

Sculptor casts life into animal figures

John Battenberg's 'Mystical Bear' on view at State Fair

By Holly Johnson
Special to The Bee

Call it intuition, call it visceral memory. Bay Area sculptor John Battenberg doesn't know where his ability springs from, but he's not asking questions.

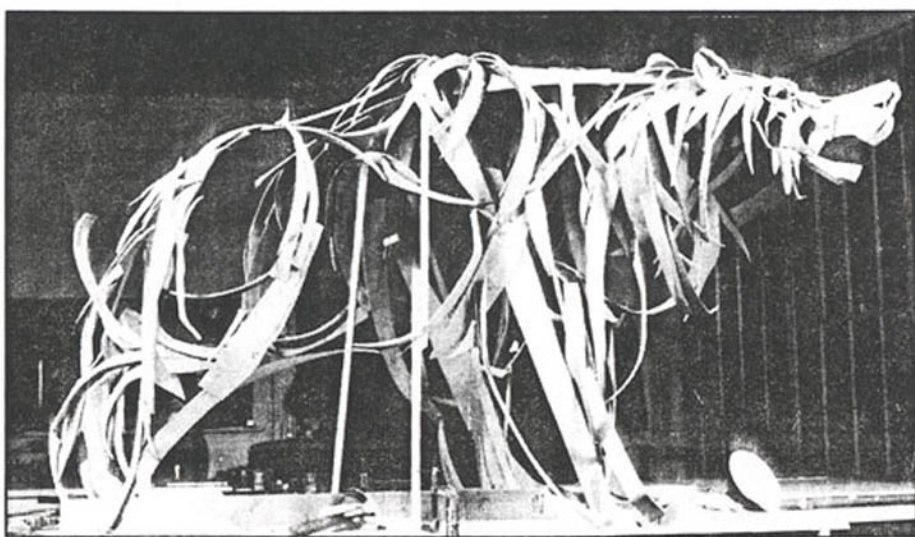
"I find that in sculpture," he recently discovered, "I can look at one side of an animal and know what's happening on the other side. It's some sort of insight, some sort of good luck."

Those following Battenberg's 30-year-career in three-dimensional forms will agree it's more than luck. With recent outdoor commissions for his large, haunting animal pieces, nearly 60 one-man shows on his resume and a reputation as a leading West Coast innovator in bronze casting since the early 1960s, Battenberg may be emerging as one of California's most important sculptors.

Battenberg's latest project is a 9-foot-long, 14-foot-high bronze, "Mystical Bear," a tussled beast on display at the California State Fair's outdoor sculpture site through Sept. 7. It was commissioned by the California Arts Council and the Office of the State Architect for Millbrae's Caltrain station, where it will be permanently placed after the fair.

The artist's signature strips of alloy, some patterned after tree branches, join in agitated lines to create animals in characteristic poses — a howling wolf with throat arched, a puma ready to spring. Battenberg captures the essence of wolf, bear, osprey, puma or eagle, leaving open space to let the air flow through. In a word, his sculptures breathe.

The bronze strips echo the impatient strokes in Battenberg's paintings and drawings.



"Mystical Bear," a 14-foot-high bronze and steel sculpture by John Battenberg, was commissioned by the California Arts Council for a Caltrain station in Millbrae.

(For him, sculpting is "three-dimensional drawing. I've always been figurative.") With his shattered, suspended fragments sparingly placed, Battenberg evokes the psychic spirit of beast or bird, mirroring his own self portrait, perhaps, in their faces.

"His animals look vulnerable and natural at the same time," says Shirley Dubnick, who represents Battenberg at Solomon Dubnick Gallery, where more than 50 sketches, paintings, etchings and sculptures by the artist will be exhibited Tuesday through Sept. 5.

Battenberg, 60, has championed humanitarian causes through sculpture — anti-war sentiments, the cultural bondage of women, the fast fade of American Indian cultures. Currently, he laments the fate of endangered species. In the images of his bears and wolves lies primal dignity mixed with despair, a combined helplessness and ferocity.

The figures in his strongest project, a series of wolves

named after Old Testament prophets, are scarcely noble. "Wolves are magnificent and beautiful animals, but these guys are full of mud. They're just hungry, scruffy wolves... and they're not going to get what they're after. I like that concept, because I think it's a commentary on man and wolves and the whole world."

Born and raised in Wisconsin, Battenberg earned a degree at Minnesota State College, then went off to Oxford on the GI bill. In 1960, he finished a master's degree in painting at Michigan State University, but did no sculpting until two years later, when he joined the faculty at New Mexico Western University, where he was later fired "for raising hell, I think." His first work was the 12-foot-high "Peace Warrior," an abstract, genderless anti-war statement.

The transition from painting to sculpting "happened suddenly, and it took over everything," Battenberg said. In 1964, he moved to California to learn

and later help revolutionize bronze-casting techniques. He became a casting instructor at the California College of Arts and Crafts in Oakland, although he had never formally studied sculpting.

Like his other large works, "Mystical Bear," initially constructed of wood, grew in steps. "First, he was a small maquette (or model) of 12 inches; then he grew into a 4-foot bear, and then he doubled to 8 feet. 'I didn't realize,'" said Battenberg, "that if you double from four to eight you're also multiplying the thing eight times cubically. Suddenly, I had a small Toyota in my studio."

A recovering alcoholic for the past three years, Battenberg looks on this period as an important time of renewal. His animal pieces, infused with a restless energy that reflect the artist's, have helped him re-enter the art scene, although from the breadth of his resume, one senses he hardly left it. "His stuff is easy to live with and to understand. It's immediately

ART REVIEW

John Battenberg

"Mystical Bear" will be on display at "SculptureSite 92" through Sept. 7 at the California State Fair. Recent sculpture, paintings and prints by Battenberg will be at Solomon Dubnick Gallery, 2131 Northrop, Tuesday through Sept. 8. Hours: Tues.-Sat., 11 a.m.-6 p.m. 920-4547.

recognizable, but different," says Dubnick's brother, Russ Solomon, owner of Tower Records, and an avid collector of Battenberg's marbles and bronzes since 1965.

The artist, whose father and grandfather were foundry men, works weekdays in his San Francisco studio, and the rest of his time on three acres in the Santa Cruz mountains, where he lives with his wife Lynn, an American Indian. In the shadowy, glistening foothills, he meets wild animals.

"Every morning, I talk to the deer," Battenberg says. "They come and eat my flowers. We have ponds... that we built. I have a kind of complete turnaround ecological water system. The place keeps expanding. The gardens have become a park. My first lotus, as a matter of fact, is blossoming today. I hated to leave it this morning."

After 20 years on the faculty at San Jose State University, Battenberg quit teaching art seven years ago, and is now professor emeritus there.

"I bailed out early while I still had my sanity," he says. "I quit because I felt I was going to die a teacher. I started out to be an artist."