

LANGLAES



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Previous page, *untitled photograph* photographer unknown, circa 1977

Following page, *untitled photograph* photographer unknown, January 1978

LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT

The University of Maine at Presque Isle is proud to host *The Man Behind the Owls*, which celebrates the incredible talent and inspiring career of the late artist Bernard “Blackie” Langlais. No stranger to our University, this acclaimed Maine artist and sculptor was the creator of our 4-ton, 30-foot-tall outdoor wooden sculpture, *The Owls*, which was recently restored and relocated to the center of our campus. This sculpture was the very last one that Langlais produced before his unexpected death in December 1977 and, until very recently, was the only Langlais work in our entire art collection.

We are so very pleased to have received a gift from the Kohler Foundation in Wisconsin that allows us to serve as a champion of Langlais’ art. Through a recent acquisition from the Langlais Estate, UMPI was awarded the Langlais Study Collection, making our campus the research institution for Langlais’ work. We would like to express our gratitude to the Kohler Foundation for honoring our campus with a gift that holds so much significance for us and entrusting us to preserve this piece of Langlais’ artistic legacy.

This very special exhibit provides us with the opportunity to showcase, for the

very first time, our recent acquisitions. We are so excited to share our collection with our community and welcome visitors to campus to see the more than 800 works on paper—including the loose leaf sketch of what became our Owls sculpture— as well as sketchbooks, archives, and more than 30 wooden sculptures and wall pieces we have received.

Because we will be providing a permanent home for these hundreds of works, we are very pleased to announce that our campus will become a part of the official Langlais Art Trail. Currently in development, this art trail will provide art enthusiasts, Langlais fans,

and anyone else interested with a “road map” connecting the locations in Maine where they will be able to view the works Langlais created throughout his prolific artistic career.

Our University has been richly blessed by our connection to Blackie Langlais. It is worthy of note that, at the time it was commissioned, *The Owls* was Aroostook County’s only public sculpture. I think he would be pleased to know that, nearly four decades later, his art is again making a major impact on UMPI and The County.

Linda Schott

President of University of Maine at Presque Isle



LETTER FROM THE DIRECTOR

I was appointed to the Reed Gallery in January 2012. During that time, outgoing Director Sandra Huck and then President Don Zillman were in the midst of a “Save the Owls” campaign. The campaign was to restore the ravaged Bernard Langlais sculpture, then in delicate shape. It was dismantled, dried and carefully restored by a team of workers, including our very own campus carpenter, Al Levesque.

In my new role as Director, I knew for sure I would want to curate an exhibition that honored the man who made our Owls. Thinking I would assemble an exhibition by borrowing artwork through museum lending programs, I embarked on contacting a number of places down state until being referred to Susan Kelly of the Kohler Foundation, Inc. Through Susan, I was invited to the Langlais estate in Cushing, Maine, where I was invited to select a few items for the exhibition.

This was truly an experience.

I made two trips to Cushing the Summer of 2013. Although I was lost on a rural road trying to find the estate, I passed a modest building with a blooming rhododendron in the front yard, but that wasn't what first caught my

attention. The white horse by the driveway was a clear indicator I was in the right place. The lawn was peppered with football players, bears, a camel, and his version of Wyeth's “Christina,” among others. Furthermore, I laughed at his salty personality when I came across a huge middle finger that was pointed at the road.

Once inside, every building was covered top to bottom with artwork. The quirky estate was now inhabited by a team of conservators working feverishly to clean and restore the hundreds of works Langlais left behind after his death in 1977. Many of the pieces were housed in unheated out buildings and around the grounds of the few acres of land. Susan and her colleague, Dan Smith, led me through Langlais' workshop and up into a loft where they proudly showed me one of the models Langlais created for our Owls. They then proceeded to encourage me to select other items to “build my exhibition.”

For a relatively new Director, the experience was exhilarating. I was able to be set loose in the estate and write a dream list of items I wanted for the University. It is as close as I can imagine to winning a shopping spree and filling my cart! In the end,

I walked away with a selection of 30 or so wood sculptures and wall pieces. And here I thought I would be lucky to gain five items!

But as the day continued on, Dan and Susan let me at Langlais' personal archives. Files upon files of his drawings, studies, plans, and sketchbooks were open for me to peruse. As I leafed through a box of loose paper, to my surprise, I came across a loose-leaf paper that appeared to be our Owls. At that time, Dan and Susan mentioned they would be interested in an organization taking all the archives (including that sketch) and establishing a Learning Collection of Langlais' work.

I nearly jumped out of my skin. I was dead set on UMPI getting these archives; however, this would be a commitment for the campus. We would become a place where Langlais could be researched and visited by art lovers and scholars alike.

I could not have been more thrilled to have the support of President Linda Schott and then Chair of College of Arts & Sciences Ray Rice in this endeavor. In the end, the University acquired more than 800 pieces of artwork, thus cementing our campus as a research institution for the artist.

I owe an enormous amount of gratitude to Dan, Susan, and Executive Director Teri Yoho at the Kohler Foundation, Inc; Linda, Ray and my work/study student Rowena Forbes—all of whom have been invaluable in acquiring the work, receiving the huge tractor trailer shipment of work (and finding a place for it to go when it didn't fit through doors), and ensuring its future here on campus; Gregg Bouchard and the campus facilities staff, who have selflessly made it possible to move the artwork (no small feat!) and secure permanent placement of it around campus; and my colleague, Hyrum Benson, who lent his talent to create this beautiful publication.

Heather Sincavage
Director, Reed Fine Art Gallery &
University Collections
Curator of *Bernard Langlais:
The Man Behind the Owls.*



untitled photograph, photographer unknown, date circa 1977

p. 12 untitled, 4 owls, ca 1976, wood and paint on wood, 14x11.5x11.5 in, unsigned

p. 13 untitled owl drawing, graphite on paper, ca 1976-77

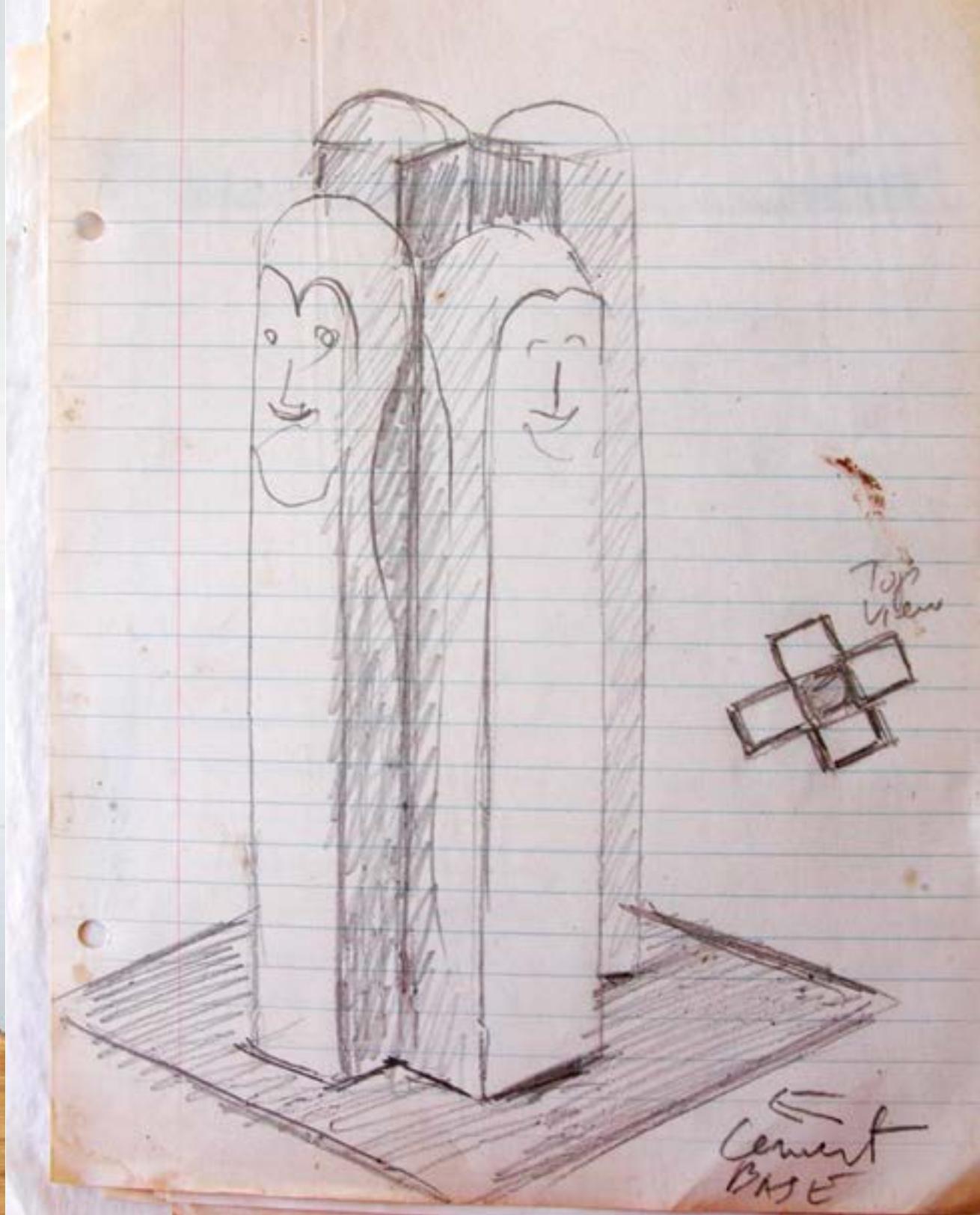
Bernard Langlais

THE MAN BEHIND THE OWLS

No one could have imagined that the University of Maine at Presque Isle's signature "Owl" sculpture would be one of Bernard Langlais' last works of art. Carved as a show-piece that honored the campus mascot, the sculpture was the result of a statewide award

sponsored by the Maine Arts Commission. The university was one of three statewide winners in the Community Sculpture '76 project. The other winners were Lewiston and Gardiner.

The Cushing artist carved the work from reclaimed, aged wood and is documented using live owls as models for the work



of art. Comprised of 5 owls, the final piece was more than 30 feet tall and finished with a hint of color. The timbers were salvaged from the old Grand Trunk Railroad grain elevator on the Portland waterfront. Other timbers from this granary were used in the interior of the Samoset Resort in Rockland.ⁱ

Sadly, the artist would never see the masterpiece in place. At the height of his career, he passed away suddenly from congestive heart failure on December 26, 1977, leaving the Owl sculpture as his final work.

The piece was originally supposed to be unveiled during the 1977 Homecoming, but Langlais' health delayed the completion of the sculpture. He made minor tweaks to the piece before his death, but commented the piece was done. The piece took two days to transport to Presque Isle and could only be transported during the day (after one of the birds "clipped off a light pole" in Bangor).ⁱⁱ

The piece was installed on campus, just a few weeks after Langlais' death, during early January 1978. Arriving on a flatbed truck, directly from the front lawn of Langlais' home, the piece was installed in a prominent area

i Author unknown, Downeast magazine, April 1978

ii Author unknown, Bangor Daily News, January 9, 1978

on campus, in front of Emerson Hall facing Route 1, where it would stay until the Fall of 2012. At risk of deterioration, the university had the piece removed and restored. Through this restoration, some of the height was sacrificed, but what was lost in height, we gained in many more years to appreciate Langlais' final piece.

During the summer of 2013, the university acquired two of the three scale models of Langlais' final sculpture and the Learning Collection of archives, sketchbooks, paintings and drawings- over 800 works. Sifting through that gift, what was uncovered was the loose doodle, done on a sheet of lined notebook paper, of the sculpture that would become our cherished owls.



untitled drawing,
ink on paper 1976

untitled owl model,
wood and paint, 1976, Working model for
UMPI, Maine Arts Commission





Top Left,
untitled, 2012, University of Maine
at Presque Isle

Bottom Left,
untitled photograph, UMPI owls in
progress, ca 1977

untitled,
Ram's head, wood, ca 1975



Far Left,
Football Players, wood and metal,
Langlais Estate, ca 1972

Top Left,
untitled photograph, Bernard
carving the UMPI Owls, 1977

Top right,
untitled, Bernard with UMPI owl
model, ca 1976



“BLACKIE”

Bernard “Blackie” Langlais was born in Old Town, Maine in 1921. He was the son of a carpenter and surrounded by the logging industry while growing up.

He was enlisted in the United States Navy from 1942 through 1948 during World War II. Langlais spent most of that time stationed in Hawaii where he painted ships and planes. Later, he would draw portraits of officers. Always interested in commercial art, we can credit the Navy as the place where Langlais created his own art education, as he had no formal training prior to that period.

After his time in the Navy and funded by the G.I. Bill, Langlais enrolled at the Corcoran School of Art in Washington DC; the Brooklyn Museum Art School in New York; and the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Maine during the summers of 1949, 1950 and 1951. At the Brooklyn Museum School, he would study under German Expressionist painter, Max Beckmann, and Social Realist painter Ben

Shahn (whom Langlais found quite boring).

In 1951 to 1952, Langlais attended the Academie de la Grand Chaumiere in Paris, France. When he returned to the United States and the Brooklyn Museum Art School, Langlais met Helen Friend, the woman who would become his wife. A common friend introduced the two “because they both had these funny accents.”ⁱⁱⁱ

His formal education peaked in 1954 when he received the prestigious Fulbright Scholarship at Kunstakademie in Oslo, Norway (the first scholar to the country), where he studied the work of painter Edvard

“I love to work with wood. I’d never work with any other medium again. Paint is too sophisticated, too removed.”

Munch. Munch is best known for his painting, “The Scream.” In Norway, he married Helen. She became his closest confidant and, in his death, the caretaker of the expansive collection of art he left behind.

Top Left,
untitled, wood and paint, Langlais Estate, date unknown

Bottom Left,
untitled photograph, Bernard’s studio, 2013

ⁱⁱⁱ Author unknown, Portland Press Herald, February 24, 2010



Left,
untitled, Indian (model) wood,
paint, and paper, 1967



Right,
untitled, Indian (model) wood,
paint, and metal, 1967

When the newlyweds returned to the United States in 1956, they lived on West 28th Street in New York City, but bought a small cottage in Cushing, Maine, where they would spend their summers. At this time, Langlais relied on available wood scrap he accessed from a lumberyard in his New York neighborhood and the ample woods in Maine. Access to these supplies created a sizable shift in his work. At a time where assemblage was highly revered, the movement was reflected first in the Martha Jackson Gallery exhibit “New Forms- New Media,” but then in the notable exhibition “The Art of Assemblage” at the Museum of Modern Art in 1961, an exhibit in which Langlais was included.

At this time, Langlais created abstract reliefs made from wood pieces that were carved, painted, stained, burned, and layered. Langlais was quoted in the *Boston Globe* about his medium: “I love to work with wood. I’d never work with any other medium again. Paint is too sophisticated, too removed. When I work with it the distance between my

hand and canvas is too great. The balance is wrong. Painting is ninety percent intellectual and ten percent physical. Using wood is closer to even. This satisfies me, this contact.”^{iv}

Obviously, the art world agreed. Langlais was picked up by the famed Leo Castelli Gallery (NY) and was featured in exhibitions from New York, Chicago, Houston, San Francisco and Paris, France. Once 1963 approached, Langlais was featured in *Art in America* magazine and selected for the Ford Foundation Purchase Award, which acquired his piece “Arrivederci Roma” for the Whitney Museum of Art in New York City.

With his career success mounting, the Langlais’ decided to purchase a year round home in Cushing, Maine in 1966, leaving New York altogether. “Langlais’ entire farm became his studio. Inside and out, he could not leave a piece of wood untouched.”^v Helen commented that he liked to use timbers “the way they come from the lumber yard. Arranging them in certain ways...“They become a person or animal. But they remain what they are- timbers. Wood already has been a living thing: has had a life of its own; and as a result it brings a sense of life

iv Karu, p. 26

v Berman, p. 224

to the work. Whereas canvas has a deadness.”^{vi}

His work shifted from abstract assemblage to more figural approaches. One could conclude that his environment had a strong impact on the evolution of his artistic styling. In his new home, he had a number of animals including goats, dogs, ponies, geese, sheep, and of course, cats. Helen commented that, “Except for some sweet cats, our animals turned out to have tough personalities” and further explained that getting around her yard, she would often be chased or “buted.”^{vii}

Leaving New York did not seem to impact his artistic career. In 1967, he was commissioned to create the now famous 60-foot-tall “Skowhegan Indian.” In 1968, he received the Childe Hassam Purchase Prize at the American Academy of Art and Letters in

“Wood already has been a living thing: has had a life of its own; and as a result it brings a sense of life to the work. Whereas canvas has a deadness.”

vi Quoted from Bernard Langlais: Independent Spirit, pg. 46

vii Berman, p. 224



New York. In 1969, he completed the Skowhegan Indian. In 1970, he worked as Artist in Residence at Penn State University in State College, Pennsylvania. In 1971, he received the Maine Arts and Humanities Award. In 1972, he received a Guggenheim Fellowship. And in 1973, he received an Honorary Doctorate from the University of Maine, Orono and was appointed to the Maine State Commission of Arts and Humanities, known today as the Maine Arts Commission. This list of accomplishments only skims the surface of the prolific seven years after moving to Cushing.

The same year of Langlais' tragic death, he received one of the greatest honors of his career, the National Endowment Artists' Award. The University of Maine at Presque Isle Owls sculpture was completed that same year, while the artist was at the pinnacle of his career. Prior to the Owl project, he had finished his acclaimed Philadelphia Zoo commission of 5 bears, one being a teddy bear, which clearly exhibits his playful personality.

Langlais' impact on Maine's artistic landscape can be summed up best in the inscription on the Maine State Award presented to him in 1971 by the Maine Arts

Commission: "The imprint of Maine upon the work of Bernard Langlais is as clear as tracks in fresh snow. Few artists nurtured by this state express more clearly its earthly heritage. Working in the prime material of this timbered land, Langlais creates with wit and power his personal images of the creatures of the earth. Under his hand, the rough scraps of forest and sawmill, of abandoned structures and implements, are brought to new and unexpected life, creating a robust art of regional flavor."^{viii}

His legacy continued on, under the diligent care of Helen, until her death in 2010. She was a champion for his art, exhibiting selections of his work yearly until her health slowed her down during the 1990's. The Langlais estate was willed to the Colby College Museum of Art after her death.

In 2012, Colby gifted much of the estate to the Kohler Foundation to preserve the contents of the estate- more than 3000 pieces. Kohler, furthermore, gifted the work to many of Maine's non-profit and learning institutions and readied the Langlais Cushing Estate for possession by the Georges River Land Trust in Rockland, Maine. The estate will become a publically accessed sculpture park.

viii Karu, p. 26

Commander in Chief,
wood, paint, found bathtub,
69 x 108 x 53 in, early 1970s

UNIVERSITY OF MAINE AT PRESQUE ISLE'S LANGLAIS COLLECTION

University of Maine at Presque Isle is the grateful recipient of over 800 works of art by Bernard Langlais. The works on paper are part of the Langlais Study Collection, which includes his sketchbooks, early paintings, chainsaw drawings, and accomplished pen and ink animal filled landscapes. Many sketches became finished sculptures while others were complete in their intensely lyrical drawings.

Of the sculptures and wood wall reliefs, the work in the UMPI collection covers the spectrum of Langlais' career and is laden with personal stories about the man. Incredibly opinionated and follower of current events, one of Langlais' best known sculptures on his estate is his pond-submerged President Richard Nixon.

A friend of Langlais, John Whitney Payson, claimed to have watched trespassers "pelt the Nixon statue with stones." When reported to Langlais, his response was "Throwing rocks at Nixon? Good. He deserves it."^{ix}

^{ix} Quoted from Bernard Langlais: Independent Spirit, pg. 58 [original source: Bernard Langlais quoted in Robert Newell, "Bernard Langlais Sculptures Give 'Impression of Primitiveness,'" unidentified newspaper clipping, early 1970s, Portland Museum of Art artist's files]

Langlais was known to do only a handful of other presidential sculpture pieces- one of Pres-

"Throwing rocks at Nixon? Good. He deserves it."

ident Jimmy Carter and the other of President Gerald Ford. He also did a wood wall relief piece of President Lyndon Baines Johnson.

Part of the UMPI collection is Langlais' Gerald Ford, nude and bathing in an actual cast iron bathtub, entitled "Commander in Chief." There is only one other Gerald Ford piece, which is more like a totem, entitled "Ford with Gourds" and registered by the Smithsonian Institute in their art inventories catalog.

Langlais was not quoted with having much respect for President Ford. In the July 1, 1974, Bangor Daily News, Langlais commented about both Nixon and Ford. This was during the time of Watergate and Langlais did not believe Nixon would be impeached. Langlais stated, "I hope he stays in there. Whatever else, he is a strong person, more than Vice President Gerald Ford." Of course, when Langlais was asked if he voted for Nixon, he claimed "No, never!"

On a more personal note, the UMPI

collection reflects Langlais' day-to-day life. The piece "Cinderella (playing)" is a sculpture of his beloved black lab, always found by his side around the estate. This piece is documented to have only been exhibited once at the Wingspread Gallery in Northeast Harbor, Maine in 1981.

His love for animals is prevalent throughout his prolific body of work. He considered his work a tribute. He commented, "They're supposed to be inferior to humans, but humans keep getting in such messes. Animals survive on freedom. Live and let live within the whole balance of nature."^x

A common subject matter is the lion, of which he self identifies as, due to his mane-like head of hair and his astrological sign, Leo. It is thought to have been his version of self-portraiture. Langlais commented, "When I do a lion- I'm a Leo, incidentally- I feel like a lion."^{xi} He loved the golden tones that wood surfaces captured and the different textures that would denote whiskers and fur.^{xii}

The UMPI collection has three lion

^x Quoted from Bernard Langlais, Independent Spirit, pg. 57

^{xi} Quoted from Bernard Langlais: Independent Spirit, pg. 51

^{xii} Berman, p. 224

pieces (and 2 unfinished house cat pieces). The untitled lion face thought to be his self-portrait, done in 1971, was exhibited and stolen from the Frost Gully Gallery in June of 1983. Exhaustive searches for the artwork were performed but turned up nothing. As quietly as it went missing, it was discretely returned to the gallery some months later. No

Nixon,
wood, paint,
Langlais estate, ca 1972





untitled,
5 lions, wood and paint on wood and canvas, found bathtub, 49 x 73 x 1.5 in, ca 1970

owner, and Langlais, son of a carpenter, met in downtown New York, although both had ties to Midcoast Maine. Nevelson and Langlais met through the Leo Castelli Gallery where they exhibited their assemblage work. Nevelson would wind up to be a “longstanding and loyal” friend of his.^{xiii} Of the five assemblage pieces in the UMPI collection, “See-Saw” could have very well been exhibited with Nevelson, as that work and another untitled work has the original Leo Castelli Gallery labeling and catalog numbering on the back of the piece. “See-Saw” was made in 1961, the same year as his Museum of Modern Art exhibition.

CONCLUSION

The UMPI Langlais Collection and Study Collection provide a small peak into the man behind the owls. One can see his prolific dedication to his practice, his compassion for animals, his satirical response to current events, and his zest for life. One thing to note: this collection is as much “Blackie’s” as it is Helen’s. Helen spent the rest of her years (from 1977 to 2010) ensuring that Langlais’ legacy was instilled in the Maine landscape and larger art world.

University of Maine at Presque Isle prides itself on possessing Langlais’ final form of expression. *The Owls* sculpture, now sitting center stage in the campus, is a backdrop for students’ academic careers. Langlais’ legacy has cemented itself in the fabric of our lives here on campus and in our community. At its placement in 1978, it was the only public sculpture in Aroostook County. Now, it is the beacon of student achievement at University of Maine at Presque Isle and the thriving arts community in the Northern Maine region.

questions were asked and no charges filed.

The “Five Lions” piece is better known and has been exhibited around Portland, Maine in the Hobe Sounds galleries in 1987. The sizable work includes wood and paint on wood and canvas. It combines his earlier abstract style with his more figural animals.

His piece, “Two Lions,” the latest lion piece in the UMPI collection, was completed in 1975. These works were part of his Maine Coast Artists Gallery retrospective exhibition

in his neighboring town of Rockport. It also appeared again in the Old Town Museum during the summer of 1993 in a solo exhibition of his work, organized by Helen.

To round out the collection, numerous early pieces capture the style that put him on the map in the New York scene. Langlais lived and worked in New York around the same time as leading sculptor, Louise Nevelson. While their approach to assembled medium is similar, Nevelson, the daughter of a junkyard

^{xiii} Berman, p. 175



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Curator: Heather Sincavage

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ONE OF MAINE’S PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES

untitled,
Bernard with live owl, working on
UMPI Owls, ca 1977

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BERNARD