

Sculptor **jd Hansen's** figurative bronzes are heavy on gesture and emotion **By Wolf Schneider**

Body



DOSSIER

REPRESENTATION

Figarelli Contemporary, Scottsdale, AZ; Left Coast Galleries, Los Angeles, CA; Hart Gallery, Palm Desert, CA; Michael Levy Gallery, Long Beach, CA; Hallway Gallery, Bellevue, WA; Moberg Gallery, Des Moines, IA; Pieces Fine Art, Los Angeles, CA, and Chicago, IL

CURRENT SHOWS

Figarelli Contemporary, October 30-November 29; Hart Gallery, November 29-December 26.

Language

CALIFORNIA SCULPTOR jd Hansen specializes in stylized gestures. In her own way, she's even made a stylized gesture of her first name, paring it down to lowercase initials with no punctuation. The contemporary figures she sculpts are likewise stripped down to the bare essentials necessary to convey an idea or emotion.

For Hansen, the gestures people make are sort of the ultimate truth serum. "A person can put a smile on their face or can say whatever they want, but their body language will betray them every time. You can tell what they're thinking and how they're feeling by the way they're holding their body," she explains. "That's what I've chosen to do—show the gesture that reveals the thought or the emotion behind it. Then the piece rings true."

Although she's studied art history, Hansen, 39, insists her elongated bronze sculptures aren't influenced by any other sculptors, not even Swiss sculptor Alberto Giacometti, who also had a proclivity for long, skinny figures. "When I first started sculpting, I thought, 'This is so unfair, everyone is comparing me to Giacometti.' But people are going to see my work and compare it to other art they're familiar with. Giacometti's work is wonderful and beautiful, but it's not an influence for me. The influence is more my own body," says Hansen, who stands a willowy 5 feet, 11 inches and weighs just 120 pounds.

Her pieces are all about using body language to express a concept. "I don't give details in the face or fingers or toes, so the gesture has always been my way of communicating what the essence of the piece is about," she explains. "If the piece needs an arm, I'll put it there. If it doesn't, the arm's not there. If it's there, it's either echoing the elongation or counter-balancing it. The elongation allows me to play with it. It gives me the leeway to distort it so I can convey the body gesture."

Gesture is what she muses over when contemplating a sculpture, trying to understand the emotion prompting it. "Then I strip away everything that's unnecessary in the figure and just try to get across the essence that expresses that emotion. That's what plays through my head as I'm thinking about a piece."

Unlike most artists, Hansen uses neither models nor photographs. And rather than sketching, she develops her artworks mostly by writing about them, which helps her to solidify the concept. She then sculpts in hot wax over a metal armature. "The image develops when I'm sculpting," says Hansen. "When I'm working on a piece, I pour all the energy and thought of what I've been writing into the piece. If I do a sketch, it almost always strips away the aliveness of the concept."

◀ **FAMILY GROUP (THOSE JEFFRIES GIRLS), BRONZE, 21 X 15 X 5.**
LOVERS, BRONZE, 36 X 10 X 8. ▶





◀ MATRIARCH,
BRONZE, 30 X 13 X 10.
BIRDMAN,
BRONZE, 29 X 12 X 7. ▶

The longest description she's written was for FAMILY GROUP (THOSE JEFFRIES GIRLS), which is a depiction of the five sisters in her family. Hansen is the youngest, and she arranged them starting with the eldest sister at far left, then placed herself at the far right, slightly separate. "At the time I felt separated because they all lived in Vancouver and I didn't," she notes.

Such autobiographical reflection comes into play even when Hansen is depicting something other than herself or the human form. Her sculpture DOG portrays a highly stylized dog with a muscular front end, protruding ribs, and leggy, skeletal rear. The idea for the piece came a few years ago when Hansen fell ill on a trip to Italy and required surgery there. "Conceptually, it's about vulnerability," she says. "A lot of my pieces are about vulnerability."

BEST OF SHOW, in which an angular horse stands with its head down and a woman sits astride it sidesaddle, is another personally inspired piece. "It's about not fitting in, but being the best anyway," Hansen says. From where she lives in Fallbrook, CA, in northern San Diego County, she looks out on a show barn and observes: "The horse show world is very structured. There are certain ways you're supposed to ride the horse and certain ways the horse is supposed to look and where its head is supposed to be. And I liken that to the real world, where you're supposed to do this and do that, and be normal. There are all these unwritten rules. Being an artistic spirit, I don't always fit into those molds. But that doesn't mean you can't transcend that and be the best you can be."

An abstracted male figure gently holding a bird in the palm of his hand, BIRDMAN is a 55-inch-tall public art piece Hansen did for the city of Laguna Beach, CA. This sculpture isn't about her, she says, but someone she knows. "He's very well known and has a very strong presence, but he also has a sweet spirit. And that's what this piece is about. The bird symbolizes spirit and a sense of enlightenment—flying and free, not bound to the earth," she explains. "From my studio I watch hawks soaring, and I'm fascinated by their spirit."

BORN IN 1969 in Vancouver, WA, Hansen was always drawing as a kid, though art wasn't something she gave much thought to growing up in a single-parent household with her mom and sisters. "Financially, we had a rough childhood," Hansen recalls. "There were a lot of tough times, which I'm thankful for now because it strengthened me and my sisters. It gives you a perspective on how insignificant material things are and how important it is to enjoy your days no matter what shirt you have on."

She dropped out of high school ("It was boring," she shrugs), worked in a paper factory, and then moved to Laguna Beach, where she rollerbladed and surfed and filed invoices in an office. She met her future husband, Ken, and he encouraged her to go to night school. Courses at Saddleback College, a community college in Orange County, led her to Pasadena's Art Center College of Design, where she graduated with a bachelor's degree in fine arts in 1994.

She married Ken, now a financial analyst and corporate pilot, and found work designing posters and boxes for movie videos, earning eight awards from *The Hollywood Reporter*. "But I knew that was not the artwork I wanted to be doing. You're doing something for someone else. I thought, 'Forget this.' So I took my money and ran," Hansen admits. **continued on page 107**



▲ HORSE & RIDER, BRONZE, 19 X 18 X 8.
THE WARMTH OF YOU, BRONZE, 13 X 9 X 9.▼



Hansen, continued from page 97

She spent the next three years in her studio sculpting. "I learned from each piece, what I did right and what I did wrong," she says. "After three years, I had a group of pieces I felt ready to cast." In 2003 Hansen showed her sculptures at the Festival of Arts in Laguna Beach. Her work sold out. She continued doing outdoor shows until late 2005, when she transitioned to working with galleries.

"The most important thing I did was take those three years in my studio working on my art without any expectations hovering over my head," Hansen says. "It was five years ago that I launched my career, and it's been amazing. I've sold about 400 sculptures since then."

Her current series features figures wrapped in a cocoon of wire. Some viewers see the cocoon as constricting, others as protective. "People see different things because everyone has different life experiences that filter their perceptions," says Hansen. How does she see the cocoon? "At first it's a necessity, so the person can grow within it. Then it's constrictive," she replies.

While Hansen maintains she isn't influenced by other sculptors, she does acknowledge two painters who have inspired her: Francis Bacon and Anselm Kiefer. "When I look at Bacon's art, I feel that he has poured emotion into it—and that comes out on the other side," she explains. Of Kiefer she says, "He gives something real to grasp onto, like a tree or ocean or building, and he distorts it and covers it up in such a way that it's almost dreamlike."

These days, Hansen works in her home studio from 10 in the morning until after midnight. Max, her 100-pound German shepherd, is usually at her side. She creates anywhere from two to 10 new pieces a year, ranging in size from tabletop to monumental. Her mantra, she says, is "It doesn't have to be pretty, but it has to be true."

When not working, Hansen can be found at the beach surfing, or walking through her orchard, picking the apples, oranges, peaches, and avocados that grow there.

"Each person blazing their path through this life has to find out what works for them. And I do that," says Hansen. "I'm very independent in my thinking. I'm not wrapped up in whether people like my work or not. I do my best. And I hope it touches somebody somewhere." ❖

Santa Fe-based Wolf Schneider has been editor in chief of the *Santa Fean*, editor of *Living West*, and consulting editor at *Southwest Art*.