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Urbane Rattle

Sculptor, painter,
printmaker, illustrator
Charlie Hewitt dares to
crash our consciousness.

STORY AND PHOTOS
BY DIANE HUDSON

When Charlie Hewitt rattles Manhattan's (and Portland's) cages, art lovers are riveted in the moment. But if you stalk him to his studio to see where the creator of *Urban Rattle* lives, he surprises with a sense of 'here and now' in not one but three places: Lewiston, Portland, and New York.

For his deepest and darkest beginnings, it's Lewiston, where he was born in 1946. Like Marsden Hartley, he channels the river for creative energy.

More recently, Hewitt's creative work gets done in Portland. The quintessential artist turbine, Hewitt sizzles in his 2,000-square-foot space studio space in the former Calderwood Bakery building on Pleasant Street.

ARTIST AT WORK



“When I am starting a new body of work,” as he did for the *Rattle* sculpture series, two of which are in Maine—one in Lewiston, the other, Portland—“I begin with doodles. I have hundreds of pages of doodles.” He holds up a wild page of them from this month alone.

“I believe in coming at ideas inadvertently, through the back door. This doodling isn’t high art, but I love this low way of thinking, scratching around, allowing things to pop up from my subconscious.



That’s where my best ideas lie.”

Hewitt once told a friend he considered his work a bit silly. But it’s silly like a fox, part “idiot,” part “sophisticate.”

In December, *Portland Rattle* rose in the middle of Portland’s Arts District, at 511 Congress Street. The sculptures are a cluster of hollow aluminum abstract shapes, each seven to nine feet high, set atop 20-foot

aluminum light poles. The shapes, “doodle-like” and painted in glorious color contrasted with black to “bring it all into balance,” are open to interpretation.

IT ALL BEGINS IN LEWISTON

Another sophisticate success came for Charlie in 2015 in a collaboration with director Gary Robinov, producing the moving

FROM LEFT: DIANE HUDSON; “CLAY PIPE #2” COURTESY JIM KEMPNER FINE ART

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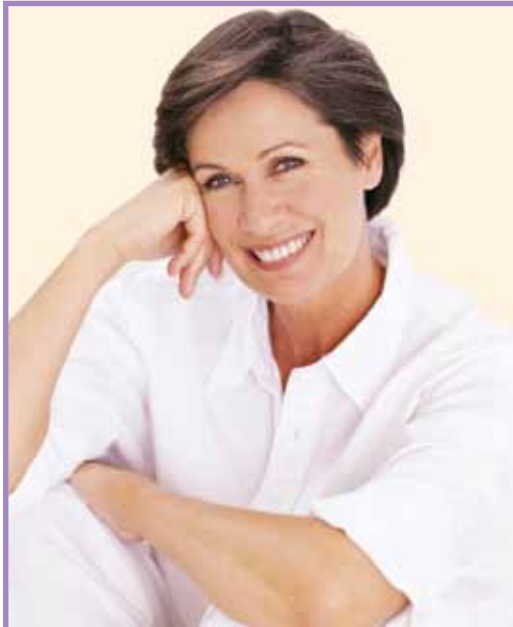
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film about Muhammed Ali, *Raising Ali: A Lewiston Story*. Neil Leifer's photo, capturing Ali urging Liston to "Get up and fight," was the inspiration for Hewitt, and the photo hangs in his studio today. Hewitt told *The New York Times*, "It's a sentimental portrait of a struggling old factory town that was visited by greatness. And what Ali told Liston as he was standing over him resonates today. Lewiston is still trying to get up and fight."

Hewitt identifies strongly with his home town of Lewiston/Auburn, and was deeply disturbed by the string of fires that were set in Lewiston in recent years. "What are they doing, destroying this beautiful place?" he asked. He vowed to build sculptures on the burn sites. *Lewiston Rattle* was completed and installed in August 2015 on lower Lisbon Street. An evolution of his previous *Urban Rattle*, which stands along the High Line in Lower Manhattan, the Lewiston piece is "simple, clever, and successful." He'd like to see all the lots the city can't sell or use transformed through public art pieces.

Lewiston's *Rattle* has some specific, iden-



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ARTIST AT WORK

tifiable references such as the Iron Cross, alluding to Marsden Hartley’s iconography; a nod to Franco-American heritage with a fleur-de-lis; and to the Somali population, using the country’s shape and colors of blue and white.

Hewitt says of the *Rattle* shapes, “There are nods to nature with tree allusions, the sun, or some kind of high spirited form. There are no words. These are visual movements, a narrative constantly changing. As soon as I describe them, they are no longer interesting.”

CREATIVE COLLABORATION

A walk through his Portland studio shows lots of projects underway, in several media. Tables are covered with large bowls sculpted from clay. Collaborating with Sam Thomason, who molds the forms for the bowls and does the firing, Hewitt does the carving and makes engravings on the clay, cutting out inserts that will adhere to the center of the bowl. He then paints inside the lines, has them fired, paints again. “They become painting instruments—I am really a painter at heart.”

“There is a demand for these—my gallery in New York (Jim Kempner Fine Art in the Chelsea gallery district) is sold out, and another gallery in Connecticut is planning a show of them. They are misunderstood and fall into the ‘craft’ field, so they don’t sell for as much as prints or paintings. But that allows for more playfulness and less angst among the buyers who can just say, ‘I love it’ and buy it without considering all the aspects that go into making an art investment.”

Then there are the large, wonderfully colorful, multi-layered prints in progress. For these, he works with David Wolfe, a master printer specializing in relief and intaglio printing, whose studio and enviable collection of printing equipment is adjacent to Hewitt’s at the Bakery.

“Collaboration is everything to me,” Hewitt says, mentioning several artists he works with (Bob Menard and his son Dan at Ball & Chain Forge for sculpture; Sam Thomason for ceramics; Gary Robinov, film; David Twiss, print and woodworking). “Maine is special for me that way. It has changed my world.” He likens his eight years at the Bakery studios to the Brill building in New York during the musical heyday of the 1950s and early 1960s, or the old days in Soho where the artists’ studios were all stacked up. “If you needed paint or a beer,



there was always somebody to go see.”

THE MARSDEN HARTLEY SPARK

This leads to talk of his next project, illustrating *Androscoggin*, a book of Marsden Hartley poems, in collaboration with David Wolfe. “This would never happen if Wolfe and I were in New York. He’d be somewhere in East Red Hook—we might get together a time or two, then it gets to be a hassle, so why not just use Kinko’s?”

We walk into Wolfe’s intriguing space and find the Hartley work that so excites them. *Androscoggin* was published in 1940, three years prior to Hartley’s death.

“I discovered this book by accident when I was 22,” says Hewitt. While visiting a friend on Cape Cod he spotted it on a shelf and said, “Hey, I grew up on that river!” Opening it, he discovered the book was by Marsden Hartley and was astonished to learn that this artist, whom he greatly admired, was born in Lewiston. “They never told us that when we were kids!”

He adds, “The book became something of a reference to me, like the river to Hartley, a reference to youth and the dark and oceans. It’s part of my Lewiston heritage.”

The three of us return to Charlie’s studio, as Wolfe also wants to see Hewitt’s drawings in progress for the project. Thumbing through a pad full of doodles dedicated to the book, Hewitt reads from the poem “Lewiston is a Pleasant Place.” He begins: “*The harsh grinding of the mills rang in my ears for years...*”

Just that “is enough for me to see smoke stacks and wheel things being churned out,” he says, “and then we come to the ‘log drives

and jams above the falls...settling into jack-straw patterns’...”

“Aha! I’ve got this great image here. I like this one. Just piles of logs. A stack, a crazy stack of logs.”

THE RIVER OF TIME

Hewitt first arrived in New York in the mid-1960s, settling in Soho to work as an artist. He studied at the New York Studio School but thinks of his education and inspiration as being a lot like his mentor, Herman Melville. Hewitt owns more than 250 copies of *Moby-Dick* in many languages.

“When I read this book at 23, I thought it was written by an old man. Now that I’m an old man, I realize it was written by a boy. That’s a phenomenon I like to bridge back and forth. For Melville, the book came pouring out of his subconscious. Nobody taught this young man how to write; he learned how to live, and the writing came after. I appreciate that his education was in work, not in the university. Similarly, I’ve done a lot of living and am very secure in that, so my work is secure because of that struggle.”


Hewitt’s creations can be found in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Whitney Museum, Brooklyn Museum, Fogg Art Museum, and in Maine at the Portland Museum of Art, Farnsworth Art Museum, and the museums at Bowdoin and Colby colleges.


Hewitt’s next *Rattle* is slated for Dallas. Beyond that, Charlie hopes for one in Eastport. “What fun to see the sun rising over it and the Canadians looking down, saying, ‘What the heck are they doing over there?’” ■

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