

A covenant relationship with his commissions

The son of a famous Detroit illustrator takes great pains to overdeliver in sculptures that are making him a name.

IT'S A HOT SPRING DAY IN A SARASOTA workshop where a cool breeze is blowing through as a power grinder spews a shower of white sparks off the shiny metal figure that in a few days will bring to life an educator famous for molding the minds of black Alabama school children during the first part of the 20th century.

As the 400-pound nearly-finished statue is hoisted above a platform, sculptor Brian R. Owens and bronzesmith Kendall Oswalt crouch around the base that will support the impressive monument. They're measuring and outlining the spot where the statue of Dr. Arthur Harold Parker (1870-1939) would rest on a half-inch solid bronze panel.

Some of the fellows at Bronzart foundry are wearing iPods and using the latest technology, a bit of it extracted from space shuttle science, but their craft is as ancient as the Middle Ages — the firing and melting of metal and immersions in vintage chemical baths to create everlasting monuments.

For Owens, who treks down from his studio in Deltona to check on the Parker project progress, this is the crucial part of a creative process that started about 18 months ago when he first began doodling and sketching out what the final result would look like. This is the stage where his meticulously sculpted clay model is fabricated into metal, in this case bronze.

Almost ready for prime time: The shiny penny appearance of the bronze statue (right) will be knocked down when the patina, a chemical substance, is sprayed onto the statue while it is hot. As the sculpture cools and the pores of the metal close down the chemical that lives on the surface adheres to the metal resulting in a matte finish.





Traditional painter: Brian R. Owens not only does commission sculptures, but he's also a painter who produces portraits. Above: *Island*, Oil on Canvas, 30" x 40", 2007, Collection of the Artist.

Owens, 55, owes his artistic ability to genetics. His father was a renowned Detroit illustrator who gained national acclaim for creating the memorable Kings of Africa poster series produced by Anheuser-Busch in the 1980s as a Black History Month project. The younger Owens grew up in Michigan, where he first exhibited art at age 16, but he never really pursued it singularly as a career. Instead, he put his electrical engineering degree to use, working in the defense industry at first in Detroit and later when he relocated to Florida.

He always was a traditional artist at heart, painting in oils and pastels, but the sharp-witted Owens gravitated to sculpting when he found he had a talent for it. And now sculpture accounts for the bulk of his income.

In the past decade, he has been gaining fame as a creator gifted in capturing the likeness and spirit of his subjects in three-dimensional representations throughout Florida and the nation.

Back at the foundry, as the statue of Dr.

Parker is lowered for them to check if his feet match up with the shoes outline on its base, Owens explains that the figure is larger than life-size because Parker was of small stature, therefore he had to be represented on a grander scale for visual impact.

"If I were to walk up to Dr. Parker in the year 1910," he said, "I would not first have been impressed by his size. I would have been impressed with his personality and his nature and the words that proceeded from his mouth."

It's the nature and the personality of the individual that Owens attempts to embody in his work, so that even with a mere glance the viewer can feel a sense of spiritual connection with the person the sculptor has immortalized in bronze.

"In the case of a sculpture commission like this," Owens said, "it's almost as if the artist has a contract with the art itself, to keep pushing until it radiates some kind of gravity or power that provokes an emotional response in the viewer.

"Naturally, I'm gratified when people

like the final results," he added, "but my primary motive does not involve pleasing other people while I'm doing the work. And this is not about doing your best. If your studio and your resources are less than adequate, that's no excuse. You still have to find a way to produce the gravity and the power."

In this interview, Owens shares memories of his childhood, fragments of his personal philosophy and some interesting life encounters.

What was the reason for going into sculpture?

It was a direction I chose. I was always an artist. At some point the question becomes what I am going to make, and for some reason I became fascinated with sculpture. And I started hanging out with other sculptors well before I had any skills, and helping them cast their bronze in their little studio foundries and I discovered I had a talent for

Continued on Page 21



From sketch to solid reality:

Deltona sculptor and painter Brian R. Owens (left) points out that the fine details such as the subject's bowtie and his eyeglasses are elements that bronzesmiths help to refine in the final stages of the statue's fabrication. Bronzart's Kendall Oswalt (below) measures the footprints where the figure will rest. The commission is from the Birmingham Board of Education, which will erect the statue at a high school that for decades had the largest number of black students in the U.S., and is named for its long-time principal, Dr. Arthur Harold Parker.

SNAP VERBAL EXPRESSIONS OF A VISUAL CREATOR

MONEY: We will have grown to our full height as a species when we have a resource-based economy where money is not required for food and shelter.

LOVE: Still working on this one. I've heard it's nice.

POVERTY: Poverty is a greater threat to national security than any foreign power or terrorist organization.

CIVIL RIGHTS: I'm amazed at the general public's lack of concern over the rights that have been taken from them under the 2012 National Defense Authorization Act. In the words of The Last Poets — if the phrase may be allowed — “Wake up, Niggers!”

REPARATIONS: The likelihood of actually receiving reparations, paid by a government that has to borrow money from a communist regime to stay afloat, that allowed Wall Street to loot our treasury, that has to increase the M1 money supply regardless of GDP or population growth, is so small as to be infinitesimal and is therefore not worth pondering.

ECONOMIC JUSTICE: I'm for economic justice. But “economic justice” is almost an oxymoron, isn't it? Since our economic system bears more than a passing resemblance to the type proposed by Adam Smith in *The Wealth of Nations* where markets are presumed to be efficient and self-regulating and the children of the “working races” are numerically reduced by starvation when the demand for labor is less

than the supply.

HANGING OUT: I don't have close family here in Florida. Formal dinners are a rarity. Most of my friends are creatives — painters and sculptors, mostly. I don't entertain at all, but I have plans to change that.

SNACKS: Keeping snacks out of the house is almost certainly the only barrier between myself and abject obesity.

CHARITY: I'm not in a position to donate time but I give small amounts of money to charities and the occasional panhandler when I can.

MUSIC: I like all types of music so I'm constantly changing what I listen to. Lately I've been listening to a lot of Terrance Blanchard, an American composer named Virgil Thomson and a Norwegian band called Madrugada. Who knows what it will be next week.

MUSICAL TALENT: I possess no musical talent at all. I'm not sure I'm capable of surprising my friends anymore, unless it's mild surprise at my having incrementally become less awkward and more graceful.

READING: I just finished *War is a Force that Gives Us Meaning* by Chris Hedges, a brilliant meditation on human



frailty and modern warfare. I enjoy both fiction and non-fiction and tend to read entire bodies of work when I find a writer that I like, such as Octavia Butler. *

it. Now most of my income comes from sculpture rather than paintings for whatever reason.

Is watching and guiding the foundry men as they finish the work the most exciting part of the process?

I suppose the most exciting part is at the beginning when you are trying to design it in your head and come up with sketches or models or maquettes because that's just pure creativity. And at that point you can move in any direction you want. This is exciting too in a different way. It's exciting seeing the sculpture finally in reality, but it's a different kind of excitement. Kind of a relief, really.

Talk a little about your early years. How large a family did you grow up with and what do you remember about those formative years?

I am a second-generation artist born to Katherine J. Owens, an educator, and the late Carl C. Owens, a freelance illustrator. I have one younger brother. Carl C. Owens became one of America's first self-employed African-American illustrators to contract directly with national corporations such as Ford Motor Co. This was in the 1970s. Many of his commercial assignments involved "Black History." This was a practical way for national corporations to reach out to black consumers at the time. The Great Kings of Africa series sponsored by Anheuser-Busch and the Roots, Stems and Flowers traveling exhibit sponsored by Ford Motor Co. are prominent examples (of his work).

On weekends, I spent time in his studio where he completed portrait commissions for local heroes such as Berry Gordy and Mayor Coleman Young and personal projects, such as a life-size portrait of Rosa Parks, who lived in Detroit at the time. He didn't talk much but his library revealed a deep interest in African-American history. I suppose you could say that he used his paint brush to think about it.

On weekdays, I resided with my mother. In her home, I was encouraged to understand "race relations" as a practical tool for the purpose of maneuvering through social and academic spheres, both white and black, that at the time were socially segregated. Both parents, in their own way, tried to understand how the world works and what had happened to bring us — as a species — to that point in time. I absorbed some of this curiosity for understanding the past and now it factors into my professional life.

How did you get along with the kids in the classroom, schoolyard and on neighborhood playground?

I had friends but was never a popular kid.

Back then, who were your heroes or mentors, people who inspired you or who you dreamed of emulating?

My father was not really a mentor but he was a constant reminder that it is possible to continuously ignore what the culture instructs you to do and still succeed in life. This was a powerful example. As a teen I admired filmmakers like Stanley Kubrick, essays by scientists

like Dr. Jacob Bronowski and speculative fiction by writers such as Arthur C. Clark and Isaac Asimov, I've never had heroes but I have been deeply influenced, as an adult, by artists such as Ed Hamilton, Tina Allen and Richard Bennett.

In those early years, what was happening in your neighborhood, across the nation and in world affairs that deeply affected you?

I'm sure that I was affected by the events of my youth but the effect was almost certainly below the threshold of conscious thought. The Cold War, the expectation of nuclear war, the fall of Saigon, the Detroit riot, police brutality, the Algiers Motel Incident, the killing of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X, escalating street crime, horrifying rumors from Chile. Add all of this to above average levels of teenage angst. Looking back, I credit my mother with shielding me from the world until I was a teenager. But I do

remember feeling a general sense of dread that grew and continued into adulthood, and a desire to put some serious mileage between myself and where I was raised.

Did you live "across the railroad tracks" more or less? At what age did you realize that you were black and might have begun to feel the different treatment inflicted by the majority society? Any examples come to mind?

I was raised in a nice, mostly black, lower-middle-class neighborhood in Detroit before widespread industrial automation, before crack, before "guns in schools." It seemed tough enough when I was a kid and Detroit was notorious as the "murder capital," but murder was something that adults mostly did to other adults. I knew about race before I was 10, I think, mostly through the accounts of adults. I had my first bad experience with a young cop who falsely accused me of vandalism on my way home from elementary school. It probably

did not help when I called him a "honkie." This may have contributed to him chasing me in his car in reverse. His partner made him get back in his car after the younger cop succeeded in forcing me to recant my ethnic slur.

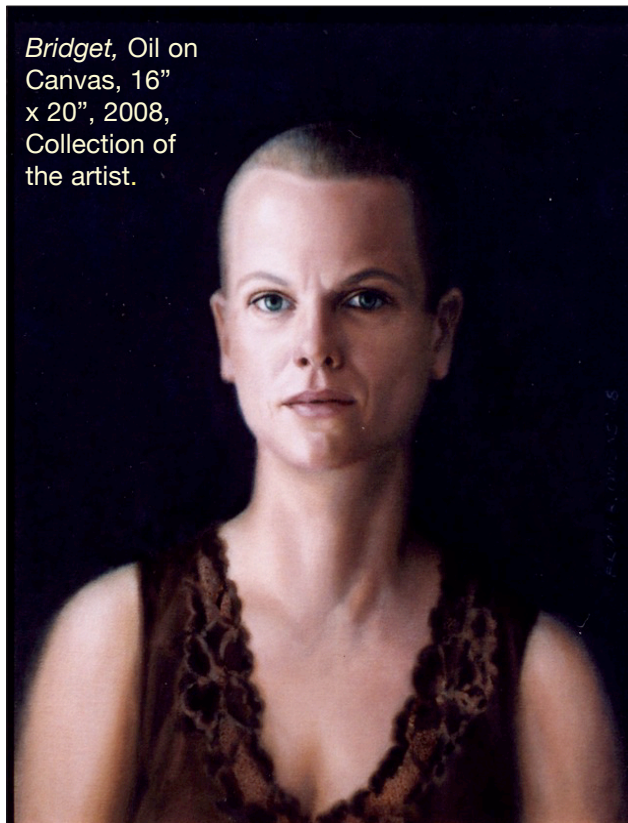
There must have been an early inkling that art and visual expression were to be your destiny.

Destiny is not the word for it because it implies that there could be no other outcome, but I think I know what you're asking. From my earliest memories, I've always been an artist. I probably had no choice in that. As an adult I made a choice to develop a practice that I could live off of.

When you look back on your life, was there any particular event, a crystallizing moment or pivotal juncture that forged a crucial turning point, leading you to where you are today?

No, there was no "Damascus moment." Only a long string of incremental changes that happened as I adapted to the world and found out what worked and what did not work for me in particular.

Continued on Page 23



Bridget, Oil on Canvas, 16" x 20", 2008, Collection of the artist.



SCULPTING & PAINTING

A sampling of Brian R. Owens works (clockwise from above): 1. Clay of Robert Saunders, bronze bust on display at library in Tampa. 2. Larry H. Handfield, cast bronze on display at Bethune-Cookman University, Daytona Beach. 3. Bust of T.H. Poole on display at Lake County Historical Museum, Tavares. 4. *Habiba*, Pastel on paper, studio collection. 5. Private commission portrait, oil on canvas.

There's been very little in the way of a grand strategy. Also, it would be a mistake to claim sole authorship for whatever success I've had. Other people have always believed in me. Without them, I would have accomplished nothing. Leonard Cohen expressed this view when he said: "I am not in command of this enterprise."

Can we be convinced that Barack Obama's sudden rise to political stardom indicates that racism is a thing of the past in America? What does this surprising embrace of a black man by the mainstream mean?

I would caution you to regard what I say on this subject with skepticism, since I would have quickly bet everything I own against my ever seeing anyone in the oval office who even remotely resembled a person of color. Overt racism in the U.S. has been suppressed, as we have suppressed certain diseases. Our relief at having made it this far should be balanced by the knowledge that racism grows out of human weaknesses that still exist. This encouraging movement toward equality could be reversed or tyranny could express itself in the U.S. a new way unless we are vigilant.

Along the way, and even today, you must have had personal encounters with discrimination. What's was the most stinging

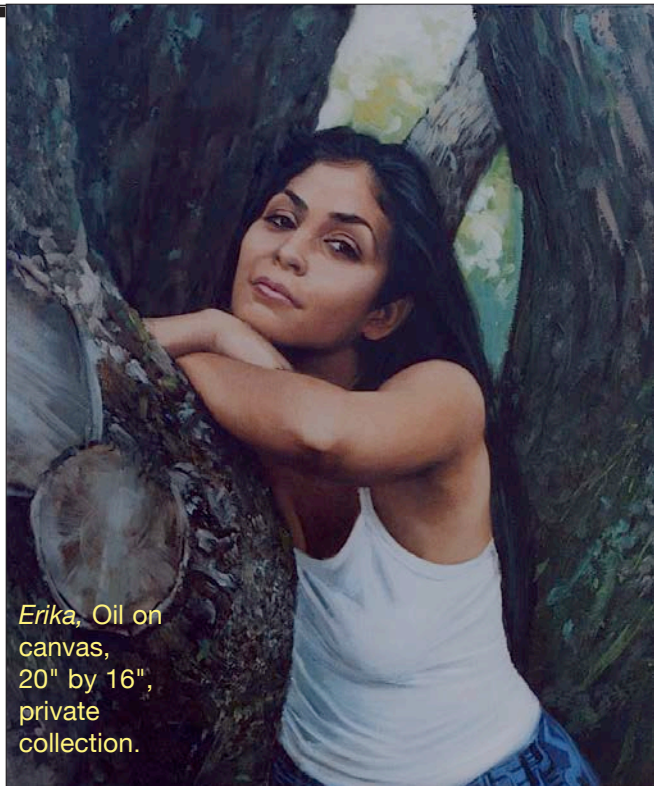
brush with racial prejudice you've experienced and how did you deal with it?

I had a run-in with a Florida cop who racially profiled a lady friend of mine with whom I was shopping at the time. This was in the '80s. He accused her of shoplifting, I stepped in and he tried to manipulate me into touching or verbally assaulting him.

It's a long, entertaining story that starts with my three- or four-page police report and ends a few years later when he finally self-destructed and was arrested while on holiday in Dominican Republic. He had an unfortunate habit of robbing banks, stealing police equipment and committing various interesting, if lesser, crimes. After extradition to the U.S. he received a 14-year sentence, leaving me to reflect that there is a God after all.

What are your hobbies? What is heaven on earth away from the office? When you get away, where do you go and what do you do?

I like to read and hang with other "creatives." I enjoy the company of people who are smarter than me. This year I have



Erika, Oil on canvas, 20" by 16", private collection.

resolved to spend more time on the beach and make my own sand sculpture. I've done it as part of a professional crew and it's fun. but to be honest, I'm not very good at it yet.

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