

# STEPHEN HANSEN

## The Kalamazoo Years



KALAMAZOO INSTITUTE OF ARTS

**Cover Illustration**

Fun, Fun, Fun, 1990, papier mache, 50" X 40" X 9". Lent by Laura & Graham Eddleston.

**Opposite**

Cow Screen, 1981, papier mache, 42" x 65-3/4" x 11-1/2". Lent by Nancy Phillips & Steve Frykholm.

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STEPHEN HANSEN

The Kalamazoo Years

September 8 - November 15, 1992



KALAMAZOO INSTITUTE OF ARTS

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## FOREWORD



*Mental Floss, 1981*

It is a great pleasure for the Kalamazoo Institute of Arts to present a comprehensive exhibit of the work of one of Kalamazoo's own, Stephen Hansen. Well-known in this area for a number of years, Steve's work has now earned a national reputation including the commission of a permanent installation in the Smithsonian Institution in Washington D.C. Because of Steve's recent move to the Southwest with his family, the KIA staff felt that now is an appropriate time to showcase Steve's work dating from his Kalamazoo years. This is, of course, in keeping with the Art Institute's focus to exhibit on a regular basis the work of local artists either in groups or individually as this exhibition certainly does.

Tracing a period of over twenty years, we have the opportunity to see the wide range of Steve's work. Included are over fifty of his well-known papier mache sculptures either as free-standing works or reliefs as well as more unusual pieces such as a pendant for a necklace and pieces for a chess set. Each and every work depicts a situation with which we are familiar. We see portrayed the people or animals who surround us in situations which often leave us with a smile. Often the title which Steve has carefully chosen is an intricate part of the work. Included also are over thirty works on paper, including 27 drawings some of which are preparatory for his sculptures and thirty prints.

It has been over ten years since Steve has created a new print but he has created one in connection with this exhibition. "You Are Here" depicts the typical Michigander who points out on his right hand the location of a city

or area in the Lower Peninsula of the state. The figure surrounded by numerous symbols of our community is pointing to Kalamazoo. It is a fine testimony to Steve's Kalamazoo years.

This exhibition and its accompanying catalogue would not have been possible without the hard work and able endeavors of several of the Institute's staff to whom we are extremely grateful: Helen Sheridan, Director of Collections and Exhibitions, who organized this exhibition and is responsible for the catalogue text; Douglas Neal who photographed several of the works; Linda Young, Museum Education Coordinator; Clifford Mulder, Director of Development; Lois Matthews, Communications Coordinator and finally Gregory Waskowsky ARTreach Coordinator and Ron Dumont, Exhibits Preparator, whose hard work and design sense created a fine exhibition installation. Credit for the outstanding catalogue design goes to Thomas Kayser of Tom Kayser & Associates. In addition, we thank the numerous lenders, private and corporate, listed in our Acknowledgements, for sharing these works with us. An exhibition such as this would not have been possible without their generous loans. Special thanks to Wm. John Upjohn who first suggested such an exhibition. Without his generous support this exhibition as we see it would not have been possible. Finally, our thanks and deep appreciation to Julie and Steve Hansen who have contributed so much of themselves, of their time, and of their art to make this exhibition possible.

**James A. Bridenstine, Executive Director**



*The Litigator, 1991*

#### A CONVERSATION WITH THE ARTIST

*\*Taken from a conversation between Helen Sheridan and Stephen Hansen recorded on Tuesday, July 21, 1992, at the Kalamazoo Institute of Arts.*

HELEN: Stephen, how do you regard your work? Is it vocation, avocation, or both?

STEPHEN: It's probably what I would do if I were independently wealthy, but it's also the only job I ever had.

HELEN: You worked with papier mache as a child. But how did it develop from a childhood exercise into a full-blown career?

STEPHEN: It's something I've always done and, when I began to make art for sale, I came back to papier mache. Wood carving, which I actually prefer, takes too long, and bronze casting is tedious. Papier mache is fast and cheap. You can also make something too large for people to ignore. That probably used to appeal to me more than it does now. I've recently concluded that what I make should be more compact, but for a while I liked working large.

HELEN: Were you always drawn to three-dimensional form?

STEPHEN: For several years, in late high school and just after, I did very somber and realistic looking paintings. But I always felt very pretentious doing it. I think of painting as very serious. It's too intimidating and stressful. There's too little actual physical labor for the amount of time you spend working on a piece. With sculpture there's a lot of work at each stage before you

have to make the next decision. There's always something you do with your hands while you're thinking.

HELEN: What about drawing?

STEPHEN: I don't take drawing as seriously. I regard every drawing as kind of a throwaway, unless I like it. There isn't the same kind of pressure.

HELEN: Is papier mache fun to do?

STEPHEN: It's a way of accomplishing what I want to do. I'm not sure that I really like it. I don't like having my hands sticky, which they are all the time. But I like it better than having my hands in plaster, which is my other option.

HELEN: When did you decide to make your living with art? Was there ever any question of another career?

STEPHEN: I avoided thinking about whether or not I was going to have any sort of career. The presumption was that I would get a teaching certificate in art. My junior high guidance counselor's conclusion was that, since I was good with my hands, I should be a dentist. Basically, at the same time I was avoiding choosing a career, I was evolving one anyway. It never came to be a conscious decision. I have the same job now I had when I was 15. I already had the job before I had to decide what I was going to do.

HELEN: Do you have the same vision? Were the art objects you were making and selling then the same response to everyday life that your sculpture seems to be right now?

STEPHEN: I see it as an evolution rather than a change in what I set out to do. My work is more personal than it was 15 years ago. Although at various times I've fought with or attempted to change my esthetic vision, I'd

say my work is pretty much the same. In terms of composition and how I treat subject matter, it's very much the same.

HELEN: You were a young man at a very important time. The late 60s caused huge social changes in our country. How did this affect your art?

STEPHEN: I was simply living the day. The period was beneficial in a mundane way. I was poorly paid, but there was an esthetic of poverty at the time. That made my life easy. I felt more like a tourist and didn't take the social changes all that seriously. I had no sense of dramatic change going on, though probably there was more than I was conscious of.

HELEN: So at that time you really were observing rather than engaged in these changes?

STEPHEN: Sometimes it disturbs me, but I've always felt somewhat disengaged.

HELEN: When you said your work is more personal now, does that mean you are more engaged with your subject matter?

STEPHEN: I'm closer to other people now. Having a family, knowing people for a long time and watching their lives change causes that.

HELEN: When you came to Kalamazoo in 1968 was it to study art at Western Michigan University?

STEPHEN: Actually I was a religion major, but most of my time was already consumed making art. I went to the university because that's what one did at my age. The area of greatest interest to me was religion. Western had a very good religion department.

HELEN: But you were supporting yourself at that time without help from your family?

STEPHEN: Yes. As I said, it was a very easy time to be poor.

HELEN: If you were making papier mache sculpture at the time, where were you selling?

STEPHEN: Galleries.

HELEN: You were represented by galleries as a teenager?

STEPHEN: Yes. On the gallery floors no one asks how old you are. I suppose it was even impressive that I was younger. It was something of a selling point, though I was never involved in the selling of my art. Someone once complimented me on my sales technique. I asked what that was and they said, "You don't seem to care at all whether anyone buys or not."

HELEN: So your university training didn't have much impact on your art making?

STEPHEN: No. My classes at Western were an agreeable and probably beneficial hobby, but it didn't actually affect my art.

HELEN: Did you visit the KIA in those years?

STEPHEN: Yes. I was very impressed with the KIA as an institution. For people who are self-motivated or know what they want to learn, it's a much easier and more efficient way than going through the university program. At the KIA you can just go in and learn to use the machines or tools you want to learn to use.

HELEN: Didn't you learn printmaking at the KIA?

STEPHEN: Yes. At a David Driesbach workshop. Of course, a lot of printmaking is self-evident. For instance, anyone can make a woodcut, though it may come out badly. Etching and lithography, of course, are technically much more complicated.

HELEN: Did you do any bronze casting here?

STEPHEN: I worked for Kirk Newman for a time. That's how I first got involved with the KIA. I also worked briefly as a jewelry teacher. I'm not sure it's good to mention it, but I'm really a lousy teacher. I feel I owe an apology to anyone who was ever my student. Since I regard a whole lot of the art-making process as self-evident, I think I instinctively supposed that others would also. I didn't provide much direction in classes. As a teacher, I was able to use the facility. That was wonderful. The weak part of the plan was that I actually had to teach some of the time. I quickly realized I was far better off signing up as a student, which I did.

HELEN: But you did learn printmaking here?

STEPHEN: Yes. Also bronze-casting techniques and moldmaking. Virtually everything that wasn't self-evident, I learned in and around the Art Center. It's a facility that has a wide range of things going on and it's compact enough that you can experiment in different areas. It's very handy when you're making embossed etchings to have a jewelry shop immediately next door.

HELEN: Didn't you also study in Europe?

STEPHEN: Well, I did in an even less formal sense. I did shows for the State Department at a number of cultural centers abroad. The U.S. has little cultural centers all over, often in conjunction with arts councils in different countries. I knew a lot of people in the State Department and ended up doing a lot of shows because of those contacts.

HELEN: How did you make your first contact with the State Department?

STEPHEN: Years ago, my brother worked as the commercial attache for Italy. He had a huge villa by the sea and I went to stay with him for awhile. I met a lot of people there who always seemed to be looking for shows. Several of these people organized art-related activities for the U.S. Information Agency and the State Department. I still work with them. Right now I have a show up at the Venezuelan Embassy.

HELEN: You've had a lot of lucky breaks.

STEPHEN: Sometimes that makes me nervous. I don't think I'm ambitious by nature. I've always had the sense that all I can really do to make my life and career better is to work harder at my art since it's the only part I do well.

HELEN: But you do take advantage of the opportunities that come your way?

STEPHEN: Opportunities come, I suppose, because of the appeal of the work. It's fortunate to meet people who are organizing shows in various countries. But I'm only likely to benefit if I have something they want to put up.

HELEN: To what do you attribute the appeal of your work?

STEPHEN: I try not to confuse the theory, or what I think about while I'm working, with the work itself. My theories about the appeal are arrived at after the fact. They're probably no more accurate than anyone else's. I think people like my work because it's personal. Also, the level of abstraction I use is selected to encourage accessibility.

I grew up in Seattle. When I started thinking about art and going to the museums there, the best of what I saw was the ethnographic work from the area — the Pacific Northwest Indians, such as the Bella Coola and Kwakiutl. For example, if you look at an Indian rendition of a puffin, it doesn't look like a puffin in many ways. It's more like a generic version of a puffin, especially when compared with something done by Audubon. In looking at the skill with which Indian carving was done, you realize two things: first of all, they know exactly what a puffin looks like and, second, that although their work clearly shows they can render this thing any way they please, they've chosen a level of abstraction that for them represents the puffin in an essential way.

If I make a figure that is very realistic, only one person in a million is going to say, "That looks just like my uncle." But with a certain level of abstraction, maybe one person in five will say, "I have an uncle who looks just like that." If I make something life-like, rather than realistic, I can engage a lot more people. Personally, I find terribly realistic images of the human figure a little creepy. It begins to seem a whole lot like taxidermy to me. Also I've come to think of realism as a crutch. There's a long process between the perfect idea for a piece that I start with, through the various stages of building, to the final product. When I run into problems and can't figure out what else to do, I'll make a feature look like it is in real life. But the piece tends not to be as lively as it would be otherwise.

Another problem with realism — even with making something life size — if you exaggerate anything, the piece becomes kind of grotesque. But if everything is uniformly abstracted and of a reasonable size, you don't have to neutralize or waterdown the effect of any exaggeration.

HELEN: So you don't think of your forms as caricatures?

STEPHEN: Most people see the narrative in my work. Of course, narrative is very important, but it ceases to be of much consequence at the very outset of a project. My decisions involve composition, the arrangement of shapes, and conveying a sense of liveliness. While the narrative may be appealing, it's a given once I start and has little to do with whether or not the piece will be successful.

HELEN: For you, the formal problems are more important than the story a piece conveys?

STEPHEN: Very much so. Of course the form has to complement the narrative. The narrative allows a point of access for people looking at a piece.

HELEN: How do the ideas come?

STEPHEN: Oh, they're just continuous. I explore ideas through drawing. If I had to pick a tool that would symbolize art for me, it would be a pencil. Of course, I wear out the erasers before I go through an inch of pencil. I change the drawing constantly and, for any particular drawing I do, I could probably tell you how it evolved. For example, take "The Litigator," an idea I explored in several drawings and then made into a multiple. The idea came while I was talking to a client and friend who is a lawyer in Detroit. For some reason it occurred to me that, unlike most people, he and a lot of lawyers like him really fancy the idea that professionally they are vicious and aggressive. Of course, the play on words was natural. A lot of ideas start with phrases or bits of conversation I hear or read. In one of those endless recent economic articles, someone was talking about how they thought they were secure in the fast track, then suddenly lost their job and their life was ruined. I was struck by the phrase, "secure in the fast track," and made a drawing of a man tied to a railroad track.

HELEN: Do you keep a notebook for ideas like that?

STEPHEN: I occasionally make tiny little sketches and fold them up quickly in my pocket, but rarely use them. I find that if I don't remember it, it probably wasn't that good an idea.

HELEN: Brilliant things have probably been lost!

STEPHEN: Probably. Sometimes I'm concerned I might forget an idea, which is why I keep those little Post-It notes. But I find that the ideas I don't remember when I start drawing again the next morning usually aren't worth it even when I find the little sketches. Either I remember the idea and just go ahead and draw without looking at the sketch or, if I don't do a good job drawing, I tend to think it's a bad idea. Sometimes I carry around a title I like for years before I make a sculpture of it.

HELEN: Your titles seem very important. There are so many puns.

STEPHEN: A lot of them are afterthoughts made up for the sake of identification on an inventory list. But sometimes I have the title long before there's a piece to go with it. I will catch a phrase that just sticks with me. I might hear something like, for example, "the lipstick, the cigarettes, the gin and the jazz," and like it. I might never do anything with a title, but I probably should do something with that one. I did with "Oh Brad, You Swine." I had heard the phrase somewhere, probably on a soap opera, and it stuck with me.



HELEN: But your debonair swine is fun. Even though you seem to be pointing out the absurdities of our behavior, some of the silliness in the way we live and talk and interact, it's not a caustic commentary. Yours is a gentle kind of humor. You don't seem to be angry with anybody or anything.

STEPHEN: I remember reading once that there are two kinds of people in the world: those who feel, think life is a sorrow; those who think, think life is a joke. I'm basically in the second category. I've always felt I was an observer. I also recognize the fact that I'm fully participating in all of the absurdities around me.

HELEN: You include yourself in your observations?

STEPHEN: Yes. Everything I make up has a large element of autobiography, whether or not it's specific. The fact that I've become more engaged with people has changed the shape of my work in many ways. It has become more complex. I've been making more reliefs where I can involve more figures.

HELEN: Instead of the isolated standing figures of the early years?

STEPHEN: Yes. The isolated forms were outside and independent.

HELEN: Your recent works are very complex, with multiple figures and very dynamic structures. They reflect your more sophisticated view of the world?

STEPHEN: Oh, I think they probably do. Although it's not that complicated a piece, "Oh Brad, You Swine," is a good example. I had to condense the idea to something that had a specific perimeter, a single object that indicated the personality types involved. Brad had to be interacting with somebody else for him to be a swine. I had to establish what sort of person he was, what sort of person he was reacting with, and what swine-like action he would be doing. I had a lot of things to accomplish in the least space possible. I solved the problem by having him locked in an embrace with a woman. She seems to be absolutely sincere, but he's kissing her with his eyes open. It seemed a fairly successful resolution to the problem. Since I made the piece, an amazing number of

people, especially teenage girls, have told me how absolutely gross Brad's open eyes are and really recognize him as some kind of pig for doing that. I did better than I thought in how it was perceived.

Anyway, I think of this kind of reduction as essential. I've come to regard much of life as a storage problem, and think I owe it to the world to condense as much as I can into as small a space as possible.

HELEN: This also speaks to your increased mastery of the medium.

STEPHEN: I've always found that it was important, in every medium I've ever worked in to design towards what I thought I could accomplish. Of course, you shouldn't design things you can't build.

HELEN: Do you have many throw-aways?

STEPHEN: About one in ten.

HELEN: That's a great percentage!

STEPHEN: Oh, but I throw away two out of three drawings. Those are the starting point.

HELEN: What are the different stages in the development of an idea?

STEPHEN: I don't really have a complete idea unless I do a drawing. But I've found there's not nearly as much in my drawings as I often think. I realize that when I look back at them later. I'll start with a very detailed idea, and the drawing is a way of outlining my thinking. At that point it's almost perfect. The whole process of building something out of it is a way of trying to keep from screwing up a good idea. It's like a game where you start out with a really good score and then try to keep from ruining your score by the end. My failures are where I get something built but then decide I hate it. I start with drawings, but many will be ruled out for a dozen different reasons. Some ideas may simply be physically impossible: for example, something that requires being suspended in mid-air without anything showing.

HELEN: You start with the idea, you make the drawing, you're satisfied with the drawing. Where does it go from there? Do you have to think about a project for a long while?



*Oh Brad, You Swine, 1986*

STEPHEN: I'm better off if I don't think about it for more than about ten minutes. I either do it or don't do it.

HELEN: So the technical considerations are such a built-in part of the way you work that you don't have to think much about them?

STEPHEN: There are probably a lot of people who can bring an amazing amount of evidence to refute this, but I think the technical requirements in art are minimal compared to almost any other kind of engineering. They are really not that much of a problem for me. It's not like a chair that somebody has to sit in it or a car whose parts have to move. Art only has to exist as an object. If it is left relatively unmolested, it will continue to do exactly what it does and just sit there. That's not a significant requirement as long as it's physically possible to get a piece built. One advantage with papier mache is that there isn't a tremendous amount of weight. That is a problem when you're carving stone, for example. I find that the faster and more directly I go from the drawing to building an armature, the better sense I have of what's really there. A drawing, however complete, is not the same thing as a plan.

HELEN: Do you work on a number of drawings at the same time?

STEPHEN: It depends. Usually if I play with a drawing for very long, I end up keeping it around forever and never actually building it. Much of the motivation to make a piece is in seeing how it comes out. The drawings I like best are really fairly simple sketches. I usually proceed quite directly. Some mornings I'll do five drawings I like, and two or three of them I'll actually build into pieces. Sometimes I just work on one.

HELEN: Is morning your most creative time? Is that when you do your drawing?

STEPHEN: I think I draw then because nothing has disrupted me yet. I simply get up and draw before there's any other stimulation.

HELEN: So in the afternoon, when you're less fresh, you can work on your sculpture?

STEPHEN: In my idealized day, I draw until about 10:00 and then build the armature for what I drew. The next day, if all of the mechanics are worked out, I do the papier mache.

HELEN: Do you work on several projects at once?

STEPHEN: Oh, yes. There's drying time involved. I build them to the point at which I've done all I can, let the piece sit for a couple of weeks, and then rebuild it. Ideally, a large sculpture takes four full days spread out over a couple of months. There are always a lot of details. Say you have a figure in a grocery store with a cart. It's easy to draw a grocery cart, but once you start building you're stuck with all kinds of detail. There's a lot of labor left to take up an afternoon when you're not feeling creative.

HELEN: Have you learned to steer away from labor-intensive forms?

STEPHEN: No. Although it's what I do for money, I never find myself thinking of the actual cost ratio of what I do. Some days are spent far more profitably than others, not because I'm more efficient but be-



*The artist in his studio*

cause of the particular requirements of the sculpture. I don't determine cost by the amount of time I spend. It's more a matter of how successfully a piece is completed. I find it just amazing that people buy things anyway.

HELEN: Your success surprises you?

STEPHEN: No, I guess I've come to assume it, but I can't really put my finger on why anybody would buy my work.

HELEN: That's the least of your worries, I would think.

STEPHEN: Well, it's not one of my worries. If it were, it would probably ruin me. I don't think that I could work with the idea that a piece had to sell, just because I wouldn't know where to make my decisions.

HELEN: And yet you have a lot of commissions.

STEPHEN: Yes, it does strike me as odd that I build this stuff all the time and there just isn't any that isn't sold. It seems an unlikely thing to have ever anticipated. And I'm not entirely comfortable with the idea of presuming it though I suppose at this point in time I could.

HELEN: It's a nice position for an artist to be in.

STEPHEN: It's nice because it would be very difficult to make art if I had to consider how I was going to sell it. The act of building something involves a tremendous number of little decisions, mundane ones like whether or not a shoulder is too wide. I don't know how I would handle those decisions if I found myself thinking about how a potential buyer might like the shoulders. I wouldn't know how to deal with those decisions.

HELEN: Do you produce specific commissions?

STEPHEN: In a very general way I can make to order. I actually find that is sometimes good for me — like the project I did for the Smithsonian Information Age exhibit. What I got from them was a clear idea of what they wanted the sculpture to accomplish. Fortunately for me, it was something that I had definite feelings about. In that sense, I can work to order. But if somebody gave me a drawing and wanted me to build it, I don't feel I could accomplish it successfully. It would bother me forever and ever to see the results, even if they thought it was fine. My one really big fear in making art is that I'm going to be at an opening where there is something I made in the room that I don't like.

HELEN: Well, the KIA show is a retrospective — Stephen Hansen at mid-career...

STEPHEN: The Kalamazoo years ...

HELEN: Yes, the Kalamazoo years. We're aiming for a summary of your development as an artist. So we'll be drawing from collectors all around the area. Do you think you're going to see works from these early years that you'll be unhappy with?

STEPHEN: Almost without question. Of course, many of the pieces I liked I remember more favorably. But a lot of people have bought things that aren't really a part of what you might call the comprehensive body of my work. I have a couple of pieces that I like very much. But I don't know what I would think about a lot of the others. There's probably a lot of my work that I'd like to destroy.

HELEN: We will be having some very early pieces — an early wood carving, for instance.

STEPHEN: I tend to like those better. Wood carvings appeal to me. Also, they look good old. But very often it makes me uncomfortable to see older works of mine. On the other hand, it would be very disturbing if I decided that what I was making some years before was better than what I was doing now. The only reason for going forward is the idea that the new work is better.

HELEN: Do you think there's a chance you'll like the old work better than the work that you do now?

STEPHEN: If I did, I would probably try to push myself back in that direction. I suppose it should be

regarded as a good sign that I've disliked older work. You have to think you're getting better...or else!

HELEN: Do you continue to like the medium? After all, you've been making papier mache for more than 20 years.

STEPHEN: Well, whenever I start not liking it, I switch to something else, find out what's wrong with that, and then find myself switching back.

HELEN: How long do those sabbaticals from papier mache tend to be?

STEPHEN: It depends on time and money and my interest. It actually takes me close to a month to get used to any change. If I switch to making prints, for example, I find that with the first couple of them there's usually a tendency to make pictures of sculpture. Then gradually I get used to the idea that I have background and can have unsupported structures. Once I become so used to the materials that I take them for granted, then I can really start thinking about what to do with them.

HELEN: Your prints have always been popular. Do you regard printmaking as a significant aspect of your career?

STEPHEN: It's something I think of fondly, but I don't actually like doing. As for line quality and particular images, I probably like the etchings best. That's also what I like doing least, because it's so laborious and involves a number of toxic materials. I do like the quality of line and, to achieve a certain kind of result, you have to do etching, but I've never much cared for lithography.

HELEN: But you've made some lithographs.

STEPHEN: I've had some done for me. I've just really never found them appealing. But I very much like doing woodcuts.

HELEN: Your sculptures translate very well into woodcut.

STEPHEN: I think that's because woodcut tends to be simple and, to some extent, spontaneous. Also a woodcut is either completed or a failure within a certain amount of time. I find that really appealing.

HELEN: The KIA exhibit marks a milestone in your life in that you've moved now to New Mexico and set up your studio there. Since you have a summer place in Michigan, will you also have a studio here?

STEPHEN: I envision building a screened-in gazebo where I can be like a gentleman watercolor painter, not that that's actually what I'd do. But the studio here will be a minimal one. I don't want to replicate my other facility. I can use the time in Michigan advantageously if I treat it as a break or a chance to do something different. If I tried to do more of the same kind of work, I would waste a lot of time and probably do some inferior work.

HELEN: So your Michigan summers from now on will be a break from your work?

STEPHEN: Well, I think my Michigan time will be more like my New Mexican time used to be. I used to go there in the winters because I like warm and sunny better than cold and bleak. I think a change of scene is

good. I have this dilemma. I can always pretend that I'm keeping myself from burnout when, in fact, I may be squandering a part of my life. I'm never sure which is which.

HELEN: Well, I wouldn't worry about it. You seem to be very work oriented.

STEPHEN: I do have good work habits.

HELEN: You work every day?

STEPHEN:

Yes. I don't mean rigid hours. But I've always believed that unless I was really having a lot of fun I might as well be working. There are always mechanical things to do. I don't like talking on the phone, so when I do I draw constantly. That doesn't mean that I'm not paying attention to the phone call; it's just that I need something to do while undergoing this period of stress. And if I find art stressful, it's good to have something to keep my hands busy while I'm doing it.

HELEN:

While one focus of the show here is to show your development, another is to demonstrate the number of Hansen collectors in the area, the support you've had over the years. It is remarkable for any artist to be so highly appreciated in his home community. Usually the community is the last to discover an artist.

STEPHEN: There is a tendency not to regard art as credible if it's local. Rather than simply buying art because they like it, I think people want to feel it is credible. They want to be certain that they're not somehow being chumped. I think Kalamazoo is more willing than most places to accept local artists. It's really unusual in that respect.

HELEN: How would you say your work has changed over the years?

STEPHEN: I would consider any change very much an evolution rather than a significant departure. There are a lot of little things that I could name, but all of the changes between the early years and now have been incremental. The changes that concern me most are probably barely perceptible to people looking at my work. A big change for me occurred when I switched from using nails to screws in building my armatures.

HELEN: But your pieces were better constructed.

STEPHEN: They were better constructed, and the way they were built allowed for a much more dynamic structure. I've become more responsible in building things. The amount of time I take to build them is far longer. And since I am building the pieces to last longer, I decided I had to get better at painting them. Earlier the colors were just essentially black and white. Especially when I started doing relief sculpture, it took me a few years to develop and gain control of a suitable painting style.

HELEN: So you have really learned your craft?

STEPHEN: I've never waited until I arrived at what I

thought I should be doing. I've always kind of lived off of the experiments. Some of these were less successful than others. As soon as I get it right, I'll have a great show!

HELEN: But your work still concerns the world around you and your unconventional ways of reacting to it?

STEPHEN: My feelings toward my subject matter have become less distant. I don't know how apparent that is to anyone looking at it from the outside. It's an odd thing. When I'm working on a sculpture, there's a point at which it becomes lively or it doesn't. It sounds strange, but at a certain point the sculpture starts looking back.



*Laughing Boys, 1991*

HELEN: It begins to engage you then?

STEPHEN: And if it doesn't, it'll probably never engage anyone else either. There should be a reason for everything added to the sculpture. It never works if there's a dissonance in the features. The tilt of the head has to match what the eyebrows are doing unless there's a reason not to. I've developed a much more sympathetic relationship with the sculptures. It is increasingly mysterious to me how

little changes can make such a big difference. The same thing is true of people. Some days, when you look in the mirror, you look good and some days you don't. And very small changes make the difference. In doing sculpture, it's the almost imperceptible changes that you've got to allow for and accomplish. And they've got to be readable from the outside. It's more complicated than I'm capable of doing, so I just work at it intuitively. Everything else, really, is an afterthought. It's when I'm building an armature, working on big body shapes, that

I have to establish the attitude. Later, when I'm doing the papier mache or completing the sculpture in some other way, I deal with the minute details of how, for example, an eyelid would be shaped. But everything has to match. If it doesn't all match, the whole thing doesn't work. I never really expect that anyone looking at the sculpture is

going to say "isn't it great how his eyelids match the way his arm goes out," but the effect will be accomplished. The idea, I suppose, is that you don't even want people to notice how the effect is accomplished.

HELEN: The average viewer probably isn't aware of all these steps.

STEPHEN: I think they're aware, but without knowing it. If a piece accomplishes its narrative, viewers

are receptive to the overall effects without being aware of the details that contribute to it. I've realized over time that the details that contribute to a successful work are so complex I have no idea of what I'm doing. I just do it. That's probably why my erasers end up shorter than my pencils.

HELEN: It may also be why your work continues to be so popular. You instill in your sculpture something that is true and real about the world and people. Viewers don't exhaust them on a first or second viewing. They can go back to discover new ideas and nuances not noticed before.

STEPHEN: I hope that's true. I

spend a lot of time and concentrated effort putting in things for people to discover, references to other artworks and so forth. While it's not necessary to notice them in order to enjoy the sculpture, it's important for me. I hope the exhibition will give viewers the chance to see my work in this way.



*You Are Here, 1992*



## Artist Biography

Born June 8, 1950, Tacoma, WA; moved to Midland, MI, 1966; resided in Kalamazoo, MI, 1968-1991; currently living in Las Cruces, NM.

Attended Western Michigan University; primarily self-taught.

Media include papier mache, design cast, wood, bronze, etching, engraving, and woodcut.

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### Selected Exhibitions

Xochipilli Gallery, Birmingham, MI: 1976, 77, 78, 80, 82, 84, 87, 90.

Gilman/Gruen Gallery, Chicago, IL: 1981, 83, 86, 88, 91.

Zenith Gallery, Washington, D.C.: 1979, 81, 87, 88, 90.

Rosenfeld Gallery, Philadelphia, PA: 1986, 87, 88, 90, 91.

United States Information Agency, Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, Colombo and Kandy, Sri Lanka: 1984.

Byer Museum of the Arts, Evanston, IL: 1983.

Six17 Gallery, Kalamazoo, MI: 1982, 86.

Kalamazoo Institute of Arts, Kalamazoo, MI: 1975, 78, 81, 92.

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### Public & Corporate Collections

Alo Alo, NYC

Amalgamated Bank, Chicago

Borg-Warner, Chicago

Byer Museum of the Arts, Evanston, IL

Canberra Industries Inc., Meriden, CT

Capital Center, Landover, MD

Capital Records, Los Angeles

Checker Motors, Kalamazoo, MI

Continental Air Transport, Chicago

Fort Wayne Museum of Art, Fort Wayne, IN

Flint Auto World, Flint, MI

The Hechinger Company, Landover, MD

Herman Miller Inc., Zeeland, MI; London; Paris; Toronto

Hughes Aircraft, El Segundo, CA

Kalamazoo Institute of Arts, Kalamazoo, MI

Luss/Kaplan, NYC

Mark Twain Banks, St. Louis

McDonald's Corporation, Oakbrook, IL; Toronto

Madowbrook Theater, Rochester, MI

Milcare, Zeeland, MI

Musee de Civilisation, Quebec

National Association of Homebuilders, Washington, D.C.

Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of

American History, Washington, D.C.

Standard Oil of Indiana, Chicago

Upjohn Institute, Kalamazoo, MI

The Upjohn Company, Kalamazoo, MI

WDIV, Channel 4, Detroit, MI

USIA, Washington, DC; Colombo and Kandy, Sri Lanka

U.S. Consular Collection, BiNational Gallery, Naples, Italy

U.S. Embassy, Rome, Italy; Caracas, Venezuela

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### Bibliography

Smithsonian, July 1990, v. 21: no. 4, p. 22.

Museum and Arts-Washington, May/June 1990, v. VI, no. 3, p. 82.

New Woman, October 1990, p. 36.

New View, Summer 1990, v. III, issue III, no. VI, p. 9.

Michigan Bar Journal, June 1989, v. 68, no. 6.

Interior Design, Sept. 1985, v. 56, no. 9, p. 278.

Money, Nov. 1985, v. 14, no. 11, p. 157.

Across the Board, May 1985, v. XXII, no. 5.

Architecture, Aug. 1984, p. 31.

Encore Magazine of the Arts, Mar. 1982, v. 9, no. 6.

Fortune Magazine, June 15, 1981.

### Video

"Stephen Hansen: Papier Mache Sculpture," produced by Mark Spink, Documentary Profile, Media Services, Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, MI, 1986.

"Reading Rainbow - The Purple Coat." Lancit Media Productions, NYC, 1988.



*Nature's Rich Pageant, 1983*

## Stephen Hansen Checklist:

### Sculpture

- Baboon**, ca. 1970,  
*papier mache*, 17 x 18 x 25.  
Lent by Ann & John Rapp.
- Lady on Couch**, 1971,  
*bronze*, 2-1/2 x 5-1/2 x 3.  
Lent by Margaret & Verne Berry.
- Booga Booga Man**, 1971-72,  
*papier mache*, 55 x 28 x 19.  
Lent by Ivan Bloch.
- Hamburger Man**, 1972,  
*papier mache*, 20 x 18 x 10.  
Lent by Julie & Steve Hansen.
- Lady with Cat**, 1972,  
*papier mache*,  
33-1/2 x 21-1/2 x 11.  
Lent by Georgia & Kirk Newman.
- Face**, 1973,  
*olive wood*, 9 x 9 x 4.  
Lent by Julie & Steve Hansen.
- Man with Bird**, 1973,  
*wood*, 17 x 23 x 14.  
Lent by Margaret & Verne Berry.
- Big Toy**, 1974,  
*wood*, 20 x 12 x 7.  
Lent by Julie & Steve Hansen.
- St. George and the Carrot**, 1974,  
*papier mache*, 7-1/2 x 9 dia.  
Lent by Alice Balz.
- Woman on Beach**, 1974,  
*papier mache relief*,  
33-1/2 x 50 x 3-1/2.  
Lent by Irene & Don Kent.
- Chess Pieces**, 1975,  
*bronze*, 1-1/2 (ht.).  
Lent by Julie & Steve Hansen.
- Wall Crawler**, 1975,  
*papier mache*, 23 x 37 x 3.  
Lent by Georgia & Kirk Newman.
- The Capitalist**, 1975-76,  
*papier mache*, 60 x 20 x 21-1/2.  
Lent by Wm. John Upjohn.
- Candleholder Man**, 1976,  
*bronze*, 1-1/4 x 5-1/2 x 2-3/4.  
Lent by Ann Soukup & Michael Dombos.
- Man with Briefcase**, 1976,  
*papier mache & found object*,  
8 x 3 x 7.  
Lent by Irene & Don Kent.
- Puccinello**, 1977,  
*papier mache*, 45 x 35 x 11.  
Lent by John & Ann Rapp.
- An Evening at Home**, 1978,  
*papier mache mobile*, 16 x 8 x 11.  
Lent by Irene & Don Kent.
- Black Market**, 1978,  
*papier mache*, 58 x 26 x 11.  
Lent by Debbie & Tom Gauntlett.
- Dog Leading Man**, 1978,  
*papier mache*, 28 x 38 x 14.  
Lent by Ann & John Rapp.
- Handout**, 1978,  
*papier mache*, 17 x 44 x 9.  
Lent by Wm. John Upjohn.
- Man Hugging Rock**, 1978,  
*papier mache*, 13 x 6 x 5.  
Lent by Ann & John Rapp.
- Cat & Dog Coffee Table**, 1979,  
*papier mache & glass*,  
59 x 29-1/2 x 17-1/2.  
Lent by Irene & Don Kent.
- Eats**, 1979,  
*papier mache relief*,  
43-3/4 x 42 x 1-1/2.  
Lent by David Markin.
- Faucet**, 1979,  
*papier mache*, 10 x 12 x 7.  
Lent by Julie & Steve Hansen.
- Fish**, 1979,  
*bronze*, 3-1/4 x 5-1/2 x 2-3/4.  
Lent by Ann Soukup & Michael Dombos.
- Three Buildings**, 1979,  
*papier mache*, 29 x 14 x 14.  
Lent by John R. Brown.
- Fruit Vendor**, 1980,  
*painted & cast paper relief*,  
24 x 24 x 1-1/4.  
Lent by Hildy & John Franzblau.
- Neptune**, 1980,  
*papier mache relief*,  
19-1/2 x 32-1/2 x 3.  
Lent by David Markin.
- Puerto Rican & Radio**, 1980,  
*papier mache*, 54 x 29 x 17.  
Lent by Carolyn & John Hutchinson.
- Cow Screen**, 1981,  
*papier mache*, 42 x 65-3/4 x 11-1/2.  
Lent by Nancy Phillips & Steve Frykholm.
- Mental Floss**, 1981,  
*papier mache*, 13-1/2 x 21 x 7.  
Lent by Wm. John Upjohn.
- Morning News**, 1981,  
*papier mache & found object*,  
46 x 19 x 30.  
Lent by Wm. John Upjohn.
- Tribunal**, 1981,  
*bronze*, 15 x 10 x 6.  
Lent by John & Pat Brown.
- Float**, 1982,  
*papier mache*, 51-1/2 x 24 x 37.  
Lent by Pat & Tom Turner.
- Tailor**, 1982,  
*papier mache*, 52 x 20-1/2 x 16.  
Lent by Carolyn & John Hutchinson.
- Anxiety Attack**, 1983,  
*papier mache*, 8 x 8 x 10. 7  
Lent by Linda & Steve Young.
- He Did It**, 1983,  
*polyester resin*, 29 x 47 x 6.  
Lent by Herman Miller Company.
- Nature's Rich Pageant**, 1983,  
*papier mache & found object*,  
41-3/4 x 24 x 22-1/2.  
Kalamazoo Institute of Arts  
Collection,  
Gift of Dr. & Mrs. Robert Stewart.
- Old Family Retainer**, 1983,  
*papier mache*, 50-1/2 x 25-1/2 x 22.  
Lent by Robert Larson.
- Research & Development**, 1983,  
*papier mache*, 25-1/2 x 46 x 9-1/4.  
Lent by The Upjohn Company.
- Oh Brad, You Swine**, 1986,  
*aluminum silica cement w. fiber  
glass*,  
16 x 17 x 2-1/2.  
Lent by Karla & Bill Tye.
- Bear Light**, 1986,  
*sheet metal, glass, wood*,  
6 x 11 x 2-1/2.  
Lent by Steve & Wendy Monroe.
- Frog**, 1984,  
*wood*, 3 x 3 x 4.  
Lent by Pat & John Brown.



44. **Pendant for Necklace**, 1987, *mastedon tusk*, 1-1/4 x 3/4. Lent by Steve & Wendy Monroe.
45. **Spray Can Joker**, 1988, *papier mache*, 55 x 23 x 20. Lent by McDonald's Corporation.
46. **Final Offer**, 1989, *aluminum silica cement w. fiber glass*, 59 x 21 x 24, 8. Lent by Wm. John Upjohn.
47. **Cat Lady**, 1990, *papier mache*, 55-1/2 x 23 x 17. Lent by Mary & Dan George.
48. **Croquet Lady**, 1990, *papier mache*, 49-1/2 x 27 x 10. Lent by Karen & Jeff Matson.
49. **Fun, Fun, Fun**, 1990, *papier mache*, 50 x 42 x 9. Lent by Laura & Graham Eddleston.
50. **Home on the Range**, 1990, *papier mache*, 38 x 54 x 7. Lent by Julie & Steve Hansen.
51. **Mirror, Mirror**, 1990, *papier mache*, 27 x 33 x 4. Lent by Gerri & Bill Schma.
52. **Laughing Boys**, 1991, *aluminum silica cement w. fiber glass*, 36 x 33 x 8-1/2. Lent by Wm. John Upjohn.
53. **The Litigator**, 1991, *aluminum silica cement w. fiber glass*, 19 x 36 x 4. Lent by Keneln Denison.
- Prints & Paintings:**
54. **Fruit Vendor**, ca.1973, *color woodcut w. handcoloring*, 20 x 17-1/2. Lent by Ann Soukup & Michael Dombos.
55. **Fruit Vendor**, ca.1973, *woodblock*, 20 x 17-1/2. Lent by Julie & Steve Hansen.
56. **Celery City**, 1974, *etching*, 6-1/4 dia. Lent by Ann Soukup & Michael Dombos.
57. **Pennies from Heaven**, 1974, *color viscosity etching*, 13-1/2 x 6-3/4. Lent by Ann Soukup & Michael Dombos.
58. **Angel Factory**, 1975, *etching*, 8 x 14. Lent by Muriel & David Gregg.
59. **Angel Factory**, 1975, *etched plate*, 8 x 14. Lent by David Markin.
60. **Fondue Party**, 1975, *etching*, 13-1/2 x 21-1/2. Lent by Ann Soukup & Michael Dombos.
61. **Fred & Ginger**, 1975, *etching*, 11-3/4 x 14-1/2. Lent by Ann Soukup & Michael Dombos.
62. **Mother's Advice**, 1975, *etching*, 6 x 11-3/4. Lent by Ann Soukup & Michael Dombos.
63. **Queen Mary**, 1975, *color etching*, 7-3/4 x 7-3/4. Lent by Ann Soukup & Michael Dombos.
64. **And the World will Crawl a Path to Your Door**, 1976, *copper engraving*, 9 x 8-3/4. Lent by Ann Soukup & Michael Dombos.
65. **Born Again**, 1976, *color viscosity etching*, 11-3/4 x 11-3/4. Lent by Ann Soukup & Michael Dombos.
66. **Evening Stroll**, 1976, *color viscosity etching*, 15-3/4 x 19-3/4. Lent by Ann Soukup & Michael Dombos.
67. **Just Good Friends**, 1976, *color viscosity etching*, 4-1/4 x 5. Lent by Ann Soukup & Michael Dombos.
68. **Mermaid for the King**, 1976, *copper engraving*, 9 x 11-3/4. Lent by Irene & Don Kent.
69. **Mermaid for the King**, 1976, *engraved plate*, 9 x 11-3/4. Lent by Julie & Steve Hansen.
70. **Pessimist**, 1976, *color viscosity etching*, 6-3/4 x 7-3/4. Lent by Ann Soukup & Michael Dombos.
71. **Fish**, 1978, *engraving*, 2-3/4 x 4. Lent by Ann Soukup & Michael Dombos.
72. **The Exhibition**, 1979, *etching*, 10 x 11-5/8. Lent by Tom Krol.
73. **Dancing Sheep, Sheep of Wheels, Headless Sheep, Pruned Sheep, Deranged Killer Sheep**, 1980, *color viscosity etching*, 5 x 22. Lent by Irene & Don Kent.
74. **Diner**, 1982, *etching*, 8-3/4 x 13-3/4. Lent by Irene & Don Kent.
75. **Fun, Fun, Fun**, 1982, *hand-colored etching*, 9-3/4 x 8-1/2. Lent by Ann Soukup & Michael Dombos.
76. **Hiccup Cure**, 1982, *woodcut*, 9-3/4 x 7-1/4. Lent by Irene & Don Kent.
77. **If I Die before I Wake**, 1982, *woodcut*, 11 x 29-1/4. Lent by Ann Soukup & Michael Dombos.
78. **Matches**, 1982, *hand-colored etching*, 4-3/4 x 3-1/2. Lent by Irene & Don Kent.
79. **Puppet Theater**, 1982, *woodcut*, 21-1/2 x 26-1/2. Lent by David Markin.
80. **Three for \$1.00**, 1982, *color etching*, 11-3/4 x 13-3/4. Lent by David Markin.
81. **Mondo Mucca**, 1983, *woodcut*, 18 x 20. Lent by Julie & Steve Hansen.
82. **Sony No Bologna**, 1986, *Chinese tempera*, 27 x 18. Lent by Julie & Steve Hansen.
83. **You Are Here**, 1992, *pencil*, 14-5/8 x 11-5/8. Lent by Julie & Steve Hansen.
84. **You Are Here**, 1992, *etching*, 15-3/8 x 13-1/4. Kalamazoo Institute of Arts Collection.

All measurements are in inches:  
height precedes width, precedes depth.



*Home on the Range, 1990*

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**Design:**

Tom Kayser, Tom Kayser & Associates

**Photography:**

Douglas William Neal - Cow Screen, Dental Floss, Nature's Rich Pageant, You Are Here, The Litigator

T.W. Brayne - Fun, Fun, Fun, Oh Brad, You Swine!, Laughing Boys, Home on the Range

Julie Hansen - Portrait of Stephen Hansen

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