

# WATER DANCE

## Jack Zajac's art is fluid by nature



Sculptor Jack Zajac, the county's Artist of the Year: 'There's something irresistible about the mass and presence of sculpture ...'

**J**ACK ZAJAC is haunted by waters, like Norman Maclean's protagonist in "A River Runs Through It." The tall bronze sculptures that crowd his Santa Cruz studio are renderings of an image that caught his eye more than 30 years ago when passing a frozen Connecticut river by train.

"I was going to visit (novelist) Bill Styron at the time," said Zajac, recently selected by the Santa Cruz County Arts Commission as the 1993 Artist of the Year. "And as the train was rushing by, I kept watching the river and how it moved. I got caught up in the frozen curls and mounds and it stuck with me."

He didn't think much about it at the time. But as a sculptor, he kept coming back to water. His "Falling Water Series (Santa Cruz)," which will be on display Saturday at the Octagon Gallery next to the McPherson Center for Art and History in Santa Cruz through May 23, is only the latest of Zajac's meditations on the flow of water.

His first attempts at capturing water pouring down a column date back to the mid '60s. After the Connecticut experience, he sought to emulate in bronze the physical properties of water flow, a meticulous challenge for a sculptor. "I remember showing in Dart-

SPOTLIGHT

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mouth around 1970," said Zajac, 63, recently retired from his faculty position at UC Santa Cruz. "And a group of Brownies, girl scouts, came through. All of a sudden, one of them piped up, 'Hey, that's water.' I could have kissed her."

Like past winners of the county Artist of the Year (a roster that includes Lou Harrison, Tandy Beal, Jim Houston and William Everson), Jack Zajac enjoys an international reputation as an artist. Over the course of his career, he has won the prestigious Prix de Rome and a Guggenheim fellowship as well as fellowships at the American Academy in Rome and the National Academy of Design. He has recently been nominated as the Faculty Research Lecturer at UCSC, a position that rarely goes to artists.

Zajac will be honored by the Arts Commission on Friday, April 30 at the McPherson Center, where he will speak on his work.

"Jack's sculpture is internationally recognized," said Chuck Hilger, executive director of the Art Museum of Santa Cruz County and a past winner of the Artist of the Year himself. "There's a quiet power that runs through it, an implicit understanding of the artist's struggle brought to fruition."

"I was reminded of Jack by being at Stanford where one of his big bronze sculptures stands from the tortured goat series," said David Heron, university librarian emeritus at UCSC, the person who nominated Zajac to the arts commission for the Artist of the Year honor. "I've always admired him both as an artist and a friend and

he is certainly one of the most distinguished artists we have in this community."

Zajac's roots in sculpture can be traced back to his childhood. Born into a Czechoslovakian family in Youngstown, Ohio, Zajac briefly followed his father into the steel mills. When the family moved to California when Jack was a teenager, he worked in the steel mills of Fontana.

He began his art career as a painter, studying with early Southern California modernists and progressing to the point that in 1954, he was honored with the prestigious Prix de Rome along with such other luminaries as novelist Ralph Ellison, poet Richard Wilbur and architect Robert Venturi.

It was in Rome where Zajac first stumbled upon sculpture as a means for artistic expression. One evening at the American Academy, he happened to come across a mass of clay in the studio of artist Carl Milles. Seizing the moment, young Zajac sat down in front of it. "I just saw the clay and it just seemed to happen." The result of that first session with clay was "Standing Lamb," a model of a lamb Zajac had noticed earlier that day in the Italian countryside.

By WALLACE BAINE, Sentinel staff writer  
 Photos by BILL LOVEJOY, Sentinel photographer

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'Large Split Almond,' a white marble sculpture by Santa Cruz County Artist of the Year Jack Zajac, is displayed in front of the County Building on Ocean Street.

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The "Standing Lamb" story neatly epitomizes Jack Zajac's approach to art. He said that intuition and spontaneity have been his guiding principles since the beginning. He did not look at the just finished "Standing Lamb" sculpture that night in 1954 and see a long career as a sculptor laid out before him.

"I didn't really see sculpture at the time as anything other than a means for personal pleasure and absorption. Over the years, it just seemed to occupy more and more of my attention. There's something irresistible about the mass and presence of sculpture that on some level reminds me of working in the steel mills. There is a satisfaction that is sculpture."

Zajac's early career as a sculptor was marked by dramatic religious iconography. An encounter with bound, sacrificial goats at an Easter pageant in Greece led to a series of goat sculptures, figurative images of goats in grotesque poses.

"Religious iconography represents a dramatic cycle of human experience. The idea of sacrifice is a powerful idea. Seeing these animals bound up in markets at Easter time was an unmistakable remnant of older sacrifice rituals.

"I didn't think I was being particularly morbid. I was trying to demonstrate the struggle and threat of this bound animal and its great vitality and strength."

Zajac also explored religious themes, in part inspired by Spanish painter Francisco Goya, in his "Deposition" series which focused on the moment when the body of

Christ is taken down from the cross.

In 1964, he began work on another series of sculptures that would come to symbolize his career. The "Big Skull" series featured a collection of large rough-hewn animal skulls reminiscent of primitive masks.

"Those figures came quite by accident," said Zajac. "I was working with wax and creating these mask-like figures, just playing with it really, until I came up with something."

Originally, some of the heads had horns which broke off during sculpting. Zajac's intuitive nature led him to consider using the broken horn image in his final work.

"It gave (the sculptures) a suggestion of drama, of combat, of mythic experience."

The water sculptures are a marked departure from the agonizing and ominous feel of Zajac's other work, both in its emphasis on

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— Art Museum director  
**Chuck Hilger**

grace and its loyalty to the laws of physics. Zajac worked two years on the water sculptures before coming up with one he liked. Most of his works ended up in the local landfill.

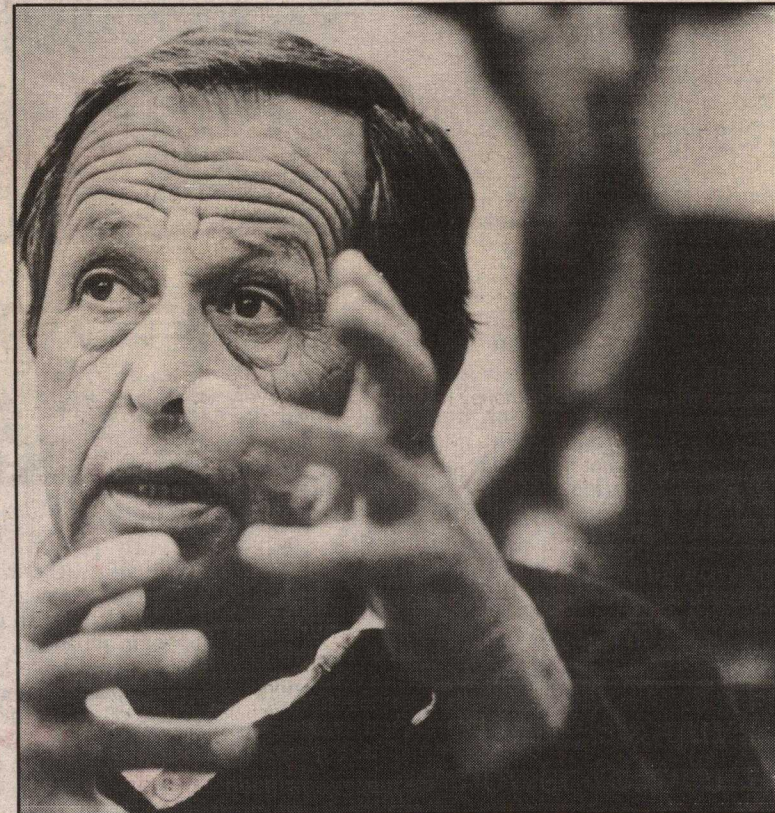
"A successful one is reassuringly quiet, in a state of perfect repose," he said. "There's no way to program it, to measure it. You just have to see it."

"Falling Water Series (Santa Cruz)" was begun in 1987 at his home studio on West Cliff Drive overlooking the ocean where he lives with his wife Corda Eby, a still-life painter herself. The 14-foot-high sculptures begin at the top from a random source (sometimes two sources) and fall in a languid cascade to almost perfectly circular base. While the works are all covered in a smooth patina to suggest liquid, at the extreme top and bottom of the sculpture, Zajac has kept the battered, rough-hewn surface of the original sculpture intact. "That's to show that this is art after all and not really water flowing."

Zajac still discards many of his water sculpture efforts ("Dropping them off at the landfill is a wonderful purge," he said). The physical work on the tall, erect sculptures is still satisfying to him. "They say the last thing you lose is the strength in your arms. I hope that's true."

He's still mastering the techniques of sculpture as well. "I built these like the slaves built the pyramids, with ancient leverage tricks."

When he is not obsessing about water, he is liable to be standing in it. He owns a getaway house on the Snake River in Wyoming and



Jack Zajac hands have worked in both the mill and the studio.

spends a great deal of time fly-fishing there with friends that include writer/journalist Peter Matthiessen.

Standing in the river, Zajac said he doesn't consciously think about art nor does he consciously put it out of his mind. Zajac's style is to always be open to images and follow where his fascinations take him. He has developed a reputation in the art world as a man who often revisits themes he grappled

with in his youth. The first water sculptures were forged in the '60s. Instead of putting them behind him, he tackled the problems again in the '80s, as if he were haunted by waters.

"Some artists set themselves a course and continue on in that manner never deviating from their plan," Zajac said. "They never allow themselves to experience the luxury and exhilaration of chance."