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Juggling two careers: Sculptor and dentist David Millen finds the proper balance

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By Hank Hoffman

Balance. Artist David Millen has found it in his professional life and represents it in his work. Half his time is spent as a periodontist; the dental specialist patients end up visiting when their lack of flossing takes a bad turn. The other half of Millen's time is spent creating and teaching figurative sculpture.



<http://theartspaper.files.wordpress.com/2011/02/millen.jpg>

Photo by Susan Millen

For
Millen,
the
human
figure
is a
vessel.
He
puts it

differently, saying, "I wasn't thinking of the figure as a subject. I was thinking of it as an object."

Like the pottery he created before he evolved into a sculptor, Millen enjoys working and decorating the surfaces of his figurative sculptures. But where his pots were vessels in the literal sense, Millen's sculptures are vessels in the figurative sense, if you can pardon the pun – vessels for adornment and vessels to contain expansive, joyful emotion.

Millen has a one-person show of his sculpture on display at the Barnum Museum in Bridgeport through the end of the year. It is a fitting culmination of a decade of work. Millen's depictions of aerialists, unicyclists, ring dancers, and jugglers are arrayed in a circular display beneath four big-top-like drapes of fabric in the museum's high-ceilinged gallery. They radiate a kinetic joy.

That uplifting quality has also been appreciated in medical facilities. Millen's sculptures are on display at Connecticut Hospice in Branford, the Smilow Cancer Center and Pediatric Intensive Care Unit at Yale-New Haven Hospital. Millen notes that "celebrating the human spirit and human potential" has always been his theme. His works, which express and even revel in their physicality, resonate positively with patients and staff alike.

In an interview at his home studio, Millen says he gravitated toward dentistry because he had always been good with his hands — he put together models as a youngster — and wanted the occupational and financial independence dentistry offered. By his early 30s, however, he was dissatisfied. Searching for more in life, Millen took painting and drawing classes. They didn't play to his strengths. Pottery was a different story. He took a pottery course at the local Unitarian Church and found "I was really good at it." Shortly thereafter, Millen began taking lessons with potter Maishe Dickman in Dickman's studio, working there for seven years until building his own home studio. By the time he was 40, he was able to pare back his dentistry practice to three days a week and devote more time to his art. He has benefited from the support of his wife, Sue, who is a talented quilter and "understood my passion."

"I thought my career was in pottery. For a long time I did a lot of marbled ware — one of a kind, variegated color on porcelain," recalls Millen. Then one Sunday, he says, "I got tired of doing them. I took them and shaped them into female figures."

While Millen had confidence in his technique as a potter, shaping the figures was his "first time doing something out of the ordinary, out of the box." The positive response inspired him. "Everyone who saw the pots fell in love with them," Millen recalls.

The figurative pots marked not just a transition in style but also a transition in self-conception — from craftsperson to artist. Millen freely admits to being a "control freak," saying, "that's why I always do my own thing."

"I thought there was a sense of freedom in being an artist. I envisioned an artist being more independent and doing what you wanted to do rather than what customers wanted you to make," says Millen.

Millen began working as a potter in 1975. In the early 1980s, he started transitioning to sculpture while studying at The New School in Manhattan under the tutelage of sculptor Chaim Gross. It was Gross who encouraged Millen to develop his own stylized, simplified approach. Noticing that Millen wasn't doing the same thing as other students when sculpting from a model, Gross suggested he pay a visit to the Metropolitan Museum of Art and look at Indian art. The "simplified, roundish figures" of Indian dancers appealed to Millen. Millen's embrace of modern art and the Modernist movement also influenced his developing style. His figures don't have faces because Millen believes "a face gets in the way of the soul of the piece."

Millen says there is also "no question that my dentistry influenced my art." The "perfectionist type of mentality" necessary to his periodontal work informed his creative approach. Additionally, the necessity to continually learn new techniques and work with different materials

was a skill that was transferable from dentistry to artistry.

“Materials and techniques, for me, can open up new ideas,” says Millen. “Every time I learn a new material, I can find out ways to do different things with it.”

At The New School, Millen was working with traditional sculpting materials such as clay and plaster. But in both cases, their lack of permanence frustrated Millen. Because of expense and control issues, Millen didn’t want to be tied down to taking his clay or plaster sculptures to foundries to be converted to bronze. While Millen has also worked with marble and stone, those materials were not suited to the types of open poses with unsupported limbs that he favors. He began sculpting with cement over steel armatures because it was permanent and could be placed outdoors. About eight years ago, Millen switched to using epoxy resin, synthetic clay that affords significantly more creative freedom when working with the surface.

Millen teaches a course at Creative Arts Workshop in New Haven in using epoxy as a sculptural material. Epoxy is non-shrinking, which makes it a good material for covering armatures with arms extended out from the figure. Clay, in contrast, shrinks 10 percent as it dries and can crack. Epoxy doesn’t require kiln firing; it self-hardens in 24 hours, but the artist can continue to add to it and change it after it hardens. Epoxy is also weatherproof, permanent, archival, and non-toxic. And, Millen adds, “It comes in colors — it’s perfect!”

Millen “sketches” with wire armatures to develop poses. When he has his idea, he constructs his steel armature. The epoxy is mixed into a sticky clay-like substance, which Millen applies and shapes by hand around the armature.

“I like to overbuild the figure, put on too much material so I have a good general shape. The final shaping and finishing is done with sanding, grinding, and polishing so it’s almost like working in stone,” says Millen. If he wants a multi-color, marbled effect, Millen uses different color “clays.” The “exciting part,” Millen says, is that he has no idea what the marbled effect will look like “until I start doing the grinding, sanding, and polishing.” Attending a Cirque de Soleil performance about five years ago inspired Millen to be more adventurous in “dressing” his figures. He creates patterned vests by pressing screens into the still-malleable epoxy vests and has incorporated beads, powdered glass, glitter, and gold foil into his surfaces.

“There are an infinite number of things you can do with the figure. You can never run out of ideas,” Millen says.

The director of a circus school in Brattleboro, Vermont told Millen “the idea is to make the possible look impossible so the audience is awed.” With his recent piece *Possibilities* — on display at the Barnum Museum — Millen stood that concept on its head. Almost a metaphor for art’s ability to transcend the realm of physical possibility, *Possibilities* depicts one figure holding up five others over its head. It couldn’t happen in reality but it looks believable. Why? Because it is in balance.

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