

MYSTERY MAN

For St. Charles sculptor, the art just happens

By Benji Hughes

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ST. CHARLES - Ray Kobald knows all the questions. He just never answers them.

"We're nothing more than storytellers," the St. Charles artist says. For more than 30 years, he has shaped bronze - or clay, or wood, or fabric - into works of fantasy and mystery. His figures often wear or carry masks. They gaze into the distance or retreat into themselves. They're animals or humans or, frequently, both at the same time. They belong to tribal societies both real and fictional. They carry icons of both life and death.

They offer only partial explanations.

"People always want stories," Kobald says. "Oftentimes, you don't have the story. You finish the piece and say, 'oh, boy, what's next?' And up comes the next one."

The truth is, he doesn't need to know his inspiration's source. The sculptures are enough.

"Sometimes I'll get up in the middle of the night and have an idea and do a sketch," he says. "It just comes."

His love of art was that way too, he says. It simply happened to him. Kobald won a state award for a drawing he did as a second-grader at Lincoln School in St. Charles. More importantly, he won acclaim and encouragement from teachers. He ties his growing love of drawing, painting and creating to a series of encouraging grade school and high school teachers. Kobald's memories of his childhood art are really memories of them.

A four-year industrial art degree at Bradley University was followed by four years of Air Force service, then by graphics coursework at Northern Illinois University. But it was in San Miguel, Mexico, where he moved to study and to teach in 1971, that Kobald would find his ultimate artistic focus.

He enrolled at the Institute Al-lende to study print-making under a respected master there. But when the teacher died in a car accident not long before Kobald's arrival, he found himself wandering. He took a few print-making classes anyhow, but found himself drawn more and more to sculpting. This would become the medium for the bulk of his life's work.

"A lot of my stuff depicts death: That's probably the Mexican influence," Kobald says. On one wall of his home studio hang 16 masks - all his own work, and all but two bearing heavy resemblance to those used in Mexico for Day of the Dead festivities.

"When you're in Mexico, you see a lot of death," he says. "Children die there. People are very poor. You'll see a young father carrying the coffin of a child on his head, open. You'll see the tiny hands inside."

With Mexico, Kobald's other great interest has been Native American culture and mythology. While stationed at an Air Force base in Omaha, Neb., he spent his weekends living with friends on the Sac-N-Fox reservation. He reads legends from all tribes as often as he can. His piece "Star-gazer," which depicts a Native American man wrapped in a cloak, veiled eyes directed at the heavens, is now on display at the prestigious Sculpture Park in Loveland, Colo.

"There's just something," Kobald says of his friends on the reservation. "I trust them, and they trust me. I feel very, very good with them."

His depictions are apparently so good that Kobald has sculpted a few legends without even knowing it. At one show, a Sioux patron told the artist one of his sculptures was the spitting image of Tall Man, a ghost that was seen often on the Rosebud reservation. Kobald had never even been there.

Still, it's not like he hasn't sculpted ghosts before. Icons of death - skulls, crows and ravens, among others - are featured prominently in much of the artist's body of an older man, unclothed, with the head of a crow. The figure's left hand holds a mask bearing a human face - Kobald's own face.

"Sometimes you just go blank; and if you do, you're best just leaving everything alone," he says. "It's a terrible, terrible feeling. It's a lonely feeling. And then, quick as it left, it'll pop right back in again."

For the most part, Kobald's inspiration stays. He usually has two or three pieces in progress at one time. A recently completed sculpture of St. Charles philanthropist Dellora Norris, to be dedicated June 8 at the Municipal Building in downtown St. Charles, is among the most rapidly completed works of his career. It took him six weeks.

Kobald also created the sculpture of Shakespearean character Nick Bottom outside the Geneva Public Library and the life-size likeness of Colonel Edward Baker in front of the Baker Hotel in St. Charles. But these commissioned works represent a departure from his usual style: Most of his characters are tall, but very slim, with a streamlined shape that narrows from top to bottom like upside-down teardrop. Often, his human figures only have one foot.

Why just one foot? His patrons ask him. He knows all their questions. But he doesn't have an answer. It's just what he likes.

"Now I can look at my art and see it's Ray Kobald - but sometimes you're just doing it," he says. "It just comes. Why? I don't know."