



UTAH'S ART MAGAZINE

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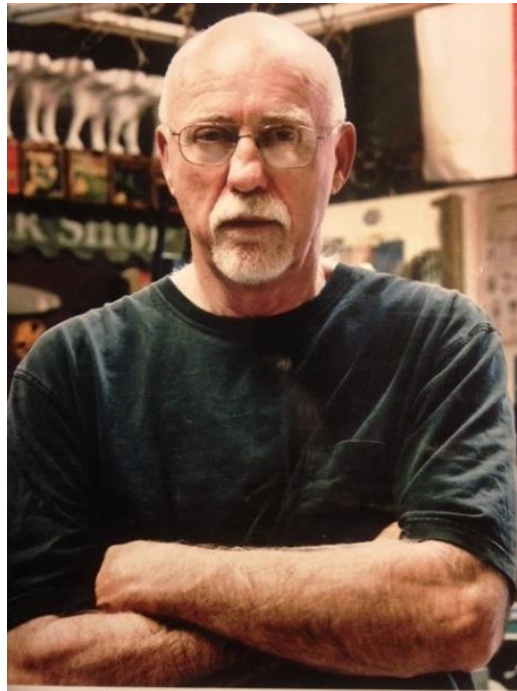
January 2018

Richard Johnston: The Maestro

By Frank McEntire

“Whimsical and humorous or elegant and monumental, Richard Johnston’s sculptures are always refined. Seemingly unyielding metals are finessed to draw out their cool, flexible, even fluid character. With considerable attention to detail, the artist delights in inventive points of articulation: notches cut in the metal, circular perforations or other shaped openings, extensions dipped in color, exposed rows of screws or other fastening devises. These details create visual transitions that carry our eye around and throughout a sculpture, or are enticing diversions that direct our attention toward some point in the surrounding environment.”

~ E. Jane Connell, Director of Collections and Exhibitions,
Muskegon Museum of Art, Grand Rapids, Michigan

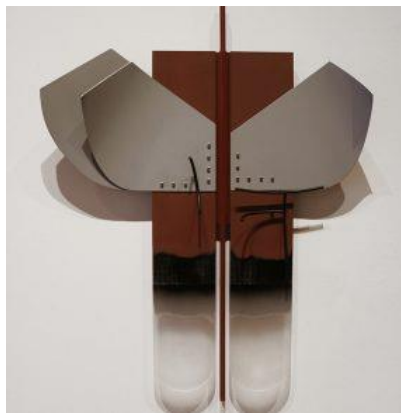


Richard Johnston

EVEN THOUGH HE MIGHT BE LOOKING DIRECTLY AT YOU, THE POWERFUL, 6' 2" goateed Richard Johnston wouldn't be giving you his full attention — that is if you were just having a conversation. His thoughts would be burrowing into details of his myriad plans and projects and all the technical configurations required to complete them. On the other hand, if you were up to your elbows in a project with him, whether in art, construction, or machine-driven, he was completely engaged, his strong voice issuing commands and suggestions in words you wouldn't forget.

"You can't produce precision work like Richard did without being compulsive and obsessive, you just can't," said his wife, Nadra Haffar, a fiber artist and museum education curator, describing Johnston's enormous capacity to simultaneously work on many challenging projects to satisfying completion. His former student at California State University, San Bernardino (CSUSB), Parker Dunbar, confirmed her assessment: "An artist doesn't develop an overarching body of major works unless he is as passionate and skilled and obsessed about it as was Richard."

Those skilled hands and that strong voice heard by so many for seventy-five years stopped on December 12, 2017, from the effects of Lewy Body Dementia and Parkinson's Disease.



Examples of wall and floor sculptures.

Besides leaving an impressive legacy of sculpture, jewelry, and pottery (see <http://www.johnstonsculpturestudio.com/>), Johnston left former students and colleagues whose lives he enriched by his ability to elicit the best in them as artists and young adults. Phil Marquez, now Chair of the Santa Anna College art department, said Johnston took him "under his wing" shortly after exhibiting together, and remained his mentor for the past 13 years. "I truly would not be where I am today if it were not for Richard. Even though our work is different, he working in metal welding and grinding and me in photography, we spoke the same art-making language."

Johnston's aptitude as an educator and his penchant for detail, strong design sensibility, and mastery over materials, especially metals, didn't come from his home life. His brother Dale said he was "inquisitive and adventurous" and "always building something," but "there were no

artistic influences on Richard at home.” Even in her 80s, his mother, Grace, would counsel him to “get a real job” and abandon notions of being an artist. His inclinations towards visual art and architecture came from within. “He found the spark in himself,” said Nadra.

According to Dale, it wasn’t until the family moved to California in 1957 that “Richard got interested in art” (and surfing). Right out of high school, Johnston studied ceramics with master potter Marguerite Wildenhain at her Pond Farm workshops in Guerneville, Calif. On his first day, she told him to dig a hole as wide, long, and deep as the shovel she gave him — a way to tell if this young student was committed and to judge his work ethic. Johnston learned her throwing techniques and remained proficient in ceramics throughout his career.

By the time Johnston graduated from El Camino College (general studies, 1962) and from California State University, Long Beach (studio art, 1966), he’d absorbed the influence of the Los Angeles art and design scene. He especially looked to John McCracken and others who were obsessed with what became known as “Finish Fetish,” and the “LA Look” — producing handcrafted works using materials, colors, and techniques adapted from industry. It was the electricity Johnston felt being around the developing LA art scene and the precision, craftsmanship, and attention to detail in the work being produced that affirmed his decision to stay on course in his development as an artist, designer, and worker in small metals.

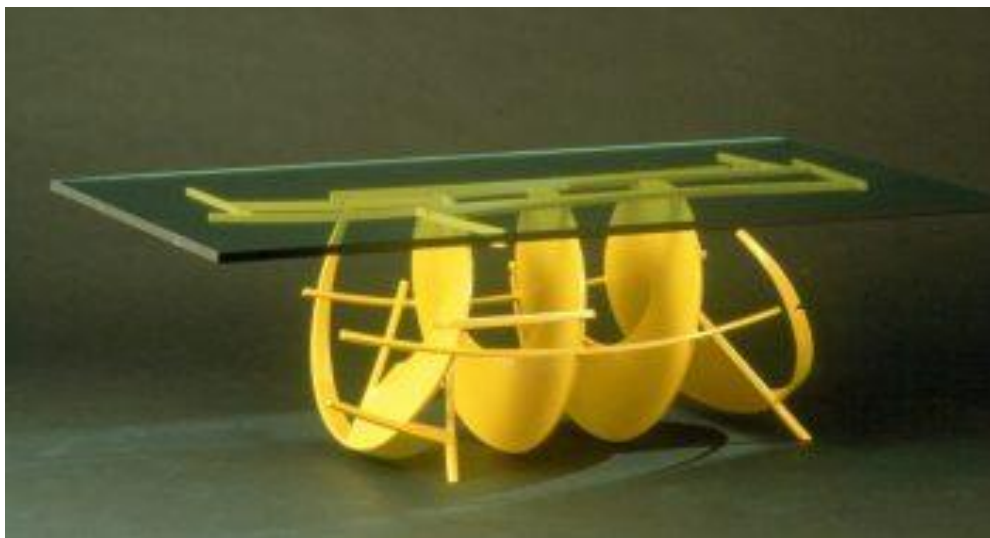
After a short, intense stint as a mold maker for the iconic designers Charles and Ray Eames, he and wife Lindsey left California for Cranbrook Academy of Art in Michigan. He studied small metals, graduating in 1968. By then, the 26-year-old Johnston had established his lifelong working methods as an artisan craftsman. His personal life, however, was not as well-established: the marriage didn’t last.



Johnston on floor grinding.

WITH HIS MFA IN HAND FROM ONE OF THE FINEST ART AND DESIGN schools in the country, Johnston was ready to move into his next phase as a professional educator and artist. He applied for faculty positions at several universities. V. Douglas Snow, a well-known modernist painter with national notoriety, was the University of Utah's art department chair and was interested in Johnston's background in metalwork — the department was expanding beyond its two other professors in 3-dimensional arts, Angelo Caravaglia in traditional sculpture and Dorothy Bearnson in ceramics. Although Johnston had another attractive offer in California, the scale of the Wasatch Mountains — discovered on a ride to Snowbird in a Porsche convertible — along with the prospect of relocating to a new city and meeting new people, tipped the scale to Utah.

Tony Smith, also on the faculty at the time, said Johnston was “a force,” a singular description attributed by many who shared thoughts about him. “He was a big, tall, handsome man who made fine, detailed, and intricate sculpture and jewelry. He was funny, smart, and very savvy about tools and mechanics.” What Smith admired most about Johnston was his prowess as a sculptor and his knowledge about materials. “His ideas were never short-circuited by his ability to use tools, technology, or metals. Richard was always able to figure out how to do stuff. He was a trusted friend, a man of action, always positive and full of jokes. I'd say he was a more playful, less philosophical David Smith.”



An example of Johnston's furniture.

Intertwined with this image of Johnston's imposing physical presence and hard-metal aesthetic was a considerate personality — the quality that endeared him to his three children and instilled devotion from students, teachers, community leaders, and others who met or worked with him.



General Engineering Building (detail), Salt Lake City.

Stephen Goldsmith, Johnston's collaborator on the General Engineering Building redesign and upgrade project for Phillips Gallery's space on Salt Lake City's Pierpont Avenue, best described Johnston's more amiable character. He portrayed him as "the thoughtful, compassionate, empathetic friend." He was "in some way opposite than the hard and wrenching material" he worked with daily. Goldsmith fittingly assessed that "steel was Richard's shadow side."

"Here's a guy who could rule a piece of steel, get out the welder and grinder and find a way to make solid form convey some idea with poetic gesture. He was a sweetheart, that guy. That's the thing, people look at his work and not see the sensitive man behind the hard metal. The essence of that man was in such sharp contrast of the harshness of the materials he used to make his sculpture. People look at his work and not see the sensitive guy behind it."

It's that "guy," the person behind the sculpture that people admired, especially his students and those who collaborated with him on public art projects.



Interior of The Station, Salt Lake City.

One of these first collaborative projects was The Station, an old railroad property in North Salt Lake. It provided housing for Johnston's family and included a swimming pool, studio, warehouse, and other buildings for residencies and studios. "It was an artists' enclave," explained Smith, who lived there for a while. "Richard was handy, quick. Never seen construction work done as good and as fast." Johnston began working on the project with his brother, Dale. "He was clearly the master mind," Dale said. "He had all the ideas and the skills to make the ideas happen — and the ability to teach others how to develop their building skills." He employed many of his students on the project. Nick Gosdis' two brothers, Steve and Ted (now deceased) were Johnston's students and all three worked on The Station. "Richard was an entrepreneur," said Gosdis. "He lived for sculpture and knew how to bring ideas, material, and people together to create great works of art."

Although Johnston spent over two decades living and working in Utah (1968-1990), remarrying soon after his arrival, life wasn't always smooth. At the university, his students respected him, but he didn't get along with Caravaglia, his senior in the department. His leaves of absences to do short-term teaching at other universities or to serve as the director of the Salt Lake Art Center (now Utah Museum of Contemporary Art) for three years (1983-1986) didn't endear him to his colleagues who had to fill in or find adjunct substitutes. By 1990, his university position and second marriage were ending.

JOHNSTON SOLD THE STATION AND LEFT UTAH TO TAKE A POSITION AS founding director of the Robert V. Fullerton Art Museum at CSUSB, a position he held for six years while maintaining a professorship in the art department for 24 years, including a term as department chair. He retired in 2014 and moved back to Utah, settling in rural Hyrum with Nadra, his companion of twelve years. "Every available inch," she said, "including the house and

a barn for a studio is filled with his personal treasures and papers, sculpture-making tools, and supplies — and that’s after divesting more than *eight tons* of his cultch pile of metals and other materials before moving here.”

“Richard was one of the best artists to work with,” said artist and gallerist Bonnie Phillips. “He knew how to collaborate with others and did it in such a joyful and respectful way. There was not a bone of arrogance in him about being an artist.” At CSUSB, Johnston collaborated with faculty colleague, Katherine Gray, on “Chancellor’s Park,” a public art piece for the city. “Richard was an inspiring individual all around,” she said, “a great leader and true collaborator. He was extremely knowledgeable, kind, and a generous teacher.”



Ogden court building and Johnston working on it in his California studio.

Darl Thomas first worked with Johnston as a student and later as a colleague and collaborator on public art projects. “He taught me how to weld, tap and drill, use metal working tools. When I saw how well he designed and how effortlessly he worked with metal, I wanted to be that expert in my own work,” he said. When they landed a contract for a big piece for the Second District Court Building in Ogden, Johnston was in California and Thomas was in Utah. They faxed drawings and ideas back and forth until their design for the outdoor chamber was finalized. “I machined many of the parts in my studio,” described Thomas, “and took them to San Bernardino to his studio and we assembled them. It worked out well.”

When complete, they loaded the pieces into a box truck and installed the work on-site in Ogden. Their labor was slowed down several times by police checking to make sure the box truck wasn’t loaded with explosives (this was 1996, just a year after the 1995 terrorist bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City). “The gift to me from Richard was how to approach work and respect the medium,” Thomas said. “When I went to Cranbrook, Richard hired me to work at The Station during the summer to help pay for it. He would work you to the bone and not break a sweat.”



“Untitled (Horse Form)” in its original state, 1991,
State of Utah Public Art Collection.

IN DISCUSSING JOHNSTON’S ARTISTIC ACCOMPLISHMENTS, IT WOULD BE negligent not to mention one of the greatest acts of taste censorship in Utah’s art history — Johnston’s 1991 “Untitled (Horse Form)” and Utah Valley State College (now Utah Valley University). According to Jim Glenn, Collections Manager for Public and Design Arts at the Utah Division of Arts and Museums (Utah Arts Council), “this work was destroyed in 1996.” UVSC Vice-president Gilbert Cook took it upon himself to direct the blowtorch dismantling of the sculpture he didn’t like during Thanksgiving break. Cook was so proud of his accomplishment and subsequent publicity that the business card he handed out as he lobbied state legislators to eliminate the 1% Public Arts Program read, “Gilbert ‘Blowtorch’ Cook.”

“It took a number of years after the piece was destroyed to work out a solution to restore and place it back on campus,” said Glenn, who got to learn about the piece “and the spirit in which it was created” while working with Johnston. “He had such an integrity and purity about his work.” Even though the situation was contentious, Glenn said it “didn’t prevent Richard from graciously working with all involved to get the piece restored and back on campus, although in a different location. He had so much administrative background that he knew how to work with diverse people and agendas and was sympathetic to the state’s position.” The pieces fragments were driven to Johnston’s studio in California where he worked to replace unsalvageable pieces and refurbish other parts. “The original piece was joyful and colorful and playful,” lamented Glenn

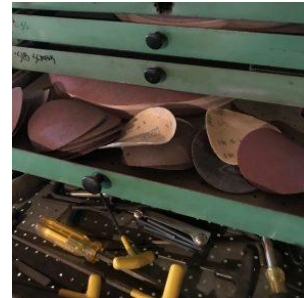
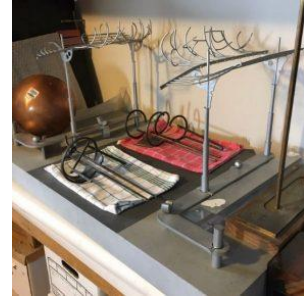
as he recalled the original sculpture. “Richard told me he really felt like the whole experience had taken the joy out of it, with it being destroyed and laying in pieces for so long during negotiations.” When it was reinstalled by Johnston in 2001, he’d painted it a somber black (see <http://www.artistsofutah.org/15bytes/10sep/page1.html>).

UTAH’S PUBLIC ART COMMISSIONS ARE AWARDED AT THE END OF AN arduous review of competitors from across the country. Although Johnston lived half of his professional life in Utah and the other half in California (1990-2014), he didn’t seem to carry the mantle of an expat in either location. His presence was felt in both places through his friendships and through the legacy of his sculpture. His resume *lists* 59 publicly-installed pieces in collections around the country. 39, or 66 percent, of those works are in Utah. These figures are modest when accounting Johnston’s prodigious fifty-plus year output of sculpture and furniture found in private collections, not counting his metalsmith portfolio and pottery. Utah sculptor Frank Riggs (1922-2016, see <http://pikenewhall.tributes.com/obituary/show/Francis-P.-Riggs-103940197>), who shared with Johnston a similar aesthetic sensibility and a passion for working in metal, called him simply, “The Maestro.”



Snow covered sculpture at Haffar-Johnston home in Hyrum, Utah.

Celebration of Life open house for Richard Johnston (1942-2017) at Phillips Gallery, 444 East 200 South, Salt Lake City, January 6, 2018, 4-6 pm.



Haffar-Johnston home and studio in Hyrum, Utah



Frank McEntire is a sculptor, independent curator, and arts administrator and former executive director of the Utah Arts Council and art critic for The Salt Lake Tribune.

<http://artistsofutah.org/15Bytes/index.php/richard-johnston-the-maestro/>