

# Imposing Figures

Battenberg's figurative work has appeared in more than 40 solo and major group exhibitions *By* LESLIE VESTRICH



**O**n three secluded acres near the summit of the Santa Cruz Mountains lives one of California's legendary cast-bronze sculptors. He is part of a sort of Holy Trinity of sculptors Los Gatos can boast. The three artists, who earn upwards of \$100,000 each for large-scale public commissions that dot the West, include John Battenberg, a pioneer in the art of bronze casting; David Middlebrook, Battenberg's one-time fellow San Jose State University professor; and Paul (Mircea) Goreniuc, a former Battenberg student.

Battenberg, a Los Gatos resident for more than a decade, would consider it "self-serving" to place a piece of his public art in town. He spends weekdays in his San Francisco studio building armatures and casting bronze, protected by a shop manager who fields his calls.

Most artists and collectors around here know of him; few have met him. Curiosity reigns: Is he friendly? A recluse? Too "big?" Will he snub the local arts scene, if indeed there is one?

Hardly. A simple invitation, and this professor emeritus immediately agreed to show slides of his work and talk, gratis, to what will undoubtedly be a small but

intensely curious audience Friday at 7:30 p.m. at Forbes Mill Museum, 75 Church St.

"I guess it's time to give something back to my own community," Battenberg said. "Why not? I'm a friendly guy." He repeats this comment more than once in a tone that dares argument.

"I think art should exist in the community, and kids should have that advantage," he added. "Otherwise, I'd charge you a fortune just for this lecture."

He could. Students flocked to him for two decades before he retired in 1980 from the SJSU foundry, from which flowed many of the Bay Area's most promising new talents. Triton Museum of Art curator George Rivera said.

"John has always been one of the people in the forefront," he said, "a key player in every decade, and you can't say that about a lot of people."

"There's a lot of respect for the quality of his work," agreed Fred Spratt, directing partner of d.p. Fong & Spratt Gallery in San Jose. "John has established himself as one of the important members of a group of Bay Area sculptors noted for figurative work."

After earning a master's in fine arts in painting, he spent several years at Oxford University on the G.I., bill mixing it up with such students as John Updike.

While an artist-in-residence in New Mexico, he began to lean toward sculpture, moving to California in the early '60s to concentrate on casting.

His father and grandfather both worked in foundries. But unlike them, Battenberg, with a few of his peers, is widely known for launching a nationwide renaissance in the nearly defunct art of bronze casting. He has shown in more than 40 solo and major group exhibitions and in museums from the Denver Museum of Art to the Georges Pompidou Center of Art and Culture in Paris. His résumé was recently capped by two retrospectives covering his 30-year career, which is far from over.

In fact, it has taken a new turn. But

there's always turnover in Battenberg's themes, albeit with an enduring signature. Like most artists, he wants to tell you something with his art, and although that something is not always identifiable or translatable, much of his work reflects the humanistic concerns of the era in which he was working.

In simple terms, he lodges protest: In the '50s, he was antinuclear; in the '60s, he was antiwar; in the '70s, he took issue with the position of women in society; and in the '80s, he swam against the tide of materialism, perhaps only incidentally, by delving into Native American spiritualism. The '90s find him in line with an avalanche of concern over the environment, calling for its protection through a series of etchings and bronze castings of animals—all wild, some endangered.

Is he just trend-surfing his way into the conservator collector's wallet, into the make-money-not-waves gallery?

"I've always been a humanist. I've never left it," he said simply. He believes there is no need to apologize for reflecting the concerns and aims of the human beings around him—or at least a certain segment once considered left-wing but now, especially since the last election, considered Establishment.

"Yes, I'm concerned with the environment, the planet. But I don't think wolves are in danger of disappearing, so that's not my point," he explained. "And don't call me a wildlife artist. Tomorrow, I could be doing something else. I think [my art] is about the spirit of animals. They are here, and they are wonderful things. To kill them boggles my mind."

His work also leans toward a larger point: that animals sit at the center of the ecosystem, indicators of the planet's health as well as guardians and keepers of the mysterious spirit of much-abused Nature. He will not object if viewers appreciate these animals through his art and end up caring a little more about what humankind is doing to them.

He first offers a realistic look at creatures

that most of us have experienced only in photographs. To get a feel for these beasts is perhaps to start caring about what happens to them. He imbues bronzed wolves, hawks, coyotes and bears—made from plaster-coated wood burned away to leave a mold—with superrealism.

"I think they're very exciting," said Edna Young of Los Gatos' Young Gallery, who represents Battenberg for the South Bay. "He only sketches the animals, almost like a pointillist painting, but he gets such a sense of the whole creature—and that's extremely difficult." Ragged and just plain wild, they look ready to either bolt or attack: vicious, yet impressive and admirable.

Second, he exposes a sad contradiction: the formidable teeth, claws and ferocious instinct that seem such fine survival tools are pathetically inadequate in a survival match with humankind.

Captive in the metal bars that reveal them, the animals look strangely touching and helpless in their rigid paralysis, a fury of life suddenly frozen in time. The cold breath of impending extinction, or maybe just the sadness of all things that must die, seems to whistle through their hollow rib cages.

Battenberg could be asking: "If something is so impressive—and look, it is!—how can we watch it disappearing, destroyed, hunted?"

At home in his own "Winnie-the-Pooh forest—magical but not frightening," the artist never hunts or sprays poisons. He tends an ecologically correct Eden with recycled pond water and a solar-heated pool.

But he is no New Age milquetoast. If his acerbic comments on the state of public art in Los Gatos indicate the tone he will take in the upcoming lecture, be prepared for fireworks. But, for now, the only fireworks strike off a 12-foot figure of a coyote on a pedestal as Battenberg reads it for yet another California city's public art collection.