

Larry Simons - Bio 8.5.2022

Looking in the rear view mirror I can see the seeds of my current life as an artist in memories of my early childhood before I recognized anything as art. Carving roads in the dirt for my toy trucks and shaping the mashed potatoes on my dinner plate with a fork were the beginnings of my developing sense of rhythm and balance that guides my hand now as an assembler of the found materials I use in my art. I remember once blanketing my bedroom with torn pieces of paper. I don't know what I was thinking then but now I would call it an installation. In elementary school I won a prize in a fire prevention poster contest and I can still picture my entry, a bold graphic not inconsistent with my current work.

During junior high, before I knew what I liked, besides girls, sports, cars and rock and roll, that is, I had no idea who I was or where I was going. I wasn't yet aware of my visual acuity or my habit of concentrating my gaze on things that fascinated me to study the details that distinguished them. My first inkling of what I might want to do with my life came when I happened upon a photo of the Frank Lloyd Wright-designed house called *Fallingwater*. I decided then and there that I wanted to be an architect. However I was an inconsistent student and a classic underachiever which made it unlikely that I would succeed in such a technically oriented field. Besides it was only the sculptural aspect of architecture that attracted me and not the endless hours of drafting required to flesh out every design. An English teacher in high school sent me off in a new direction with the notion that the main purpose of an education was to teach you how to think rather than to prepare you for a specific occupation. As a result of his sage advice I spent my college years reading literature and philosophy. My first real exposure to the art of the ages came in a mandatory art appreciation course I took as a college freshman, in an auditorium with hundreds of other students, most of whom weren't interested. My favorite discovery was Wassily Kandinsky, the father of abstract painting. I started experimenting with pastels, watercolors, acrylics and oils but I had no talent as an illustrator and representational rendering didn't ignite the same fire in me as abstracts which I began to produce prodigiously, sometimes on a grand scale.

An unexpected turn in the road came after my freshman year in college. I was on my way to Martha's Vineyard to look for a summer job as a waiter when I wandered into a hand-made sandal shop in Hyannis. The smell of leather and something about the atmosphere there inspired me to ask if they needed help and I was hired to make a garden out front. I knew no more about gardening than I did sandal-making but I jumped at the opportunity to get closer to the world I had just discovered. One thing led to another and a few days later I was working with leather which helped me to focus on the connection between what I saw with my eyes and what I could do with my hands, and the exciting opportunities that lay ahead.

Not only did I learn to make sandals, belts and bags which became my occupation and my main source of income for the next eight years but I started fashioning sculptures out of the leftover leather scraps. I didn't realize it at the time but that job liberated me from following a more conventional path and the frustration I might have felt from not knowing how to unleash my creative drive. I came away with a portable skill and a keen sense of my own aesthetics. Other than an occasional construction or bartending stint in my early twenties, I have never worked for anyone else again. I took a few leather-working tools with me on a ramble around Europe in 1972 and I was able to put them to use in Germany to make a little money and extend my trip.

One day during my sophomore year in college, standing at the top of the cellar stairs in an old house I was renting, I emptied a case of antique bottles, throwing them, one by one, at the concrete wall below, smashing them all to bits. It was, on the face of it, a purely destructive act but the satisfaction it gave me was very much akin to the exhilarating release of energy I feel when creating something and I've never forgotten it. I also staged a happening of sorts in that same basement by gathering all the stuff left there by previous tenants into

an visually organized arrangement and then inviting other students in to take what they wanted—a kind of free garage sale as art.

One thing that time has taught me is that you don't have to be making art to be developing as an artist. I spent the summer of 1966 in Provincetown running a small import shop for a friend who had rented a house on Commercial Street, set up her wares in the front room and then decided she didn't want to be there. I took over for her, temporarily suspending my newly learned craft of sandal and belt-making as well as my untrained endeavors in painting and sculpture. It was a wild time in America's oldest art colony. There was cutting edge work in the galleries and creativity in the air and lots of counter-culture distractions that this 20 year-old found hard to resist. By the time September rolled around and I was headed back to college, I had not made anything with my hands in months but I realized decades later that I had grown artistically anyway in an intangible way. Now when I visit P'town, over 50 years later, I am reminded how important that summer was to my progress as a person and an artist. The energy that was coursing through me then was uncontrollable and decades passed before I was able to put it in perspective.

After my junior year in college I drove out to Aspen, Colorado to attend a writer's workshop where I met a woman from northern California who invited me to visit her in Sausalito when the workshop was over. She took me to see the junk sculptures in the mud flats across the bay from San Francisco. There were dozens of them constructed out of the flotsam and jetsam that had washed ashore. Then we went to LA to see the Watts Towers and she introduced me to the work of Zoltan Kemeny, an artist she was related to who made sculptures out of nails and bits of industrial waste-metal. I was blown away. Art materials were everywhere, just waiting to be transformed by willing hands and the needful souls that direct them, into artful constructions. And that's what I started doing on beaches and in empty lots – anywhere that I found some scrap wood, rusty metal and whatever else was lying around, leaving my efforts to the whims of the elements. A few years ago I spotted an arrangement of sticks and stones someone started on a concrete slab in the alley next to our store and I added a few elements to it. The next time I looked it had grown and I added more. This went on for a while but I never found out who I was collaborating with. What fun.

One summer in Aspen, I was given the use of an old ramshackle single bay garage as a studio. It was full of accumulated detritus of the sort I favor in my current work and I set about assembling it to suit my sense of design. When I was finished a few days later, I walked away and never went back. It was my Merzbau (the environment Kurt Schwitters created in his parents' apartment in Germany which was, unfortunately, destroyed in WWII.)

After four fun filled years in Aspen I felt my New England roots pulling me back and I landed in Brattleboro where I continued to do custom leather work. On a drive from Vermont to Panama I developed an interest in the indigenous handcrafts I found along the way and I shipped samples back with hopes of selling them. After a few months in South America and Jamaica I returned home full of new ideas and out of money. Then I ran into an old friend who, like me, was a traveler with a bit of Gypsy in his soul and we decided to open an import store together. He had the capital and I had the energy so we rented a storefront on Main Street and I spent the next few months creating an environment in which to exhibit our growing collection. After getting the doors open we headed off to Mexico and Central America on a buying trip and from there I went around the world, west to east, in search of beauty. I sent back a wide variety of handmade jewelry, clothing, woodcarvings, baskets, weavings – even raw wool and gemstones.

We didn't know much about business when we started but we caught a wave. Our generation was developing an appetite for all things ethnic and the inventory we chose, which included a strong selection of American Indian jewelry, was right for the times. It was rough at first. We opened during a recession and the first oil crisis but we persevered despite these obstacles and the many mishaps that are endemic to importing. We had no

illusions that that we had embarked upon a get-rich-quick scheme but we did manage to create an aesthetically pleasing venture. I bought my partner out in the mid '80's and my wife replaced him as soon as our kids no longer needed her full time.

I remember saying that I could probably stay interested in that project for five years or so. Well I finally retired from it in 2011 after 38 years on the job. I recently returned to help with our closing sale after 46 years in business. Along the way I developed a deep love for hand-woven textiles and Oriental rugs which became the most important component of our business and the reason that I was able to stay involved for so long. The business of business also filled my head for all those years and in 2005 I felt a calling to get back to working more with my hands.

A few years earlier, I had a conversation with an older acquaintance who was teaching at a law school in Boston and he mentioned that some of his colleagues were turning 60, and facing the realization that they had not fulfilled their dreams and probably never would. I have always had an aversion to the prospect of looking back and feeling that I had wasted any part of my life or forward to a time when I could finally live where and do what I wanted. What happened to his friends was not going to happen to me. With our daughters out of college, moving happily along their life-paths and no longer financially dependent on us, it was time for a change. My wife took over the responsibilities of running our store and I resumed scavenging cast off junk that I could transform into art. My previously mentioned hiatus was the blink of an eye compared with the 32 years I had spent building a business during which I made no sandals, no paintings and no assemblages. But when I set up a studio in our basement and picked up where I left off, I felt a sense of uninterrupted continuity with what I was doing in the '60's.

At first I had no interest in selling my work but as my output grew I realized I couldn't keep everything so I began showing it and the response was better than I expected. In addition to the gratifying experience of selling them, the more finished pieces I hung, the more odds and ends people brought to me that they had accumulated over the years. It seems that they had hoped to do something with them but just never got around to it. Now I spend less time collecting because so much stuff finds its way to my door. However I do keep busy sorting and storing it in plain view where I work. Some of it gets passed on to a local art school and other assemblage artists.

I think of life as art. Everything we do from making dinner to packing for a trip to putting cheese on crackers can be done artistically. Just as having a sense of humor can mean being funny or enjoying others who are, being an artist can mean creating beauty or gathering and arranging beautiful objects created by others. Building and exhibiting a collection by selecting from the innumerable choices available is an art in itself. The thrill of the chase, traveling and buying, was the highlight of my career but most of my time was spent immersed in the rudiments of retailing such as bookkeeping, marketing and customer relations. Showcasing the treasures we collected served as an outlet for my creative energy and I feel that my art progressed as a result of my business related activities. For decades the store had served as my canvas, so to speak.

Larry Simons lives with his wife and his flocks on 42 acres near Brattleboro, Vermont.