



Miami Mourns Artist Robert Huff, 1945-2014

September 4, 2014

by Elisa Turner

A native Midwesterner transplanted as a boy to Florida, Robert Huff fell in love with Miami's water and light and was marked forever by his life in the Sunshine State.

At the age of 11, he moved from Kalamazoo, Michigan, to the west coast of Florida, growing up in Dunedin. He later forged a significant career in Miami as both a widely-exhibited artist and profoundly influential art teacher at Miami Dade College, Kendall Campus, where he chaired the visual arts department from 1979 until retiring in 2005.

Huff died at Baptist Hospital in Miami on August 22, 2014; he was 69. Barbara Young, his wife of 27 years, was at his side.

Although he was dedicated to teaching, Huff was never the sort to retire from his versatile career as a painter, printmaker, and sculptor. He also produced works of public art for Miami and other cities. In a statement released after his death, his dealer Carol Jazzar wrote that he "had been battling courageously with cancer for several years while still producing powerful and provocative work."



Robert Huff. Photo courtesy of Huff's wife, Barbara Young.

His wife and many friends recalled Huff's enthusiastic dedication to making art. He always seemed ready, they said, to explore a new idea or refine an ongoing project at his capacious free-standing studio in the backyard of the couple's home in Miami.

In an email response to questions, Young, a retired art librarian for Miami-Dade Public Libraries, wrote: "It was so much fun to be with Bob. It was fascinating to go into the studio and watch him work and an idea grow. He loved tools and materials and had such an ease with building and art making."

Four years ago, Huff offered a tour of his studio to a group of about 20 ArtTable members in Miami. With his trademark wit and ready laugh, he patiently explained the many tools of his trade to the curious group, which that night included art dealers and educators. There was a lively exchange of ideas.

Calling Huff “one of the area’s go-to artists for answers to media and structural problems,” the invitation to this event explained that “For the past couple of years he has been working with a series of small detailed drawings. He has digitally transformed and reduced a number of these drawings and then hand-bound them into exquisite little books. Tour will feature large two and three-dimensional works as well as a new suite of framed works on paper, *Appalachian Breakdown*.” In line with their renowned and typical hospitality, that night Huff and Young provided a barbeque dinner with chicken salad, cake and cookies.

“He was very generous with information,” Young wrote. “He was a reader, he could fix an engine, build a house. He had raised bees, planted gardens. He loved fishing and being outdoors, especially on the water or in the mountains of southwest Virginia.” After Huff’s retirement, they spent a lot of time at their second home and property in Virginia, dubbed “Camp High Rock,” because it had once been a Boy Scout camp. “Our time together was an incredible gift,” Young said.



Robert Huff. Photo courtesy of Huff’s wife, Barbara Young.

In 1968, Huff received his MFA from University of South Florida, joining the faculty of Miami-Dade Community College, South Campus (now known as Miami Dade College, Kendall Campus) that year.

His resume lists more than 20 solo exhibits during the years 1971 to 2012, in places that include various cities in Florida and in Washington, D.C. From 1969 to 2013, his art was selected for dozens of group exhibits, at venues including Florida museums and galleries, Chicago, the United Arab Emirates, and Kassel, Germany. Traveling to the former USSR in 1989 and 1990, Huff was a guest of Michigan’s Lakeside Studios and the Soviet Artists Union for an artist residency there.

Among institutions holding his art in permanent collections are Pérez Art Museum Miami (PAMM), Fort Lauderdale’s Museum of Art, and the Ringling Museum of Art. Huff’s work will be the focus of an exhibit in 2015 at Miami Dade College Museum of Art + Design.

In PAMM’s collection is Huff’s *Day Dreams #1*, a gift of Miami collectors Richard and Ruth Shack. A mixed media work on canvas, it melds architectural forms with abstract passages to evoke Florida’s sun-splashed waterways, an enduring passion for the artist.



“Day Dreams #1” by Robert Huff. Mixed media on canvas, 32 x 76 x 2 inches, 3 panels. Collection Pérez Art Museum Miami, gift of Richard and Ruth Shack. © Robert Huff. Photo credit: Sid Hoeltzell.

As his close friend Harold Rifas recalled in a phone interview, “Bob and I spent many days sitting in his boat fishing in Flamingo in the Everglades, which I think was his favorite place to be. I met Bob through Karen, my wife, who was a student of Bob’s about 25 to 30 years ago.”

Speaking about his wife, Karen Rifas, who is a widely-exhibited artist herself, Rifas added, “His influence on Karen was immense. On a larger scale, Bob influenced so many people as both mentor and artist. He was always available for everybody in the art world to assist in every way possible.”

Huff touched countless hearts and minds. “The history of Miami’s arts community is embedded with the spirit and work of Robert Huff,” observed Brandi Reddick, Curator and Artists Manager for Art in Public Places, Miami-Dade County Department of Cultural Affairs, in an email. “Throughout his long and prolific career, he refined a visual language that helped form a ‘Miami aesthetic.’”

Michael Spring, Director of Miami-Dade County Department of Cultural Affairs, noted in an email that “For nearly five decades, artist and teacher Robert Huff stood as a leader in a pivotal generation of Miami’s visual arts pioneers. His creative work elegantly reflected a sense of both the complexity and grace of our changing world.”

“He will be remembered not only for his enormous contributions to our burgeoning arts community,” Spring continued, “but also for his humor, intellect and always caring nature, which engaged and inspired generations of students, fellow artists and admirers of his work.”

In 2007 at Art Basel Miami Beach, authors Paul Clemence and Julie Davidow launched their book *Miami Contemporary Artists*, an essential guide to more than 100 professional artists with ties to Miami. Huff was featured along with many of his former students, including Robert Chambers, Luis Gispert, and Karen Rifas.

For his section in the book, Huff wrote that “Miami has always been an interesting place to be an artist,” extolling the region’s unparalleled light because “it is bright and clear with a definite influence on the way we see things.”

In addition to his wife, he is survived by his mother, Clarice Huff; a brother, Jerry Huff and his wife Chris; a niece, Stacy Huff; great-niece Barbara Zamudio, great-nephew Sergio Zamudio; as well as by his wife’s mother, Elizabeth Young; his wife’s sister, Betty Young; and niece Beth Poff and her husband James Norman Poff.

A memorial celebration is being planned for the fall.

To see images of Robert Huff’s work, view our slideshow:

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