

# from down under to up-state: LEON SMITH, SCULPTOR



White Forest

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Beautifully nestled on two hundred and fifty acres in the rolling hills of Winchell Mountain in Ancramdale, is the home and studio of sculptor Leon Smith. Here, his work is showcased in a twenty-acre sculpture garden that provides a majestic backdrop for his wonderful and whimsical creations. Those creations captivate and inspire at every turn. As you coast along the long driveway to the old farmhouse and studio, Mr. Smith's works surround you. The manicured fields that once were home to dairy cows are now populated by sculpture. At a fork in the road, the drive heads to the either the house or the studio. Here, visitors are greeted by a massive six-foot boomerang decorated with traditional aboriginal paint motifs that hint at Leon's past, and teases the viewer as to what lies ahead throughout the property.

### Dental molding in Australia

Seventy-nine year old Smith was first introduced to the materials, tools and techniques of sculpture while studying dentistry at the University of Sydney, Australia during the 1950's. There, he became fascinated with the small-scale molding and casting methods used in the creation of dental implants and orthodontic pieces. From these small beginnings, his ambition to create drove him on to bigger things. While he enjoyed a successful career

as a dentist, Smith could not fight the urge to travel the world and explore other cultures. As a citizen of the British Commonwealth, he was able to travel and explore the many lands that once made up the empire and seized the opportunity to work abroad, setting up shop in Hong Kong and London for a short time.

### Mexican tiles

In 1962, while studying new dental techniques at University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, he met and later married Elaine. His wanderlust eventually got the better of him once more. At this time, he realized that it was not fair to the patients for him to spend so much time away from the office and he traded the Dental Arts for the Arts. It was time for a change.

In 1964, the two moved to New York, where Leon began to explore his passion for large-scale sculpture in earnest. He also established himself as an importer of hand crafted tiles from a remote village in Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula. Things took off for him after an article about his tile business was featured in the New York Times Home section. As ever, times and tastes were changing. An increased appreciation for handcraft and artistry developed as interior decorators and homeowners moved away from the dull, vinyl flooring and linoleum counter

tops of the 1960's towards handcrafted products that expressed an individual's tastes and aesthetics. Smith had negotiated exclusive distribution rights with the workshop and craftsman and was able to benefit from the change in the American design aesthetic. He was able to respond with high quality, colorful products that were handcrafted by artisans and responded to increased appreciation for craft and artistry.

The success of the tile business also fueled Smith's interest in sculpture. As he expanded his business and hired more employees, he had the time and resources to explore his passion for sculpture. His sculptures became larger and he began to integrate the idea of balance and motion into his work. The contrast, tension and delicate interplay between scale and movement is something that he continues to explore and develop today in his larger outdoor pieces as well as his smaller works.

As the scale of his work grew, so did his need for more studio space and room to display his work. So, in 1975, he purchased the initial plot of land that would one day become the home and studio of today.

### The birch office

There is a great deal of wit, humor and transformation in Leon's conceptual pieces. In the playfully





Bulbus  
Circulars  
Horotree

Tree Frame

Mask Bluer  
Pink Tree

Echo  
Branch Office

On Edge  
Hand

titled Branch Office, a 1960's filing cabinet, office chair and metal desk, complete with rotary phone and typewriter, almost disappear as if they part of the natural landscape. The cold grey metal of the desk and the green vinyl of the chair's cushion are transformed. They are replaced with an application of black and white paint that replicates the coloration and texture of birch bark, camouflaging the items into their surrounding. By cleverly positioning the piece in a small cluster of birch trees, the viewer is forced to double-take as they explore the sculpture garden and happen upon Branch Office. What is seen is not seen.

In his work, Dysfunctional Table he presents the viewer with what seems to be a perfectly quotidian table and two chairs. Upon further inspection however, the chairs have become incorporated into the support structure of the table, making it impossible to pull out the chairs, thus rendering the table completely useless on its own. The pieces need each other. They work in unison but not in isolation.

### Duality and contrast

In addition to humor, there is a duality that runs through all of Leon's work. One contrast that runs throughout his work is the divide between the pieces that stand out discordantly from the natural world, and those that exist in harmony with their

organic surroundings. The first are composed primarily of larger steel and aluminum sculptures that boldly declare with their shape, scale or bright color they are not a part of the organic world and have been placed there by a force other than nature. They stand in nature but are not of it.

On the one hand we find works that fit in and blend with nature embracing or enhancing the natural world around them. They create their own ecosystems and become a part of their environment. A vivid example is Tree Frame, in which a seven-foot-tall, bright pink steel halo surrounds a living cedar tree. The halo and tree are separate but exist together, playfully fusing the organic with the geometric. Art and nature intertwine to create a new form.

Leon's work also explores the idea of elevating the objects we see in everyday life and taking our perception of them to a higher level. In his piece Logorrhea, he takes what he calls the "miserable little woodchip" and transforms hundreds of them into a graceful curvilinear cascade pouring from the knot in a small log. As with his history, his art often showcase transformation. Like Marcel Duchamp with Bicycle Wheel, Leon takes the objects of daily life and metamorphosizes them from the ordinary into things to be coveted and collected. In some of his more recent work, he takes the shape

of the prefabricated light bulb and transforms it into something totally new, asking the viewer to rethink notions of everyday objects. Smith also cuts away portions of their solid form, experimenting with ideas of positive and negative space. Through his celebration and exploration of shapes, Smith transforms what we see and perceive, expanding our own understanding about every day objects and what they can be.

Leon and his wife Elaine recently celebrated their fiftieth wedding anniversary. In addition to her work teaching English as second language, Mrs. Smith is an accomplished painter and creates her art in a small, light-filled studio immediately adjacent to his. Hanging on the wall in her space is a beautiful trompe l'oeil painting of a yellow quilt, so realistic that you initially think it is an embroidered piece fabric hanging on the wall. Transformation of perception and metamorphosis can be found throughout the Smith's home, and offer an inspiring and captivating experience to the visitor. ●

*The studio and sculpture garden are open to the public by appointment, to arrange a visit call 518-329-4521. To learn more about Leon and to see more of his work visit [www.leonsmithsculpture.com](http://www.leonsmithsculpture.com).*