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From Jock to Surfer to Sculptor: An Artist's Winding Career Path

By Rick Murphy



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RANDALL ROSENTHAL thought he had it made in 1974 when Salvador Dali and Andy Warhol showed up at the Artists Gallery in Manhattan to laud his first major art show. Little did he know it was to be the highlight of his career as a painter.

"I lived in Santa Barbara at the time, surfing by day and painting at night," he recalled. "I had never stopped painting since I was 6. The first show, I sold all 30 paintings. It shocked me. I was famous. I lived off that money for 10 years." Mr. Rosenthal returned to California and "kept surfing." He continued to make a living from what he calls his "hippie art," but the paydays were few and far between for someone unwilling to play the commercial game.

Then he made a fateful decision: to get a real job. With the art market thin, he decided to become a carpenter shortly after returning to Long Island. While hammering nails, he had inadvertently set out on a circuitous path that would eventually lead him back to the art world, this time as a sculptor.

Though resolute in his desire to become an artist from an early age, Mr. Rosenthal, now 51 and living in East Hampton, never envisioned his present tools, which include chain saws and blocks of solid wood often weighing hundreds of pounds. In 1965, as a senior at Lynbrook High School, he was voted most creative in class. "I was a real jock back then, into surfing, softball, motorcycles, but art was the thread," he said. "It was what everyone patted me on the back for."

He earned a degree in fine arts from Carnegie Institute of Technology. Yet, with the exception of his major show, Mr. Rosenthal made his living chiefly by drawing concert posters, album covers, newspaper ads and fliers, or decorating store windows. "I never stopped working; I was making a living wage," he said. "For 20 years I supported myself with art." He also traveled, to Hawaii, Austria, Colorado and Utah, where he became reacquainted with his future wife, Caren Sturmer, with whom he had attended grade school. When the couple returned to Long Island to marry in 1979, they fell in love with the East End.

"I bought the cheapest house in East Hampton," Mr. Rosenthal said proudly of a somewhat dilapidated 100-year-old toolshed in Springs. He honed his carpentry skills by adding a studio for his wife, building a master suite and converting an old barn into a studio for himself.

In 1986, he answered a classified ad placed by the architect Norman Jaffe, who was about to embark on what he would later describe as his crowning achievement, the Jewish Center of the Hamptons, Gates of the Grove, and was looking for craftsmen who shared his vision and could convert his ideas to reality.

"Norman liked my paintings, and he knew I understood carpentry," Mr. Rosenthal said. "He hired me, even though I was the only one out of 36 people he interviewed who wasn't an architect." Mr. Rosenthal carved the doors of the Ark, the portable cabinet in which the Torah is stored, from solid mahogany and crafted the lecterns and much of the furniture.

The Ark and the furniture were impressive enough to earn him two national awards (of four given) from the American Institute of Architects in 1998, a rare feat for a sculptor, let alone one who wasn't even an architect. The jury wrote: "We admire the conception as well as the craft and execution. . . . The wood surface yields a subtle sense of movement with a mysterious quality of transformation that hints of grander themes -- the cycle of seasons, of life and death."

After the project was complete "I thanked Norman for the chance, but I told him I didn't want to work in his office for the rest of my life," Mr. Rosenthal said. Before he knew it, however, he had been talked into working for the architect on another project, two 22-foot-long friezes depicting beach scenes carved out of pecan wood for a client's oceanfront house, the bursting waves continuing a theme Mr. Jaffe had envisioned for the estate. "I'd never done anything like it," he recalled, "but Norman said, 'Don't worry, you can do it.' " It was then, Mr. Rosenthal said, that he realized "I can design, but I can also physically do the work." Thus the motto for his business: Bonac Design, Imagination Fabrication.

Other awards and commissions followed, but none so lucrative as his recent work for Stephen A. Wynn, owner of the Mirage and other casinos in Las Vegas and Atlantic City, and his wife, Elaine. Typically, the route was a circuitous one.

"I was in Vegas on business, and I was staying in the Mirage, and the decor had a lot of carved stuff," he said. "I thought mine was better, so I asked around to find out who did it and called them."

Last year, two years after his visit, he received a phone call from Atlandia Design in Sun Valley, Idaho, owned by the Wynns and responsible for all Mr. Wynn's hotel projects, in addition to the couple's yet-to-be-built winter vacation house. Mr. Rosenthal sent some pictures of his work, and the next thing he knew he had been commissioned to carve the front door. "They really liked it, so they asked me to design some sculptures and build them into the millwork," he said. He did 64 in all, and more work followed, including the master staircase, for which he carved the newel posts from solid pecan and inserted sculptures that replaced the pickets.

"He does incredible work," said Lauren Taylor of Osborne TylerDesign in Sun Valley, which worked with Atlandia on the Wynn house. "After he did the doors, we kept saying to each other,

'Now, where else can we put his work?' We wanted an Alpine look, and those pine needles made him nuts, but he just rolled with it." Mr. Wynn was ecstatic with the work, she said.

"Does it make me feel good that someone who spent \$200 million on art thinks enough of my work to have it in his residence? Sure, it does," Mr. Rosenthal said. He would not reveal how much he was paid beyond saying "I earned more last year than I had in my entire life up until then." Two more major commissions are pending: a house in Vail and another synagogue.

Mr. Rosenthal's work is entirely reductive: nothing is ever added, just taken away. He starts with masses of hardwood and begins the creative process with blade routers, chain saws and angle grinders. The finer work is done with as many as 50 hand tools. "I work fast and furious," he said. His wife added: "It's noisy and messy. I put on headphones. He sheds layers of sawdust. He sweats sawdust."

Audrey Flack, a Manhattan-based sculptor who lives in East Hampton part time, said, "The great thing about Randy is that he's a real artist. He had a calling. He molds wood as if it were clay. He stands there with all that equipment and produces these marvelous pieces that haven't been done since the 19th century."

Of his works in progress, Mr. Rosenthal said, "I surf my way through, starting out with a general idea and refining it as I go along." The process -- tools grinding, sawdust flying -- sometimes shocks onlookers. "People who only see the finished work think it's like brain surgery," he said. Far from being consumed by his work, Mr. Rosenthal can still frequently be found surfing, playing ball or hobnobbing with friends at Wolfie's Tavern next door to his studio.

His work often reflects nature: intricate collections of leaves, thick yet delicately woven forests, breaking surf lighted by the moon. "I try to portray God's hand on earth," he said.