



## A Matter of Form

### The life and art of Larry Elsner

by Ann Poore, for 15 Bytes (Artists of Utah)

“As a sculptor, my concern is for form,” Larry Elsner wrote in 1977, “a maddening search for the unity of space and mass.” An Idaho native and longtime Utah State University professor, Elsner would always choose form over function, regardless of the medium in which he was working: bronze, clay, metal, stone, plaster, or wood.

Elsner died suddenly 34 years ago, on March 27, 1990, at the age of 59. At the time of his death, more than 700 pieces were collected from the Southwest to the Orient to be sorted and selected for a major 1992 retrospective at the Nora Eccles Harrison Museum in Logan. Since then, little of his work has been seen in public. But as part of Phillips Gallery’s 50th anniversary exhibition, his sometimes humorous Asian-influenced modernist ceramic sculptures will be paired with Denis Phillips’ abstract hard-edge paintings. “Who else could I pair Denis with?” says gallery director Meri DeCaria, about planning the exhibit. “They are both from the same era and sort of ‘try anything’/experimental types.” Elsner’s works, she says, are “at once serious and playful but mostly they are achingly desirable.”

Born in Gooding, Idaho, Elsner grew up on a ranch in the southern part of the state. When he went to the University of Idaho on an athletic scholarship in 1948, he promptly registered for art classes. His studies were interrupted, though, by work and then service in the United States Navy (1953 to 1955), and he eventually transferred to Utah State University.

It was at USU in 1957 that Elsner met Yoko Yamakawa, a microbiologist from Tokyo who came to Logan to further her studies. It was not a whirlwind courtship. “I was not interested in marrying; I guess he was the same way,” she recalls. After receiving his B.S. at USU, the artist was awarded a scholarship to Columbia University under figurative sculptor Oronzio Maldarelli and earned his master’s there in 1958. The couple wed a year later.

While at Columbia Elsner researched Chinese art for a paper, which was the beginning, his wife says, of his study of Oriental culture, its religion and art. The couple went to Japan for a visit in 1969 and stayed for three months. Yoko had not been home for 13 years and it was the first time her family had met her husband or their daughter, then 7.

They took some of Elsner’s tea bowls to a friend for a gift. At that time Elsner was making ceramic wheel-thrown pieces. One of their acquaintances thought they were so good they introduced him to a gallery in Tokyo. Elsner eventually would have four one-man invitational exhibits in Japan to critical approval. “What they liked about Larry’s work,” says Yoko, “was he left his pieces unglazed, showing the clay. His main concern was with form.”

Elsner began showing at Phillips Gallery in 1974. Bonnie Phillips says Elsner’s work has

'integrity.' "It has an organic sense to it — every piece has a real sense of organic shape. And Larry's work has a sense of formality."

Renee Fitzpatrick, who was gallery director at Phillips in the '80s and '90s, says Elsner had "a phenomenal aesthetic that ran the gamut between being an Idaho farm boy and loving twigs and sticks and teaching in Japan."

His majestic, ceramic horses have always been prized by collectors. They have personality, style and undeniable charm. With an Asian influence, particularly in their minimal color, they continue to hold their interest. Another animal he loved to sketch was the cat, and "Frolic," a stately feline, is included in the Phillips show. His intriguing modernist pots are consistently studies in form over function and a delight to behold as their shapes mimic intricately decorated Aladdin's lamps; simple hand-built rounded vessels where the clay's beauty shines through; tall, elegant pieces with quite simple but fascinating decoration. His wooden works, shaped from found branches and limbs, are often primal images, almost early African in nature; others are good for a smile.

The Japanese aesthetic, Fitzpatrick emphasizes, is very evident in all his work. "These pieces," she says, pointing to photographs, "were from limbs and roots and tree branches that he found in and around Logan: walnut, ash, cottonwood, box elder — and are very Asian in the way they show the chinks in the wood, that very fluid form is very Kanjiesque. But as a ceramic artist, you know, he was crazy good. They were hand built; they weren't thrown. So hand-building is something that in the ceramic world is an exceptional talent. He used minimal color in his ceramic pieces which is also very Asian and gave emphasis to the form."

Fitzpatrick was also impressed with the range of his materials. He had studied metalsmithing under Richard Thomas at Michigan's famed Cranbrook Academy; and at the Archie Bray Foundation he studied pottery under Ken Ferguson, and sculpture under Betty Feves and Richard Hunt. "He worked in pen, pencil, clay, bronze, metal," Fitzpatrick recalls. "I always had great appreciation for him like I do Denis [Phillips] because they just don't have any way to hold themselves to any kind of barrier as far as making art."

Elsner spent his life creating sculpture and teaching — he was at Utah State University for 30 years. When his teaching day ended, he often worked in his studio/office on campus. Evenings and weekends he created in his home studio, housed in a separate building. At home he worked with wood or metal; at the university he worked in clay.

He was an incessant sketcher, continually refining his ideas on form (his "drawing diaries" can be viewed digitally at the Utah State library site). Fitzpatrick remembers visiting his home after meeting his daughter, Tami, at USU. "There was a bust of the head of Yoko that was just mind-boggling," she says. "There were clerestory walls — it was a very contemporary house. He watched lots of sports and sketched the whole time," she says, presenting a photograph of a sculpture of a coach by Elsner that was the result of one of those sketches. To honor his lifelong obsession, his family buried him with a pen and sketchpad.

Elsner's sense of humor, which came out more in his work than at parties, his wife says, was

an important aspect of his art. When Fitzpatrick began working at Phillips in 1986, one of the first shows was Elsner's. "Having seen his studio in Logan and their house there, it brought a completely different perspective to what that exhibition could be." It was called "Friends," and each piece had the original Elsner sketches, different views if they existed, hanging beside it. The figures were very popular, Fitzpatrick says, "and it was a nice exhibition for me because it brought humor into what can be kind of a stuffy setting. . . Elsner was incredibly funny; and these were figures that really brought that out. . . ."

Bonnie Phillips recalls visiting Elsner's Logan studio a couple of times and having dinner at the Elsners' home with her husband and gallery partner Denis. "I just felt a confidence in Larry's understanding of art, in what he created, and the gentle way in which he transmitted information about it, whether it was a conceptual principled idea he was looking for in the shape of a horse or an abstract shape and how he did it. So, he was well-spoken about the way he intended to create a piece, with the substance of the idea behind it and how he went about doing that. And I thought, 'he's just a good teacher in person and through his work.'

"So, he was a good teacher and working with him was always a positive experience. We have only a few difficult artists, but Don Olsen, Larry Elsner and a few people stand out as the most responsible and courteous kind of artist. Not expecting too much and wanting to help. Larry was always willing to come down, heft around a few pieces and set up the exhibits," says Phillips.

"He was very smart and incredibly quiet but would have a little smile that would come over his face that was really charming," Fitzpatrick recalls. "He lived a very simple, very nice life and produced a *lot*. That's another thing I admire and there was a time when I didn't understand that. But it almost becomes an obsession, a worthy obsession, not unlike Denis," she observes.

Since Elsner's death, Phillips Gallery has been able to sell a few pieces, mostly those the Phillipses owned and a few the Elsner estate released. But the majority of this incredible and extensive collection has been warehoused until now and will be seen for the first time in a quarter century on March 20th.

Yoko Elsner naturally had difficulty coping with her husband's loss and the numerous demands involved in bringing his work to the public: determining which pieces to keep for the family, cataloging (she spent 20 years at this), consulting (particularly with Elsner's friend Peter Briggs, art historian and Helen DeVitt Jones Curator of Art at the Museum of Texas Tech University, Lubbock) — so much to do, so many decisions to make that are extremely difficult when you have worked full time well into your 70s and reached the age of 86. But with the considerable help of her daughter, Tami Leppert, this show has come about and Elsner's work "finally . . . can be enjoyed as it was intended," DeCaria says. "Larry's there," observes his daughter. "It's a powerful show. It stands the test of time. Hopefully we will pull in a whole new generation of people who will follow Larry's work."