





HEN THE IRISH POET W.B. Yeats ended his famous "Among School Children" with the question "How can we know the dancer from the dance?," he raised a central paradox in the nature of art: on the one hand, a work springs from an artist's experience, mind, and soul; on the other, it spawns associations and ideas often very different from, if not foreign to, those that went into its creation.

Berkeley, California-based sculptor Joseph Slusky doesn't find this paradox puzzling. Rather, he honors and celebrates it in his life and work.

"I believe that what constitutes a vital work of art is when one probes deeply into oneself and explores the unknown, and that way one will link up and say something," says Slusky from his Berkeley studio. "The aspect of discovering a structure that's inside and bringing a piece forth with its multiple—not single meanings—is the reason I do art."

Indeed, any one of Slusky's hand-painted, welded steel sculptures encoded in colorful, acrylic lacquer embodies this artist's intelligence, charisma, and indefatigable energy, and like an apostle of the imagination, offers art's palliative and healing powers to its viewers.

"Making art for me is about the magic of being alive today," Slusky, 63, continues. 
"Whatever went wrong yesterday, we have the now in which to dance." His blend of geometric abstraction and organic thrusting shapes all but leaps off the ground in joyful pirouettes.

"He's the consummate artist in terms of dedication," says novelist Anne Rice, who adds that, like her late husband, poet and painter Stan Rice, she "respects him mightily." Several of Slusky's smaller sculptures adorn Rice's new home in the California desert.



FROM EVERY ANGLE Slusky amidst the twisting metal of Ashby Odyssey (1969-1974), which currently resides in a downtown Oakland office building.

SLUSKY GREW UP in Los Angeles, the only child of a working, widowed mom. He became mesmerized by the colorful lead-painted British toy soldiers sold at Los Angeles's Farmers' Market, and loved the car shows at the Pan Pacific Auditorium. These, as well as his experiences at the beach, swirled together in his forming consciousness and expressed themselves in drawings that even at a young age blended a precocious technical proficiency with wildly inventive playful forms.

By the time he headed off to University of California at Berkeley in 1960, his interest in architectural form, structure, and space led Slusky to an architectural major. An architectonic manipulation of space has remained a defining characteristic of his work throughout nearly five decades of making sculpture.

"I'm using the basic vocabulary of architecture in my sculptures before the elements take on a utilitarian or functional form," Slusky explains. "In sculpture, a solid shape or the subdivision of forms is at the service of the imagination.

"But I also believe in the metaphorical possibilities of these pieces, so that they have other meanings beyond a vertical and horizontal plane in relationship. What has continued to intrigue me is that as a creature of flesh and fluid and bone I can transfer ideas and ephemeral information to the harder more permanent substance of these steel sculptures."

Slusky stayed in Berkeley, where for the past 25 years he has taught drawing and threedimensional studies classes as a senior lecturer in the architecture department at UC-Berkeley.

Architect Charles Kahn of Berkeley-based Kahn Design Associates, says that Slusky's sculptures "reach out into space and energize it the way good architecture should. They just don't sit on a pedestal in a museum and say, 'I'm better than you.'"

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, Slusky produced large, contorted yet organically flowing metal works in which tension erupted from a surrealistic intertwining of cylindrical pipes, bulbous forms, spheres, planks, and mesh grids. Some viewers and critics saw in such works as Kaisersong somber allusions to missiles, tanks, and jet bombers. In their ironic, Pop-sixties stance, these works spoke out strongly against America's involvement in Southeast Asia.

By the mid-seventies, Slusky's pieces had become, for the most part, smaller and more geometric and constructivist in appearance. Rather than monochromatically spray painting them, he began to meticulously handpaint the surfaces of his metal with seas of hieroglyph-like circles, squares, triangles, half moons, and spirals and other archetypal shapes suggestive of a ritualistic yet highly personalized language.

"These marks are like DNA that carry my aesthetic code across the border of subjective and objective experience," Slusky says.

A prolific drawer, Slusky says that for him, "drawing and sculpture form an interrelated dialog where pen and ink, colored pencils, and mixed media on paper become more immediate means to explore possibilities and combi**"MAKING ART** FOR ME IS **ABOUT THE** MAGIC OF BEING ALIVE TODAY," SAYS SLUSKY. "WHATEVER WENT WRONG YESTERDAY, WE HAVE THE NOW IN WHICH TO DANCE."



THESE HANDS Above: the sculptor's primary tools. Opposite: Calliope, Slusky's installation at the Berkeley Marina was refurbished in 2004.

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nations of forms not so quickly attainable by assembling sculpture out of the steel media."

In a catalog essay for Slusky's retrospective at the Oakland Museum of California's Sculpture Court, George Lloyd, a Maine-based painter who has followed Slusky for 36 years, writes that, "Slusky's sculptures, like those of Picasso and David Smith before him, are chock-full of holes. In the modernist idiom, the more substantial and massive forms of classical tradition were superseded and replaced by a new sort of spatial continuum, made up of skeletal forms and lyric gestures."

Slusky continues to show his work widely in California, nationally, and abroad. He also periodically exhibits with his wife, artist Katie Hawkinson, whose colorfully composed paintings in oil and egg tempura nicely complement his own multihued sculptures. They've given their collaborative shows names such as Dialogues, Osmosis, and Tangents, to signal their creative partnership and "celebrate," as Hawkinson puts it, "the fact that we share an optimistic outlook on life and that we give each other hope."

Painter Carl Worth, curator and director at the city-run Berkeley Art Center and the Walnut Creek Civic Arts Gallery, has exhibited Slusky's work on a number of occasions over the years. He echoes the admiration and affection the Bay Area artistic community has for Slusky and his work.

"Joe's energy and clear aesthetic vision have brought forth a remarkable range of whimsically dynamic works," Worth says. However, Worth agrees that Slusky's art isn't funny in a facile way. Rather, it borders on a Dionysian darkness where humor and anxiety, the friendly and ferocious are inextricably drawn to one another.

Although Slusky continues to draw and build small-scale sculptures, he has also devoted some of his focus to larger pieces for public spaces. In 1982, the city of Berkeley originally commissioned *Calliope*, which reaches more than 11 feet high and 21 feet long, for its Marina Plaza. Slusky restored the work's surface in 2004 by replacing its symphony of small decal-like markings with large simplified areas of individual color.

OTHER LARGE-SCALE WORKS installed in public places include *Calypso* at the San Francisco Water Department's Crystal Springs treatment facility, and the brilliantly colored *Helios, Chariot of the Sun*, commissioned in 2002 by the Bayer Corporation for the plaza at its West Berkeley facility.

How would Joseph Slusky like people to approach or view his work?

"Kids get it right away," he says, "and respond to the work with the nonjudgmental reverie of play. That's the state that I try to get into myself as well while creating all of my sculptures and drawings." And everyone is invited to the dance.

For more details, see Where to Get It, page 63.

