

William King Remembered

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by Janet Goleas

The sculptor William King (1925 - 2015), a true American original, died March 3 at his East Hampton home surrounded by his wife, the artist Connie Fox, and members of his family. He was 90 years old.

King leaves behind a legacy of art making unlike any other, and a body of work that has captured aspects of the human condition for seven decades. From Shakespearean drama to tennis players, dancers and acrobats at play, King's aesthetic drew on the archetypal everyman, touching on the Walter Mitty in all of us with poignant works in wood, aluminum, bronze, vinyl and clay.



Bill King. Photo by Janet Goleas.

Born in Jacksonville, Florida, in 1925, Bill King moved to New York City at age 20, enrolling in Cooper Union as an architecture student. On a class trip to the Museum of Modern Art he was

transformed by an Elie Nadelman exhibition—so much so that he soon found the artist inside himself. Bucking the prevailing winds of Abstract Expressionism, he embarked on a figural body of work that captured the attention of the art world through its canniness and qualities of satire, empathy and craftsmanship. His works quickly began to sell and, liberated by the knowledge that he could make a living as an artist, he never looked back.



Bill King, Summer of 2014. Photo by Janet Goleas.

Now, some 70 years later, King's art is represented in some of the country's most distinguished collections, including the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Los Angeles County Museum, the Guggenheim and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. He is the recipient of four honorary doctorates and numerous fellowships as well as the International Sculpture Center Lifetime Achievement Award (2007) and the Academy of the Arts Lifetime Achievement Award (1997) at Guild Hall in East Hampton.

Subversive, ironic and often political, in his career King examined caricature and comic gesture as

he tapped into the passion, pathos and poignancy of human-to-human relationships. Lanky and long-legged like the artist himself, his towering figures are known for merging planar form with the three-dimensional. For King, slicing drawings out of sheet metal was second nature, and a huge swath of aluminum (his favorite medium) was like a bar of chocolate to him—and just as easy to navigate.



King sculpture on Saddle Lane. Photo by Janet Goleas.

On any given day on the East End, the artist could be found upstairs in his woodland studio carving wood, cutting metal, pushing clay or sewing vinyl figurines. His “stop-before-you-ruin-it” aesthetic resulted in works that are neatly self-referential, confounding logic with equal parts humility and majesty.



"Musicians" by Bill King. Photo by Janet Goleas.

William King's body of work reflected the artist's own "aw-shucks" attitude and his multiple, endearing charms. When Bill laughed, he would close his eyes and throw his head back, as if in complete reverie. An effusive storyteller, at the Art Barge in Amagansett last summer, he regaled the audience with tales of love, life and art making.



Bill King and Alice Hope at The Art Barge. Photo by Irene Tully.

His and Fox's presence has been integral to the evolution of the community of artists on the East End. King, who began spending summers here in 1959, moved his home and studio to East Hampton in the 1970s. The couple met not long after, forging a path as passionate artists and as supporters of the arts over 35 years.



3 clay works in Bill King's studio. Photo by Janet Goleas.

Perhaps more than anything, Bill King's sense of gratitude was implicit in all his interactions. It seemed to me he was not only grateful for a lifetime in art, but for a cup of hot tea, for hand tools, for Connie, for the sky and the trees.

If you did something nice with Bill—visited his studio, wrote something about him, gave him a tip on a show or a collector—he would call the next day to thank you. The day after that he would call again to say how much he appreciated how kind or smart or helpful you were. Following that, he would certainly drop by or call again, at least three or four times, just to tell you how great you were and, of course, to thank you again. He understood friendship and camaraderie like a gentleman and a scholar. The world will be a smaller place without Bill King, but all the more rich for his long presence in it.



Bill King. Photo by Irene Tully.

William King is survived by his wife, Connie Fox, who celebrated her 90th birthday last week, as well as his children, Connie's children, and a bevy of beautiful grandchildren.

A memorial service will be held later in the spring.

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