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GET INTO THE NEIGHBORHOOD



Home Sweet Home

Local sculptor depicts the elusive quality of memory

By Debra Belt

Upon exiting city hall, you might wonder if you really saw “Ghost House.”

It stands just inside the building’s north entrance, the translucent framework of a house perched upon a fragile wooden foundation. It looks fleeting and transparent, and its subtle shape may haunt your memory.

“Ghost House” is part of the “Home Works” exhibit created by Sacramento sculptor Benjamin Hunt. The small, powerful show is Hunt’s exploration of family, home, distance and time.

Hunt has been working with the concept of home since 2007, inspired by old family photo albums. “I started thinking about photo memory and how it’s a little deceptive and fragile,” he says. “Content dissolves and we fill in the gaps, reconstructing the photos in a way.”

The city hall show includes several photo transparencies, including a triptych of a strong female figure with healthy kids in a pool with a beach ball. The images are muted and superimposed, giving the distinct sense of a blurred memory. In this case, the impression is a nostalgic glimpse of summer, childhood and carefree, distant days. The photos, from Hunt’s family albums, were taken around 1968, a few years before he was born.

In another piece, featuring three photographs inside a reclaimed acrylic box, the images are partially



Sacramento artist Benjamin Hunt with one of his sculptures

visible and partially obscured, just like a memory you can’t quite grasp.

Hunt uses a lot of reclaimed acrylic, a salvaged material he started using while studying sculpture in graduate school at San

Jose State. “I loved the translucent and seductive quality of it,” he says. “It’s a soft material, and you can fuse it with solvent and sand it like wood. It reflects light and has that ephemeral quality of memory.”

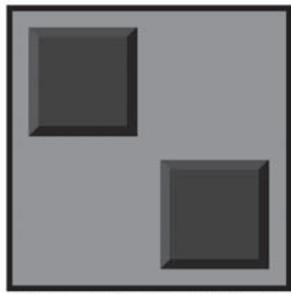
In graduate school, Hunt worked as lead studio assistant to Bay Area sculptors David Middlebrook, Randall Shiroma and David Kimball Anderson. He was attracted to the practical nature of sculpture. “I had been studying drawing and painting, but was always fascinated with the building process,” he recalls. “Sculpture offered the opportunity to get the skills to create three-dimensional objects. It just made sense to me.”

In 2008, Hunt received the International Sculpture Center award for outstanding student achievement in contemporary sculpture. That same year, he was invited to be a visiting artist and guest lecturer in sculpture at Idaho State University.

He came to Sacramento in 2009 because he fell in love with “a girl from Woodland.” (That girl is now his wife.) Hunt, who says living in Sacramento has been a great experience, is participating in Sacramento Metropolitan Arts Commission’s Emerging Public Artist Residency program and teaches part time in the art department at Sacramento State University.

His recent shows include “Linear and Non-Linear Possibilities” at Gallery 1075 in West Sacramento, which explored themes of time and nostalgia and also considered ordinary, everyday objects such as collectible items. “I am fascinated by how an object such as a photograph, a piece of furniture or old toys can become a marker of time to a collector,” he says.

Among his public art pieces are galvanized steel bike rack



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sculptures installed along R Street Corridor between 11th and 12th streets. Hunt says he likes the element of surprise that comes with public art, and that it gives people a chance to see art without making a special trip to a gallery or museum.

“People go to city hall to get a parking permit or take care of some other business with the city, and they are exposed to something new and unexpected that they didn’t have to seek out,” he explains.

The city hall installation is an example of the dimension public art can add to our daily lives. The show gives us a reason to pause for a moment and reflect on a distant memory of home. As the old saying goes: “Home is a place we spend our youth trying to escape and our adulthood trying to find.”

The “Home Works” exhibit at Robert Matsui Gallery in the north entrance of city hall continues until June 30. ●

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would walk past me carrying boxes of beautiful cookbooks. Sometimes I’d see a gem of a book sitting atop one of their boxes and grab it as a junkman passed me by. But thousands of books were being consigned to the dump before my eyes, a sight no book lover can endure unmoved.

Finally, I said to the Cookbook Widow’s friend (I’ll call him Joe), “Why don’t you just drive to my house and dump all those books in my driveway? That way, you’ll avoid paying the fees they charge at the dump.”

Joe was not a heartless person. Nor was he a philistine who enjoyed trashing valuable artifacts. But he was on a tight schedule. He was working hard to help out a family friend in her hour of need. The Cookbook Widow had asked him to oversee her downsizing project because she knew that he had no sentimental attachment to her belongings and would empty the house with ruthless efficiency. I begged him to quit jettisoning books. I told him that if he gave me three days, I could empty the house of every last cookbook all by myself. But Joe was on a mission. He told me he would spend a few hours emptying the house of other junk, leaving me alone to cull the best of the cookbooks. But when there was nothing left to haul away but books, he was going to continue throwing them into the junk trailer until the shelves were empty. Then he told me a story.

It seems that Joe had once lived and worked in an impoverished African country. At some point, he was enlisted to help build a wall that would prevent flooding in the town where he resided. He and a large crew of workers used sandbags to build this floodwall. When the sandbags were in place, concrete was poured over them and allowed to harden, so that the wall would be more or less permanent. Unfortunately, the work crew ran out of sandbags before the floodwall was finished. After making the determination that flood protection was more vital than food, the foreman of the project ordered the

work crew to take bags of rice from a nearby warehouse and use them in place of sandbags. Joe told me, “I felt bad using food to build a floodwall because I knew there were a lot of hungry people in that city. But the floodwall had to be built. So despite my misgivings, I helped empty the warehouse of its rice bags. Throwing these books away makes me feel just about as awful as I did when I was building a floodwall with food. But the job has to be done or [The Cookbook Widow] will never get out from under this mountain of her belongings.”

“Fair enough,” I said.

Joe smiled and said, “Of course, you could always drive out to the dump tomorrow and try to round up as many of these books as you can.”

I told him I wasn’t prepared to go to such an extreme just to rescue some vintage cookbooks.

“I guess those books aren’t as important to you as the rice was to those African villagers,” he said.

“Why is that?” I asked.

“Because the day after we switched from using sandbags to rice bags, we returned to the worksite only to find that all of the concrete we had laid had been chipped away in the night and the rice bags had been stolen by hungry villagers.”

I think he was trying to help me put my own frustrations into perspective. If so, it didn’t work. Every time he or his assistant passed by me with a boxful of condemned cookbooks, the book lover in me experienced a sharp pang of futility and loss. It was an oddly ambivalent situation. Being allowed to grab books at will without paying a cent for them was a book lover’s dream come true. But seeing four or five books destroyed for every one I managed to save was a book lover’s nightmare. It was the best of times. It was the worst of times.

In the end, I managed to save about 2,500 cookbooks from being consigned to the dump. But that number represented only about a fifth of the original collection. When it was all over, my wife, the eternal optimist, told me, “You just have to look at this as one of those glass-half-full situations.” But as I saw. ●

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