Passion and Power
Iron Artists in Western U.S.
by Nancy B. Zastrow
Julian Voss-Andreae is full of joyful energy with an infectious enthusiasm for life, for people, for the way everything is put together and interacts. I suppose I am a reductionist, he says, for I am fascinated with the smallest elements, with molecular structures, and with the elemental building blocks of structures. But then I want to bring this understanding to light. I want to make the protein molecules, for instance, bigger than life size. There is something just basically beautiful to the structures, and people can relate to them without necessarily understanding why.

I was always an artist from my youth and rather indifferent to school, he admits. In Germany where I grew up it took me fifteen years to complete the 13-year course. After that I turned to painting and devoted myself to that for several years. In my early 20s painting became thin for me and I wanted to follow my fascination with how things are put together, so I went to the university to study physics. Physics was a hard course, but I persisted. I can do well with studies when I work at it.
Still, it was difficult and fascinating, and at the same time sterile in a way. There seemed little room for the intuition that I find I need to leap from where I am to the next place. It was clear to me early on in the studies, however, that it would fuel my artistic search as well as provide some answers to my basic questions. Questions like: Why is the sun that color? How does it happen that leaves are green and then turn yellow or brown? What makes a steel bar so rigid and strong?

I still have these types of questions and a lot more. I find a little thing that interests me and I follow it to where it leads, all the time struggling to visualize what it looks like, trying to bring the words I was reading and studying into visual expression. It informs the way I work. Learning physics was so different from this artist life. One of the big differences is that most physics students were incredibly humble and modest. There was little fear of intelligence, no delusions of grandeur, and most of my fellow students were essentially good-hearted people. In the art world many times people are ego-driven and not so easy and open. Still, there are good-hearted people everywhere.
My ideas come from the work and from a deep interest in people. I'm very interested in how humans relate in space and in mental and physical interactions. I've been fortunate to show my work in many galleries and art exhibits in many states in the United States, as well as in Switzerland, Australia, and Canada. Like any artist, I feel gratified to find people like and appreciate the work I produce.

Einstein said that science is a refinement of everyday thinking, and art is similar in that art has a way of evolving in history as well as in one person's art, just as science is evolving. When you look at it from the outside it seems completely miraculous that someone has arrived at a particular idea — but seen in terms of personal as well as historical baby steps it is more understandable. You keep following your path and each step follows one after the other and there you are. Of course, once you have your idea firmly in mind it takes a lot of experimentation to express it correctly. I originally started with wood and thought the sculpture to honor Linus Pauling, for instance, would be wood pieces cast in bronze. The cost of such a plan was outrageous, so there had to be a simpler and less expensive way to carry it out. I thought I could create it from a steel beam, but at the time I had barely learned to weld. Fortunately I had a friend who helped with the forming and welding in his studio because my studio at school and I were simply inadequate for the work. I'm indebted to him for helping me realize that idea.
I like to work mostly with steel; mild steel is very nice but it needs to be finished in order to stand up to the elements. Stainless is good, and I’m experimenting with black oxidizing for a finish. For outdoor pieces I sometimes use copper or bronze. You know, I thought that if I understood the form of the molecule, I could just enlarge it back up to ‘human three-dimensional life size’ and it would be done. It isn’t that easy, of course. Nothing ever is as easy as it looks. Many of the statues of enlarged protein molecules have had to be tweaked in significant ways. But they come out to be still recognizable, and I’m pleased with the end products as being accurate representations of their starting points, and at the same time, works of art in their own right.

Picking up the thread of an earlier point, Julian concludes, Ah, yes, there I was in the 90s studying physics at the Free University of Berlin, Germany, and here I am making sculptures in Portland, Oregon. The connection? It was another of those intuitive leaps, I suppose. I attended a symposium of scientists and artists in Italy one year and there met a woman whose father was presenting a paper. She and I liked each other, spent a lot of time together that week, and ended up liking each other more. At the end of the week, she left for Portland and I went home to Germany. After six months, I came to Portland for a visit, and decided to stay, giving up my former life and starting over again. We married. I enrolled in the Pacific Northwest College of Art and earned a degree studying sculpture. As I said before, when I follow my deep interests, step after step leads me to the present. It is a great life, a really full life. I have a number of commissions to fill; we have three children; my wife is finishing her medical studies; there are challenges to solve and interests to follow. And it is all good!
Julian Voss-Andreae
Portland, Oregon

Quantum Man
2007, stainless steel

Quantum physics describes a moving object as consisting of waves oriented perpendicular to its direction of motion. Voss-Andreae studied physics at the University of Vienna in Austria before settling on art as a career.

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"Quantum Man" at Maryhill Art Museum  photos by Leonard Mills