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{COLLECTING} {*New Orleans-Style*}

A Conversation with **Sydney Besthoff**

by Robert Preece

Since the 1970s, Sydney and Walda Besthoff have specialized in collecting modern and contemporary sculpture, in addition to photorealist painting. In November 2003, the five-acre Sydney and Walda Besthoff Sculpture Garden opened at the New Orleans Museum of Art. It features 50 sculptures, 41 of them donated by the Besthoffs' foundation, including works by Arman, Botero, Bourgeois, Burton, Chadwick, Chia, Hepworth, Lipchitz, McCollum, Moore, Pomodoro, Rickey, Segal, Shapiro, and Zadkine. (The remaining nine were museum purchases or gifts from other donors.)

Previously, most of the Besthoffs' sculpture collection was on view at K&B Plaza, a seven-story office building in downtown New Orleans, which Sydney Besthoff purchased in 1973. The building, designed by Skidmore, Owings and Merrill in 1960–62 and featuring an 18-foot granite sculptural fountain designed by Isamu Noguchi, became the headquarters of K&B Incorporated, a family-owned drugstore chain founded by Besthoff's grandfather in 1905. Besthoff served as chairman and CEO of K&B until 1997, when he sold it to the Rite Aid Corporation. He still owns the building though, and, even after the donation, it still contains a sizable art collection.

Besthoff has served on the boards of numerous business and arts organizations. He was a founder of the Contemporary Arts Center of New Orleans and past president of its board of directors. He also serves on the board of the New Orleans Museum of Art. Meanwhile, Walda Besthoff has had a lifetime commitment to the performing arts, particularly theater and dance, as a performer, staffer, and patron. Mrs. Besthoff served on the board of the Contemporary Arts Center in the 1980s, chairing the Capital Campaign for its expansion. She is currently a trustee of the New Orleans Museum of Art. Sydney and Walda Besthoff are the recipients of the International Sculpture Center's

2004 Patrons Recognition Award. The couple will accept the award at a gala in their honor on Saturday, October 30, 2004 at the New Orleans Museum of Art.

**Louise Bourgeois, *Spider*, 1996. Bronze,
70 x 296 x 278 in.**



Robert Preece: *What particularly attracted you and Mrs. Besthoff to 20th-century sculpture?*

Sydney Besthoff: Originally, we were very interested in collecting antique furniture. However, after you fill up the house, there's not much you can do. So, we wanted something else to collect. And I particularly wanted to collect something within my size range, that I could get my arms around, that wasn't too vast. And so we selected a very abstruse form of art known as photorealism and went into it in the late '60s/early '70s, when it was just starting to become a really hot area. After that, we became very interested in other forms of art.

We thought that sculpture was a nice adjunct, and we had an office building in downtown New Orleans—with a 20,000-square-foot plaza. We commissioned our first work, which happened to be by George Rickey, and George was really delighted with the commission. He came here to install the piece. And I worked with him on the installation—in the sense that I was around. I got really interested, and that started me off. From there, we commissioned a few pieces, bought a few pieces. As the years went on and on, we had a lot of stuff.

RP: *Forty-one major works is a huge gift. What conditions did you require? What concerns did you have?*

SB: I did put some conditions on the gift. The garden was to be named after my wife and myself. A portion of the pieces have to be shown on a continuing basis. For a certain period of time, they cannot be alienated—sold, mortgaged, transferred, or gifted.

Above: Arman, *Pablo Casals's Obelisk*, 1983. Bronze, 240 x 84 x 60 in. **Left:** Saint Clair Cemin, *Acme*, 1990. Copper, 59 x 44 x 44 in.

Michael Sandle, *The Drummer*, 1985. Bronze, 106 x 55 in.

Those were the basic conditions. And the garden had to be open to the public.

RP: *Do you mean admission-free?*

SB: No. Just open to the public. It's currently admission-free. I didn't want to have the museum lock the garden up—not allow access or open it only to members. It has happened in the past with gifts.

RP: *Why did you do this? Why now?*

SB: We had already set up a foundation, and all the pieces given to the museum were part of the foundation. So, there was no tax benefit in giving the sculptures to the museum. We wanted to donate the works at this point in time because it would be good for the city of New Orleans, certainly good for the museum, and it would simplify my estate. What are my kids going to do with the pieces when I die? So we thought it was a good time. The sculpture garden was in the planning stages for about 10 years. As with all nonprofit entities, everything had to be done by consensus, and it took a long time to work out the details.

RP: *I understand that you were intimately involved in the practical aspects of installing the sculptures in the garden. Could you explain how this worked?*

SB: First, for the general garden design, Lee Ledbetter, the architect, and the landscape architect, based in New York, laid out the overall site. I provided input about the paths and spaces for the garden design. Then we placed the sculptures. We sited each sculpture where we thought it was best—a four-way mutual discussion—myself, the museum director, the architect, and the landscape architect. And we had some arguments: "This should go here." "No, it should go here because..." And so on. For example, the architect sometimes wanted one thing, and we were looking for another, and the museum was looking for another concept as well. So it turns out, most of the "more sedate" pieces are in the pine grove as you first come in, and the more contemporary pieces are on the far side.

When it came to the installation, we had to discuss how the sculptures were to be mounted. And that required a fair amount of discussion. Some pieces were already on plinths when they were here at the K&B Plaza. Some were re-used, but a lot of times we had to design bases. Other sculptures didn't need bases because they sit directly on the ground. I was involved in the discussions, and I have a lot of practical experience on how to do it. You're moving a 2,000-pound sculpture, and it has to fit between trees and branches, and it has to come down on the right spot—and it needs a plinth that is going to weigh 2,000 pounds, needs to be bolted together, and that sort of thing.

RP: *For me, the garden was rather intense. I can't place why exactly. There are many layers to the design: the architecture, the paths, the integration*



with water, the greenery, and the various kinds of staging. Sometimes it's dramatic.

SB: That's a very astute observation. One of the things that makes the garden relatively unique is that it has all of these different concepts built in. The architectural concept has no straight lines, everything is curved. It's a real English countryside garden, in the style of Capability Brown. We specifically wanted to get away from the Italian Renaissance and the French formal look, which most sculpture gardens adopt for some reason. So the walks and the concepts were designed with that in mind. Another thing is that because New Orleans is built on an alluvial plain, and there are no hills, the highest elevation is two feet above the next highest elevation.

RP: *That's amazing, because it feels a bit billy.*

SB: That's because you're looking at the sides of the lagoon, which is really only nine inches deep. In the

garden, we inherited 100-year-old pines and 200-year-old oak trees. We took out about 60 trees that were diseased and put in 125. In another 25 years, they'll be gorgeous. The sculptures are among them. We specifically wanted to have the three bridges and the walks, to have different views of the sculptures. You get various views, including the two in the lagoon itself. You see the sculptures in a complete "surround" basis. And there are no "keep off the grass" signs.

One thing we knew was that if we didn't enclose it or fence it, we would have vandalism problems, but the landscape architect designed it so you wouldn't have views beyond the fence. There's lots of shrubbery, and the fence will be covered in five years. So it'll be hidden from exterior views—except for certain cut-throughs in the shrubbery.

RP: *How is buying a sculpture different for you and Mrs. Besthoff now compared to the first purchases?*

SB: Well, of course, it's much more expensive now than 30 years ago. That's the big difference. We were



not as knowledgeable before. It was more on a coincidental basis. Now we think we know what we are interested in. And we zero in on particular artists. Usually, we work from that standpoint rather than use a scattershot approach.

RP: *What things would you recommend to someone interested in serious collecting?*

SB: First, you have to do a lot of reading—the trade press, the brochures—and know enough to decide on your area of concentration. And get to know the players in the field—the art dealers and the museums, those who specialize in your particular field of interest.

RP: *I understand that the last ISC conference held in New Orleans in 1976 inspired you and Mrs. Besthoff in some way.*

SB: We had just bought the K&B building a couple of years before. The Noguchi at the time was inoperative—and I had to get it to work. At that time, I had already commissioned the Rickey and I had some experience with that. The ISC had a conference here, and I went. I enjoyed it, went to several other meetings, and I've been a member ever since.

RP: *Do you think that the art world needs to be more business-like, and, if so, how?*

Above: Arnaldo Pomodoro, *Una Battaglia (A Battle)*, 1971. Bronze and stainless steel, 149 x 149 x 141 in. **Left:** Lynn Chadwick, *Two Sitting Figures*, 1979–80. Bronze, 66 x 33 x 56 in.

Sorel Etrog, *Large Pulcinella*, 1965–67. Bronze, 113 x 51.5 x 27 in.

SB: I could talk for days about that. The art world is definitely not the business world. It operates on its own principles. And you have to recognize that. With our exposure via the Contemporary Art Center, years ago, we became well aware of that situation. It's not just the artists who are usually not so business-like or organized, it's the dealers as well.

RP: *Writers too, right?*

SB: Well, I don't know if I'd say that. We were talking about artspeak earlier today. And that's one of the funniest things you have to learn. How to get through the artspeak.

RP: *What do you think needs to be done to more effectively encourage patronage of modern/contemporary art in the U.S.?*

SB: I think art right now is having a real renaissance, in that more people are interested in it, they're talking about it, and museums are still doing very well in terms of attendance. It's not classed with professional football, but there is a surge in attendance. More public-interest shows. Also, the art dealers could explain their art better. That's important.

Among the key things not talked about in the art world are the pricing arrangements, which are always confused. For example, the only national art market is the auction house system, and that is the only way that anybody who is interested can know what art is truly worth on a public basis. The art galleries price their artists' merchandise on the basis of what they think it will bring. Frequently those prices have no relation to reality. They're not what the artist would sell the work for in a perfect market. The galleries are asking more, and sometimes they're asking a lot less than the public market. It is not an organized marketplace. One interesting thing is that pricing is different geographically—in New York, New Orleans, Europe, and across America.

RP: *Any other ways that the modern/contemporary art market could be more facilitating to collectors?*

SB: As you know, the modern/contemporary art world is an elitist operation—at best. Therefore, it has to maintain its mystique as an elitist operation. If it loses that, it becomes a commodity. When you go into a gallery, and they ignore you, when they know you are interested; that's part of the mystique of gallery shopping.

RP: *You have been ignored in galleries?*

SB: Everyone has been ignored in galleries.

RP: *We actually like it sometimes, maybe.*

SB: That's true. But, of course, the New York galleries are notorious for this.

RP: *But in your view of art, you feel very differently. You don't think of it as an elitist thing.*

SB: That's true. I don't, but people do. The public does. Absolutely.

RP: *What goals would you and Mrs. Besthoff like*



to achieve over the next five years—and more—with the sculpture garden?

SB: We'd like to add a few pieces. I think we can add as many as 25 pieces to the garden. My wife thinks we can add 10. Of course, anything that we'd do would have to be in conjunction with the museum.

RP: *Do you have other collecting goals?*

SB: I certainly am interested in doing something for the museum on a continuing basis. We'll have to find some categories and concepts that they feel they would like to have. On a personal basis, I now have a fairly empty plaza downstairs. And I can do pretty much anything.

Robert Preece, a resident of New Orleans in the mid-1980s, is now based in Rotterdam, the Netherlands. He's a contributing editor for Sculpture and focuses on contemporary art and design.