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Soaring on Paper Wings

An Exhibit of Irving Harper's Art in Rye

By SUSAN HODARA OCT. 3, 2014

At the Rye Arts Center's opening of "Irving Harper: A Mid-Century Mind at Play," the subject of the exhibition, whose mind is still quite playful more than a decade into a new century, was impressed.

Mr. Harper, 98, moved through the gallery in his wheelchair, perusing the 77 masterful, whimsical and impossibly intricate sculptural works he had constructed almost entirely of cut, folded and glued paper.

"Wow," he said quietly. "Sensational."

Mr. Harper usually refuses to exhibit these personal works, which were made from 1963 to around 2000 as a means of relieving the stress of a demanding professional life. Trained as an architect, he spent his career as a designer and was the creator of such emblems of mid-20th-century home décor as the Ball Clock and the Marshmallow Sofa.

It was while he was director of design at George Nelson Associates and overseeing the design of the Chrysler pavilion for the 1964 World's Fair that he came home one day, disassembled a bamboo window blind and used the fragments

to fabricate a graceful, mask-like headdress.

That was the first of more than 300 sculptures that ended up filling the 19th-century farmhouse in Rye, N.Y., where Mr. Harper has lived for six decades. They cover the walls, hang from the ceilings, perch on every surface: a trove of fanciful animals and figures, African-inspired masks, complex architectural structures and meticulously detailed abstractions.

“I like to have them around,” Mr. Harper said on a recent afternoon in his window-lined living room. “They constitute my environment and I don’t want to deprive myself of them.”

He began to soften when members of the Rye Arts Center gallery committee sought his expertise while planning an exhibition about chairs. Visiting his home, they were stunned at the sight of his creations. He invited them to go upstairs to see more.

“It felt like the Marie Celeste,” Katharine Dufault, an artist and the center’s gallery chairwoman, said. “Everything was covered in dust, and on his work table there was a knife and a half sheet of paper, as if he’d left one evening and never returned.”

Then they brought a few pieces down. “He was amazed,” she said. “He couldn’t remember doing them. He started thinking, if I don’t remember them, I won’t miss them.” In April, he agreed to an exhibition.

All but two of the works in “A Mid-Century Mind” were borrowed from Mr. Harper’s barn and the top floor of his house. The exceptions are an arrangement of creased and curved strips of colored paper that usually hangs in his bedroom (“I’m asleep when I’m in there anyway,” he said) and an owl, the last sculpture he made.

The two-and-a-half-foot-tall owl consists of thousands of overlapping bits of folded paper, small tan triangles comprising the breast and head, larger spiky brown ones covering the rest. Mr. Harper said he worked on one construction at a time. When he completed the owl, he said, “I had no room for anything else.”

“A Mid-Century Mind” was curated by both Ms. Dufault and Jeff Taylor, president of the center’s board of directors. Their selections exemplify Mr. Harper’s diversity of subject matter, styles and techniques.

Animals besides the owl include a snarling wolf, a curled-up snake and a flock of brown birds pecking at tiny squares of paper. There are people: a Cubistic reclining nude; and the head of a blue-eyed woman sporting a straw hat, which Mr. Harper said was like one his wife used to wear. Several are abstractions where colorful paper slivers are glued to grids of thread in dynamic patterns. A circular composition is made with frenetic snips of multicolored telephone wire.

Dr. Taylor, an assistant professor of arts management at Purchase College, praised Mr. Harper’s virtuosity and cited his riffs on art movements that include Cubism, Surrealism, Abstract Expressionism and Op Art. One work resembles Pablo Picasso’s “Guernica;” others conjure Henri Matisse’s cutouts and quirky versions of Piet Mondrian’s grid motifs. “He could play every instrument of the 20th century orchestra of styles,” Dr. Taylor said, “and he did it all in three dimensions.”

The curators installed the exhibition to mimic the displays in Mr. Harper’s home. One area contains dozens of juxtaposed works stacked on the floor and crowding the walls. “You’re seeing pieces through pieces and beside pieces and they play off one another,” Ms. Dufault said. “There’s a sense of visual opulence.”

Dr. Taylor suggested that Mr. Harper’s prolific output was the product of “creative excess, things his mind was coming up with during the daytime that he couldn’t present to his clients.” He described the work as “the purest artistic expression I’ve ever witnessed, because it was completely unconscious to market, audience and posterity.”

“The more you look,” he said, “the more you are in awe of every gesture he made.”

Mr. Harper was more modest about his accomplishments. “It was really nothing more than thinking about new ways of putting things together and trying

them out,” he said.

He shared what seemed a simple part of his process, one that in his hands spawned mind-boggling results. “You take a flat piece of paper and cut it into a shape,” he said. “Then you score it and you bend it and it becomes three-dimensional. That’s the secret of the whole thing.”

“Irving Harper: A Mid-Century Mind at Play” runs through Dec. 6 at the Rye Arts Center, 51 Milton Road, Rye, N.Y. For more information: ryeartscenter.org or 914-967-0700.

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