



Sculptor Hans Van de Bovenkamp: A Real Man of Steel

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by Charles A. Riley II

"I have never been so busy in my life, I have more going on now than I ever have," Hans Van de Bovenkamp said with a look of mild surprise on a recent relatively quiet summer day at his Sagaponack studio and sculpture garden.

The day was only relatively quiet because the artist made his remarks during breaks when he and his assistant of two decades, Kevin Miller, were not cutting steel or welding.

Many more have seen his towering stainless steel sculpture than can pronounce his monumental Dutch surname. The unmistakable glittering steel fantasies dot Montauk Highway and other roadways in front of galleries and stores from Water Mill through Bridgehampton, up toward Sag Harbor, and out to East Hampton.



"Siv's Tiara" by Hans Van de Bovenkamp, 2006-2007.
Stainless Steel, 108"H x 72" W x 72" D.

The illusion that there are more of them than actually exist probably stems from the snail-paced summer traffic patterns, ensuring there is plenty of time to study the twisting ribbons of stainless steel as the sun moves across them faster than frustrated drivers can inch ahead.

Van de Bovenkamp has even turned the high visibility of his work into a charitable stratagem, siting one of his largest sculptures as a landmark in front of the Children's Museum of the East End on the Bridgehampton-Sag Harbor Turnpike.

"Nobody could find the building so I gave them a bouquet," he said. "It makes us all happy, standing on the earth with its nose in the clouds just like us, with our feet on the earth but our dreams above."

The artist is overbooked these days because his star has been on the rise in Asia after a high-profile sculpture park in Shanghai showcased, along with other monumental sculpture, one of his vast "portals," a billowing steel arch through which cars can pass. As in Manhattan, Sarasota, Dallas, overseas in Bratislava, Slovakia, and various other venues, the public sculpture of Van de

Bovenkamp makes a splash wherever it lands.



“Sagg Portal With Bench” by Hans Van de Bovenkamp, 2005 & 2006. Stainless Steel, 9’H x 10’W x 5’D.

The Shanghai portal, erected in 2010, is on permanent view at the Jing’an Sculpture Park, its muscular columns supporting the floating forms that in that context relate not only to the traditional men or gate (as in Tiananmen, the “gate of heavenly peace” in Beijing, the world’s most famous portal) but to the flowing strokes of a calligrapher’s brush crystallized in steel.



“Shanghai Portal” by Hans Van de Bovenkamp, 2010. Stainless Steel, 12’ H x 22’ W. Jing’an Sculpture Park, Collection of the City of Shanghai, China.

Van de Bovenkamp’s agent in China is a singular character named Phillippe Staib, who has a rich repertoire of juicy anecdotes about all-night benders in Montmartre with Samuel Beckett and Alberto Giacometti. Staib has introduced Van de Bovenkamp to the red-hot Chinese market, not just on the mainland but also in Taiwan. His main New York dealer is Louis K. Meisel, another power broker.

Stateside, the public sculpture has an eleemosynary purpose, such as a portal now in Rockford, Illinois, that moves on two massive low-boy tractors from one blighted area to the next in an attempt to spearhead urban renewal with art. “They help to uplift a degraded neighborhood,” the sculptor said. “I find it’s more rewarding than a gallery exhibition because it is accessible and useful to the public.”

Van de Bovenkamp is a notorious soft touch for charities in the Hamptons, often hosting benefits on his huge estate and donating especially generously to The Retreat (not only art works but a Mercedes and a boat with trailer). Major public works are nothing new. In 1976, the state of Nebraska commissioned the 40-foot, 18,000-pound work *Roadway Confluence* for a stretch of highway that became a drive-by sculpture gallery.

His pastoral retreat in Sagaponack, with a farm for rescue horses at its corner, is a throwback to the Hamptons of the 1960s, when Van de Bovenkamp, Willem de Kooning, Ibrahim Lassaw, Syd Solomon, Jimmy Ernst and Adolph Gottlieb would wander in and out of each other’s studios with enviable familiarity (many of their works hang on his walls). Van de Bovenkamp followed de

Kooning to East Hampton, renting his first house in 1969. On a recent sweltering July day his neighbor, the sculptor Nathan Joseph, shambled by with his cigar and New York Post to lounge by the pool.

Van de Bovenkamp's work is rooted in the heroic style of the Abstract Expressionist moment, especially the twin pillars of de Kooning and David Smith, although it is not a stretch to see as well the "bones" of Fernand Leger (both he and Leger trained as architects and saw the erotic potential of cold, shiny steel). The first time I grasped the way the sculpture performed its lyric dance was the day he told me how closely he and de Kooning, friends from his earliest days in New York, connected. Tracing the ribbon-like gestures of a de Kooning brushstroke as they unspool in the curves of Van de Bovenkamp's graceful steel sculpture makes the affinity very clear.



"Dance" by Hans Van de Bovenkamp, 2002/2011. Stainless Steel, 84" H x 36" W x 20" D.

Born in Garderen, Holland (his father, a Baptist preacher, was in the Dutch resistance during the Nazi occupation), Van de Bovenkamp studied mathematics and architecture in Amsterdam, where he heard Miles Davis play live. The family moved to Ontario in 1957, and he earned a degree in sculpture and architecture from the University of Michigan.

He and his older brother Gerrit started a design firm in 1959, about the time when he began to fashion his first sculpture from coat hangers salvaged from the street, work that was first exhibited in 1961. At the end of that year, he packed up the Buick and headed to a studio on East 10th Street, but he had a stop to make en route.

"I made a detour to Bolton Landing [on Lake George] to visit David Smith, but he wasn't there," the artist recalled. "I roamed the grounds and absorbed."

The Sagaponack property, with its outdoor gallery of Van de Bovenkamp's large-scale sculpture, as well as the main house, drawing studio, and two large hangars for cutting and welding steel, are his version of Bolton Landing. Among the sculpture by the pond and in the woods are collaborations with his wife Siv Cedering, a poet who lived in Amagansett. They married in 2000, and even though she lost her battle with cancer not long ago, she continues to be a presence in his conversation.

A 50-year career and back-to-back commissions does not preclude the need to rethink materials or scale. While he is best known for using stainless steel that has been ground to deflect the light (as did David Smith), he has recently begun to paint the steel (again, as did Smith) and to use strong colors in his patinas to differentiate one element in the work from another, as in *Loop* (2014).



“Accabonic Woman” by Hans Van de Bovenkamp, 2005. Painted Stainless Steel,
68” H x 46” W x 36” D

He has also shrunk the basic vocabulary of the portals to tiny, tripartite silver pendants, talismans of his vision, which will be on view beginning in mid-August at the legendary E.R. Butler (www.erbutler.com) bespoke hardware showroom on Prince Street in Manhattan (which, until 1897, was the silversmiths shop where Tiffany’s line was made). The showroom is not far from the Greenwich Village studio where Van de Bovenkamp and his brother fashioned custom lamps, furniture and hardware. David Yurman, now a celebrated jewelry designer, was a studio assistant when they created fountains.



Jewelry by Hans Van de Bovenkamp.



Jewelry by Hans Van de Bovenkamp.

A Buddhist who rises at dawn to practice yoga, at age 77 Van de Bovenkamp is as brightly cheerful as his work.

“When you’re young you want to claw your way to certain shows,” he said. “I am really now just trying to give back.”