically trained, but the truth is, I never took painting; all of my training is sculpture. My own foundation courses were concept oriented, and eye opening because I had never taken art classes before I went to Michigan State. I got hooked by one of my English teachers. And, in fact, it’s a great story.”

INTEREST IN ART REVEALED

“I started in pre-med at Michigan State, and my English prof, who was near retirement at the time, like most good pros will do, said ‘Come to my office to chat, after class.’”

Diverging for a minute, Schefman adds, “I still use the ‘office chat,’ to ensure students get involved and stay engaged in school.”

Schefman continues, “Anyway, I went to this prof’s office, and we had a nice connection. He was a college tennis player in the 1920s, and had lots of trophies around his office. I was a player myself, although never at that level.

“We started talking, and he asked, ‘What are you interested in?’ And one of the things I said I was interested in was art, but that I’d never really been able to pursue it because we didn’t have art at my high school.

“And he said, ‘Oh, go see my friend at the art department, Mr. Pollack.’ So, the next day, I went over to the art department and went up to the desk, and said ‘I’d like to see Mr. Pollack, please.’ And the girl looked at me like I had just asked to see Jesus Christ on a bicycle.

“Mr. Pollack was, of course, Jackson Pollack’s brother, who, during the WPA, was more famous than Jackson Pollack as a muralist for the WPA. I was told he was one of the original people who started the art school at MSU.

“So, I asked to see Mr. Pollack, and she went and got one of the department chairs who came out to talk to me, and said, ‘I’m sorry, but Mr. Pollack is dead.’

“And I did, and I’ve been hooked ever since.”

“The smile returns to Schefman’s lips as he recalls, ‘Of course, changing my major from pre-med to art was not my parents’ favorite thing, as they were used to the idea of me becoming a doctor. In high school, I had worked at Harper Hospital doing autopsies, and gone to surgery with my uncles and with older friends who were already surgeons.”

TRANSFERRING THE EXPERIENCE

“When people hear that story, they look at my work, and often say ‘Oh, no wonder you know the human body so well.’

“I joke that I’ve never had an opportunity to paint kidneys and lungs. And, as much as personal experience helps me paint, truth is, it’s all about illusion. It’s about interpreting what we see, the power of observation—and being able to translate the three-dimensional world into a two-dimensional world.

“That act of ‘translation’ spans all the art disciplines. It is the value of art.

“That is, human beings talking about human issues to each other; transferring an experience or transferring ideas of the experience. I don’t have to go to the D-Day beach to know horrible as it was. I can watch Saving Private Ryan.

“Which is part of what annoys the hell out of me about politicians, when they want to use art to better math scores or better science scores, or better this or better that. Value the arts because they give perspective on our humanity.”

MSU WAS HEAVEN!

“As for how he’d describe his time in the College of Arts and Letters at MSU, Schefman responds, “Heaven; are you kidding?

“First of all, you’re in college. And I had some great faculty; faculty who had shown art from the 1920s to the 1970s, and were still showing in New York, at that time, with some of the top galleries.

“It was fantastic. And I had an incredible facility. Michigan State’s sculpture department had its own building. I could get access to the building and work as much as I wanted to. And when I was a senior, I was even helping teach the freshman classes, which was great. I was given studio space; I was given access to whatever I needed; and I was able to go like gangbusters.

“From the time I got in, I had no preconceived notions. I was like a blank slate. And coming from pre-med to fine art, I was like a sponge. Whatever I was told, I accepted as the
truth, which was a wonderful way to be a student. And, then, as I went further and further in my program, I also learned to challenge what those people said.

“At MSU, Mel Leiserowitz was probably the biggest influence on me, but I also had courses with Jim Lawton, Bob Weill, and John deMartelly in printmaking.

“Another great influence on me was Margaret Yuill, who taught jewelry.

“I viewed jewelry as the exact same thing I was doing, but on a very tiny scale. And I was able to crank through fabricating and casting. I made money all the way up to going to New York. In fact, when I first moved to New York, I got a job in a production place making jewelry.

“I also learned a really great lesson about the business from some of the older profs at MSU; about what we’re really doing—what our attitudes are; and how to sustain this for a lifetime.

“John de Martelly, who exhibited at the World Expo in 1920, was the one who said: ‘The real way you judge this is not what you can make today, but can you still be working when you’re 90 years old?’

“That’s the real judgment.

“And I feel you can, as long as you keep developing and don’t stay in the same place. And as long as you remember that the end product is not the goal.”

AND IOWA MAKES SEVEN

Schefman continues, “Upon graduation from MSU, I was accepted to six other graduate schools in addition to Iowa, which I chose because it was the center of sculpture in America at the time and was being taught by the dean of sculpture in America, Julius Schmidt.

“Schmidt was the ‘big father’ of all the sculptors and sculptor teachers in the United States. And although I stayed away from teaching for a good 20 years, it was still valuable experience.”

Bringing up an image of a massive metal sculpture on one of the two Mac computer screens in his studio, Schefman says, “Let me show you this. It’s a presentation I put together for my students to give them an idea of what I’m all about and who and what has influenced me.”

As, one by one, images of various large metal sculptures fill the screen, Schefman says, “These are all made out of steel; obviously fabricated by me. I was able to build the large 16-foot sculpture in the opening screen right there at Michigan State. It’s what I learned to do at MSU.

“This next sculpture is a bit smaller at six feet. Here’s a piece that’s on the Wayne State University campus on the mall; and another one at the World Trade Center when it was still there. So this is what I was trained to do. This is what my work was for the first 10-15 years after Michigan State: large-scale, non-objective sculpture. This is where I jumped on the train for art in general in 1970.”

WORKING FOR THE FAMOUS

“So that was where I began. And I continued making large-scale sculptures once I’d moved to New York. I also worked for a lot of famous artists while I was there.

“I did projects for Claes Oldenburg, George Segal, Miriam Shapiro, Suzanne Anker, Lynda Benglis, Helen Frankenthaler, Bryan Hunt, Ron Gorchov, Jud Nelson, Hannah Wilke, Sandy Skoglund and others, as well as special installations for Whitney Museum of Art.

“Sometimes, I would be working for two of them at the same time.”

Moving ahead in the presentation until a four-square-like drawing fills the screen, Schefman explains the development of his work. “Next, I started blowing apart the form, dissecting the form, and creating a language out of the form: simple shapes, simple forms, creating visual metaphors.

“Like letters make words, and words make paragraphs, and paragraphs make books. As you change any letter, you change the word. Change the word, and you change the paragraph. Change the paragraph, and you change the whole book. Right? I could change a shape, or form, and alter a relationship.”

DEVELOPING A LANGUAGE OF FORM

“So, in making these, I was developing a language of form. There were hundreds of these. And, along with them, I began to explore alternate spaces by digging sculptures down into the ground, to explore space down below level, or pushing into a niche in a wall.”

Schefman continues, “And it was at this point that all the paintings that were adjunct to my sculpture practice became the focus of my work.

“It seems a pretty radical change to move into painting from sculpture, but I was just following where the work led. I was still exploring the language of simple forms, when three-dimensional space led to working with two-dimensional illusion. I wanted to approach the content of language more specifically. I’d always worked
in a modular way, so I thought: ‘Why not change the module?’ My module went from big pieces of steel, to human beings.

“And with that I was not just developing language in the abstract, but actually talking about specific things; much more specific. And that was much more challenging; also hugely more open than what I’d been doing.

“It’s incredible how the mind can buy something if you make it somewhat realistic. It’s amazing how a photograph or movie can draw you in. Obviously, you see everything I do is pretty much a larger scale, from my first sculptures to this painting I’m working on here in my studio. I like to pull people in that way.”

Over the ensuing years, Schefman painted a censorship series, and a series on dreams. “Collectively, humans have about 40 dreams. We each have about 12 to 16 of them, and we’re stuck with that set for life.

“There are also paintings I’ve done on mythology, such as Tribute, the story of the faithful Penelope, Ulysses’ wife. Yet another is a very large painting, 16 feet wide by nine feet tall, named Antigone, which is now part of the collection of the MSU Ely and Edythe Broad Art Museum on campus.”

IT’S ANYTHING BUT REAL

No matter what is being made, though, Schefman says, “If anyone asks me what I’m really thinking about, for me, personally, it’s going through the development of an idea. Taking an idea to different places, and seeing what I can see. And as far as the external work; the things that get produced, it’s about a narrative illusion. I know people call it realism. But it’s anything but real.

“What I used to do was realism. Non-objective work is real. It is tangible; it is what it is, and is meant to be no more. And the idea is to take it as that form; as that material; as that mass; as that structure.

“These paintings are not real. These things are illusion. These things are a fantasy. These things are my ability to invest a bunch of ideas in an image and give it to you and see what your brain does with it.

“Obviously, my intentions and your perception are not going to be the same. It’s going to be a little bit open, but it should have enough information to take you to a similar place.

“That’s the object: the ability to transfer information; the ability to learn empathy; to understand the concept. This is what it’s all about.

“This is what I think is important.”

About Robert Schefman’s Art:

In addition to MSU’s Broad Art Museum, Schefman’s artwork is in the collections of the Detroit Institute of Art; Boca Raton Museum, FL; Mint Museum of Art, Charlotte, NC; Ford Performing Arts Center, Dearborn, MI; Ennis Francis Housing Complex, Harlem, NY; Detroit Receiving Hospital; Detroit Country Day School, Birmingham, MI; Wayne State University, Detroit, MI; University of Iowa, Iowa City, IA; and Cooley Law School, Lansing, MI, among others. Robert Schefman’s solo exhibitions have been held at the U.N. Plaza, New York City; Robert Kidd Gallery, Birmingham; Midland Center For The Arts; The Charach Museum, West Bloomfield; The Krasl Art Center, St. Joseph, MI; and Oakland University Gallery. Group exhibitions include: The Fort Wayne Museum, IN; Art Miami; Scope; Art Chicago and Art LA; The Timothy Yarger Gallery of Fine Art, LA, and The Detroit Institute of Arts. He has been awarded grants from the Pollack-Krasner Foundation, The Benard Maas Foundation and The Arts Foundation of Michigan.