

1980S

In spring, 1980, I made changes to my foundry in Aylett, to accommodate ceramic shell casting. I went to work producing many new bronzes for a fall exhibition at the Institute for Contemporary Art at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts. The positive reception of that exhibition and the many new commissions that followed challenged my ability to cast work in Aylett plus create more work in Sarasota. But it was a challenge that I managed. In my early 40s, I was energetic and doing what I'd always wanted to do.

The bronze commissioned by the Wiltshires became the centerpiece for the VMFA exhibition, attracting additional commissions. Among them, was a large-scale bronze for the home of Jeanette and Eric Lipman, dramatically situated on a hill overlooking the James River. This sculpture is now in the collection of the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts.

Another significant supporter of the arts in Richmond and a collector of my work at this important time in my career was Kip Kephart. For him, I created annual memorial sculptures over two decades to honor his many friends. Kip supported me until his death with open-ended commissions that gave me complete artistic freedom. This allowed me to experiment and grow in new directions, which included hard-edged, biomorphic, and totemic designs.

Numerous sculptures commissioned by Kip are now in the collections of the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, the Valentine Museum, Virginia Commonwealth University, Virginia Union University, Longwood University, the University of Richmond, and his home Cary Hill sculpture garden in Charles City County.

For a time in the early 1980s, I was offered the use of a friend's apartment in New York City while I considered branching out into the New York scene. I'd take breaks from the search for studio space to visit galleries, museums, and other artists.

But early on I realized that my roots are in the South. The complications of New York City were a distraction and limited me creatively. That art world's emphasis on newness and novelty ran counter to my impulse to create works that are inwardly searching and enduring.

Opposite Page:
Memorial Bronze
Aylett Art Foundry, 1994
Sarasota, FL
Bronze





The warmth, pace and gentle rhythms of the South better suited me.

With its vibrant art scene and international mix of people, Washington DC attracted my interest. My exhibitions at the Franz Bader and Sidney Michelson galleries there in the 1970s were successful and my network of connections expanded. I purchased a fire-damaged building in need of restoration on New Jersey avenue, in downtown DC. For several years, Sylvia and I stayed there off and on.

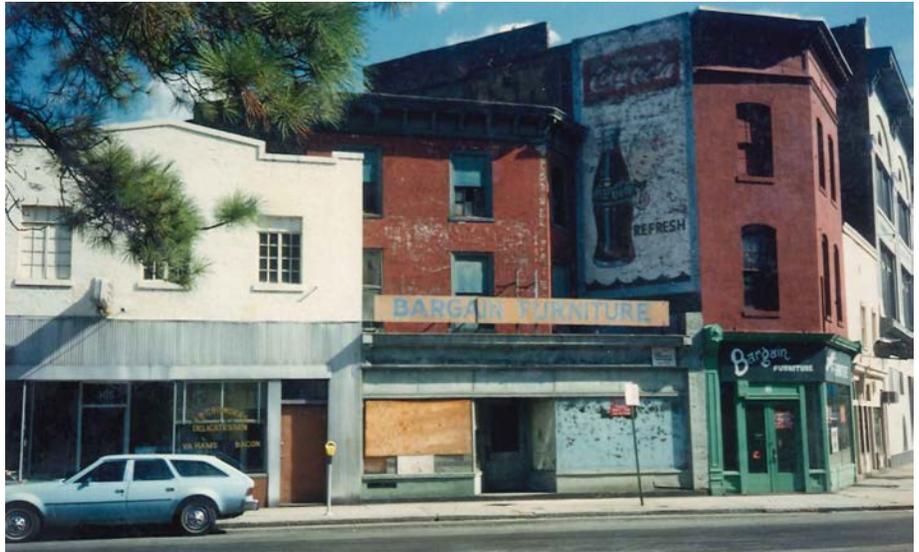
The restoration was well underway in 1985 when my seven-year-old daughter Corelia, came from St. Remy, France to live with us. Now a family of three, our lifestyle required adjustment for all the considerations happily made for a child. Balancing homes, studios, and lives in Virginia, Florida, and DC made little sense, so we sold the house in DC to renew my concentration in Richmond, where I had a solid circle of supporters.

That year, I purchased an abandoned, pre-Civil War commercial building at the intersection of historic Brook road and Broad street in downtown Richmond, where I maintain an apartment and studio.

This is an unusual building, even to today's eyes. Built on a diagonal to conform to a very early, Colonial-era road, 303 Brook Road is sharply and strangely angled. It caught my eye in the early 1970s and stayed in my mind for more than a decade before I actually bought it.

Throughout my life, historic buildings seemed to appear almost magically, presenting irresistible opportunities for developing interesting studio and living spaces. For me, the process of renewal

Three decades later my studio is in the center of Richmond's Arts District. I miss the anonymity and authenticity of the early neighborhood which has been erased like the Coca-Cola sign on the wall next to my balcony.



involved in restoring an old building parallels the creative process of making art. I am energized by both. Like my art, these spaces became products of my imagination and my own labor, providing me with suitable environments for the ever-changing direction of my art.

Interestingly, the “For Sale” sign for 303 Brook Road—the building I hadn’t been able to forget—had been hanging for so long that it faded into the same condition as the graffitied, crumbling building it advertised.

I called the real estate agent to make an appointment to tour the property. When we met, I was armed with measuring tape and flashlight as I knew this exploration would be more akin to spelunking than touring. And it was. All the windows had been boarded for many years, leaving it in total darkness. It was filled



*Painting and wax working studio,
303 Brook Road, Richmond, VA*

with musty rubbish from decades gone by. The plaster wall over the bricks had mostly fallen into the floor and the plaster and batten ceilings were barely hanging on. My one question to the real estate agent: “How do we reach the second floor since there were no stairs or indication of where they might have been?” His answer: “There is no upstairs.” I’m not sure how he missed entire floors, but he did, to my advantage.

Walking the Jackson Ward neighborhood then, I found mostly vacant buildings. Despite their age and their decades of neglect, they were still beautiful to me.

Two days later, on an early Sunday morning, I loaded an extension ladder on my old truck and Sylvia, Corelia and I drove to Richmond equipped with a flashlight, hammer, crowbar and a clipboard with the realtor’s card to make us appear less suspicious. We parked on the sidewalk as close to the building as possible, securing the ladder inside of the bed of the truck. Corelia--brave and adventurous - was the first to go up the ladder, with me close on her heels and Sylvia bringing up the rear. We reached a two-foot ledge where we could safely stand and I proceeded to pry open the tin that covered the window opening.

When inside, we stood silently for a few seconds - - in shock - - at the abysmal state of a space untouched for years. Pigeons had



taken over, depositing several inches of dung on every square inch of the floor and up to two feet around their favorite roosting spots, creating stalactites of waste. While I was undeterred and could only see what possibilities, my daughter implored in wobbly English: “Oh, Papa, don’t buy this one.”

What had been a grocery store turned out to be a great studio space.

After a more thorough inspection, I was sold on my dream of making it my downtown studio/apartment/gallery. It had been love since first sight, love of an enduring kind. Undaunted by the prospect of a long restoration, I was dedicated to the challenge. From its improbable beginning, 303 Brook Road exceeded my expectations for a satisfying environment to live, work and exhibit my art to this day.

When I think back on the various studios that have served as my workplaces, I’m not sure that the more primitive workshops haven’t served me as well as the better-equipped spaces that I have also occupied. I believe the search was about finding a place to be alone, to concentrate, to work my mind and to challenge me physically.