

Sculptures take a trip to VanDusen Botanical Garden

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Local sculptor and caster Alex Schick gives life to The Bronze Seal

On a wet Wednesday afternoon, James Fletcher’s Powell Street studio feels like a cozy clubhouse. The president of the Sculptors’ Society of British Columbia is hosting a small gathering of his colleagues, senior sculptors all. Among shelves and tables crowded with Fletcher’s works in alabaster, limestone, and bronze, they chat amiably about projects they’re working on, the materials they’re exploring, and the exhibition they and other society members will be presenting this week at VanDusen Botanical Garden. Opening Thursday and running through Monday (July 31 to August 4), it’s the SSBC’s eighth annual show in that location, Fletcher says, then adds: “Sculpture in the garden is a great fit.”

As he puts on another pot of coffee, Fletcher talks about his own art. “It ranges from surreal and sensual organic forms to allegorical realistic human figures.” Currently, he is working on a series of miniature mountains atop rectilinear columns of granite. He also discusses the history of the SSBC, founded in 1974. Mostly, however, he extols the camaraderie of the members of the SSBC. “We get together from time to time, we visit each other’s studios, and we just talk shop. That’s the main thing about the society—we share information. That’s why we joined. And yet we’re individual sculptors in our own right.”

Shyly or confidently, each of the individual sculptors in Fletcher’s studio speaks of his practice. Cliff Vincenzi, whose rough-hewn portraits in bronze reflect his admiration for the work of

Auguste Rodin, says, “I like taking the human figure and then kind of pushing it around and stylizing it.

“I’ve cast bronze for about 30 years from my residence in Richmond, and before that, I worked with a sculptor named Jack Harmon,” he says. “We cast a lot of Bill Reid’s first bronzes.”

Alex Schick draws many of his subjects from the natural world—from philodendron leaves to polar bears. He is both a bronze caster and a stone carver, and as he flips through his portfolio, he talks about how any given chunk of stone will dictate the form that emerges from it. “It’s amazing what you can do with a rock,” he adds, pointing to a photo of a sculpture made from a single piece of soapstone: its unpolished forms are an opaque white; its polished areas are a translucent green. Schick has exhibited his work at the Canadian Museum of Nature in Ottawa and his carvings are in a number of corporate and government collections.

A self-taught artist, Ron Simmer creates humorous sculptures out of scavenged materials, from old brass water tanks and broken garden tools to rebar and bicycle parts. “I enjoy the mental game of taking consumer discards and making the mundane and common into the unique and spectacular,” he says. Simmer describes his sculptures of big flowers, bouncing dogs, and long-legged birds as “resembling oversize children’s toys”. Some have been sited as public art throughout the Pacific Northwest, and others temporarily staged at arts festivals and community events, including a huge assemblage of salvaged driftwood, set afire at Burning Man.

Many of Jean-Guy Dallaire’s bronze sculptures are based on natural forms, such as stones he finds on Vancouver beaches. Both figurative and abstract, they are a homage to the work of Henry Moore. Rather than modelling his works in clay before casting them in bronze, he carves them in Sahara foam.

“It’s a material that was developed maybe 40, 50 years ago for florists,” Dallaire says. “I had a friend who was a florist, and one day I was visiting his studio and I asked, ‘What is this stuff that seems to be so easy to cut?’ And being a little lazy by nature, it suited me very, very well. So I took one of those little blocks home and that was the beginning of years of exploration.”

Dallaire also casts his works in plaster and will be demonstrating this technique during the SSBC show at VanDusen. (Works will be installed between the Visitor Centre and the formal rose garden, adjacent to the Shaughnessy Restaurant.) Fletcher, who will be showing visitors how to carve in stone, says, “Sculptors by tradition pass down their secrets and their techniques and their knowledge.”

Outside his studio, the rain has stopped; inside, the four other artists are still chatting. Fletcher looks at them with respect and affection, then adds, “Even though sculptors may be fiercely independent, vying for commissions, they have a great camaraderie.”