

Fire and Ice: Remembering Richard Hunt

by Neil Goodman

Note: All photos of Richard Hunt and/or his work are © 2024 The Richard Hunt Trust/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

I was fortunate to have met Richard numerous times in my career. Additionally, I knew his work well, and several of our sculptures are in both public and private collections. On a more personal note, when my son Maurice was in junior high, he was asked to write an essay about an influential and important person. I suggested Richard, as Maurice was aware of his work. Shortly thereafter, we were at an opening of Richard's prints at a local gallery. I introduced Maurice to Richard with a short introduction explaining that Maurice was writing a paper about him. I told Richard how much I admired his work, and he re-

sponded with "you haven't done too badly yourself." That gentleness and acknowledgement said volumes about who Richard was, and why I, like so many others, felt so strongly about him both personally and professionally. All roads in the Chicago sculpture community seem to have led back to Richard, and, without question, he has been our defining voice for more than six decades. His impact, productivity, and stature are unparalleled, as he was our most important sculptor.

A brief biography highlights that at the age of 35, Richard was given a major solo exhibition at the Museum of

(Left) Young Richard Hunt seated at Mill Race Studio, San Antonio, Texas, beside *Longhorn* (1959, dismantled 1960). Photo: Martha Mood. (Right) *Arachne*, 1956. Welded steel, 30 x 24 1/2 x 28 1/4 inches. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Purchase. Photo: The Museum of Modern Art.





Swing Low, 2016. Welded bronze. National Museum of African American History and Culture, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC. Gift of Richard Hunt. Photo: National Museum of African American History and Culture.

Modern Art in New York. His professional career included 150 solo exhibitions, 100 museum collections, and 160 public sculpture commissions, more than any other American sculptor. He received 18 honorary degrees, 36 awards, a John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Fellowship, and the lifetime achievement award from the International Sculpture Center. On April 24, 2023, the State of Illinois declared it Richard Hunt Day in a ceremony presided over by Illinois First Lady M. K. Pritzker. In his last year, Richard also completed the sculpture *Book Bird* for the Obama Presidential Library. Without pause, his career flourished as did the numerous awards and accolades.

Form and social content seem equally embedded in Richard's work as a sculptor. When he was 19 years old, Richard saw the open casket of Emmet Till. Also, while serving in the army and stationed in San Antonio, Texas, Richard desegregated Woolworth's lunch counter in Alamo Plaza and was the first African American served at the diner. Although many titles for his public sculptures are descriptive or non-referential, these events inspired many other titles to refer to key moments in African American history. These include the recently installed Ida B Well's memorial, *The Light of Truth Ida B. Wells National Monument*, as well as *Rise Up*, *Swing Low*,

(Left) *Sea Change*, 1986, Welded bronze. Institute of Environmental Sustainability, Loyola University, Chicago (originally commissioned for and installed at Northern Trust, Chicago). (Right) *The Light of Truth Ida B. Wells National Monument*, 2021. Welded bronze, South Langley Avenue, Bronzeville, Chicago. Photo: Jyoti Srivastava.





Aerial view of Richard Hunt's Lill Ave. studio, 2020. Photo: Art Institute of Chicago.

Sea Change, Build a Dream, I Have Been to the Mountain, Muskegon Together Rising, and From Here to There, among many others. Although these works can be viewed abstractly, title and place can also strongly influence their narrative and interpretation.

Richard's work reaches back while moving forward, as it is both mythic yet distinctively modern. If many of his pieces have a strong socio-political context, they seem equally influenced by other sculptural histories, including the *Winged Victory of Samothrace*, for example. In this Hellenistic Greek sculpture, the pedestal is part and parcel of the work as a whole and the relationship between base and object form a dynamic composition. Like the *Winged Victory* demonstrates, when Richard's work reaches its peak, the forms often become more linear and expressive—transitioning from their massive planar and geometric base into a more gestural upward thrust. In his

large public works, the volumetric expanse of the base allows the viewer a safety net, safely removed from the linear and sharp end points. In this way, the viewer is both engaged and kept safely at a distance.

Richard's work was situated within the history of contemporary modernist abstract expressionist sculpture characterized by the work of David Smith, Herbert Ferber, Julio Gonzales, and Seymour Lipton. His working style reflects a proletariat work ethic exemplified in that period, where sculptors were many things—builders, engineers, designers, and fabricators. In Richard's work, and similar to others of that generation, both line and plane defined form, and the expressive mark is the memory of modeling or construction. Equally, the pieces reflect the hand of the maker, as each decision is ever present through bending, forging, casting, or cutting. Form is found through the direct manipulation of material, and chance and spontaneity

(Left) David Smith, *Australia*, 1951. Painted steel on cinder-block base, 6' 7 1/2" x 8' 11 7/8" x 16 1/8". Gift of William Rubin, Museum of Modern Art. Photo: https://www.moma.org/collection/works/82047?artist_id=5480&page=1&sov_referrer=artist. (Right) Herbert Ferber, *Jackson Pollock*, 1949. Lead, 17 5/8 x 30 x 6 1/2 inches. Museum of Modern Art. Photo: https://www.moma.org/collection/works/80879?artist_id=1851&page=1&sov_referrer=artist.





(Left) Julio Gonzalez, *Woman with a Mirror*, 1936–37. Wrought and welded iron, 80 1/4 x 23 5/8 x 18 1/8 inches. Photo: <https://www.theartstory.org/artist/gonzalez-julio/>. (Right) Seymour Lipton, *Genie*, 1948. Copper, brass, bronze, and wood, 22 x 22 x 14 inches. Photo: https://www.artnet.com/artists/seymour-lipton/genie-a-_Grjiz1VrNZpH363PNa97w2.

are equal partners in construction and decision making. Like his contemporaries in this regard, metal was Richard's palette, and decisions were intuitive, ever changing, and responsive.

Having said that, Richard's work is distinctively his own; he seemed to have an innate sensibility that defined his sculpture from the very beginning and throughout his long career. He revealed a continuity in both form and ma-

terial that seemed instinctual and natural in his sculptures, prints, and drawings. Early works were welded directly from plate metal or, in many cases, cast directly in bronze. He also made a smooth transition from the more organic earlier cast pieces into large-scale fabricated sculpture. As his numerous public commissions flourished, sculptures made directly from constructed forms allowed him to expand and enlarge his works without the more circuitous

(Left) *Firebird*, 1975. Welded Cor-Ten steel, 44 x 85 x 96 inches. The Cleveland Museum of Art. Photo: The Cleveland Museum of Art. (Right) *The Chase, second version*, 1969. Welded chromed steel, 44 x 85 x 59 inches. New Jersey State Museum. Photo: New Jersey State Museum.





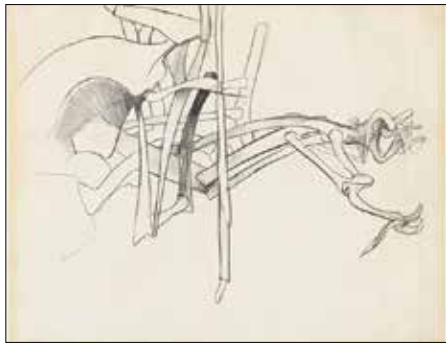
(Left) *Why?*, 1974. Cast bronze (ed. 2/3). Franklin D. Murphy Sculpture Garden, Hammer Museum, University of California at Los Angeles. Photo: Hammer Museum. (Right) *Fish Curve Hybrid*, 1971. Cast bronze, 50 x 26 x 19 1/2 inches. Nasher Museum of Art, Duke University. Photo: Nasher Museum of Art.

casting process of modeling and mold making. Richard also possessed a herculean work ethic, a driving artistic ambition, and the talent and ability to move from model to monument with fluidity and confidence.

In Richard’s work, there is fire and fury—flames frozen as they soar into space, yet resolved with stability and balance. He was the spark of the Chicago sculpture community, and, like Nelson Algren, Walter Payton, Jeff Tweedy, and Frank Lloyd Wright, he was part and parcel of our identity as a city. His impact is felt by both those who

knew him and the work he left behind. He will be missed, yet we are thankful for all that he has accomplished, and for the benefit of seeing a creative life lived fully and completely. ■

Neil Goodman is a sculptor formerly based in Chicago with an extensive exhibition history. Presently living on the central coast of California, he retired from Indiana University Northwest as Professor Emeritus of Fine Arts. He is currently represented by Carl Hammer Gallery and serving as the South Central California Region Editor for the *New Art Examiner*.



(Top Left) *Untitled*, 1964. Pencil on paper, 25 1/2 x 30 5/8 inches. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Eugene and Clare Thaw Fund Photo: The Museum of Modern Art. (Bottom Left) *Crucifix Figure*, 1957. Lithograph (ed. 3/8), 19 3/4 x 25 7/8 inches. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, John B. Turner Fund Photo: The Museum of Modern Art. (Right) Richard Hunt standing with *Scholar’s Rock or Stone of Hope or Love of Bronze*, 2014–20 at his Lill Ave. Studio. Welded bronze, 168 x 84 x 84 inches. Photo courtesy of the Art Institute of Chicago.