



DEPTH *DEFYING* ART

Rick Harney's portraits are so much less than they appear

*By Kathleen Ryan
Photos by Marc Featherly*

Rick Harney carves three-dimensional illusions with depth-defying techniques that infuse his characters with so much personality one might expect them to walk across the room and shake hands. The reality is that these lifelike sculptures are meticulously carved into flat boards a mere $\frac{3}{4}$ " to $1\frac{1}{4}$ " thick. Yet each whimsical bas-relief portrait packs an emotional wallop. "A good portrait should tell a story and evoke a feeling," said Rick. "I'm enthralled by virtuosity, but skill isn't the only string on the guitar. I'm an emotional person—I like to create a certain magic."

Rick cuts most of his sculptures from pine and basswood because "they are soft, hold detail well, and provide a warm coloration favorable for human subjects." The margin for error in working with such thin boards is slim. As a result, many of his early attempts warped because he had "hogged off" too much wood; this led to new and better techniques. "I love the physicality of the 'dance' of carving, and I'm energized by the risk of this one-chance medium," he said. "I'm like a dog with a bone in my studio. Rather than dabble with multiple projects, I work on the same piece until it's done. That way my interest doesn't stray and leave an idea unloved or abandoned."

Rick started as a business major at Illinois State University but soon became bored, quit school, and went to work for a church restoration company where he was exposed to mural painting and sculpting. On a whim he signed up for an art class—a decision that changed the course of his life. "That class was my first introduction to art, and I never felt so alive," he recalled. Rick earned his art degree while continuing to work for the restoration company fashioning life-sized figures in fiberglass. The fiberglass worked well for the statues but wreaked havoc on Rick. "After 10 years of breathing fiberglass dust, I found myself in the hospital. That's when I decided to try my hand at woodcarving."

His first wooden figures measured 3' tall by $\frac{3}{4}$ " thick. Although he now makes some larger pieces that require thicker materials, the recipe has not changed much over the years. "Flat boards appeal to me for practical and aesthetic reasons; I only need a handful of tools, and I love creating three-dimensional illusions. Plus, hauling tree trunks around had no appeal when I was 30 and even less now at 60."

Rick's studio is a large classroom in an old high school that was converted into a multipurpose building. "It fits me like a glove," he said. Overlooking downtown Bloomington, Ill., it features high ceilings,



Clockwise from left:
Sunday Best, $\frac{3}{4}$ " thick by 10" by 19";
Not Forgotten, $2\frac{3}{4}$ " thick by 14" by 28"; and
Sunset Groucho, $2\frac{1}{2}$ " thick by $8\frac{1}{2}$ " by 14".



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When viewed from the front, Rick's portraits look like busts; however, the side view reveals the deception—and the artistry. *Spunk* is approximately 12" by 21" and 2½" thick.

wooden floors, large windows, and enough space to hold all of his multimedia tools and supplies. In addition to wood, Rick also likes to play in the mud (kiln-fired clay), work with papier-mâché, and use cast bronze for his large, public commissions.

For shallow wood reliefs Rick employs knives, gouges in various sizes, and a jigsaw. He draws inspiration for new work from family photo albums, things of interest that catch his eye, and the wiles of his own imagination. Each sculpture starts with a sketch to scale. Sometimes he glues two or three boards together for width and adds dowels for extra support. For complex pieces, he makes a clay model first to better determine where added materials are needed. “I highly recommend having a clay model because it dramatically reduces the anxiety level.”

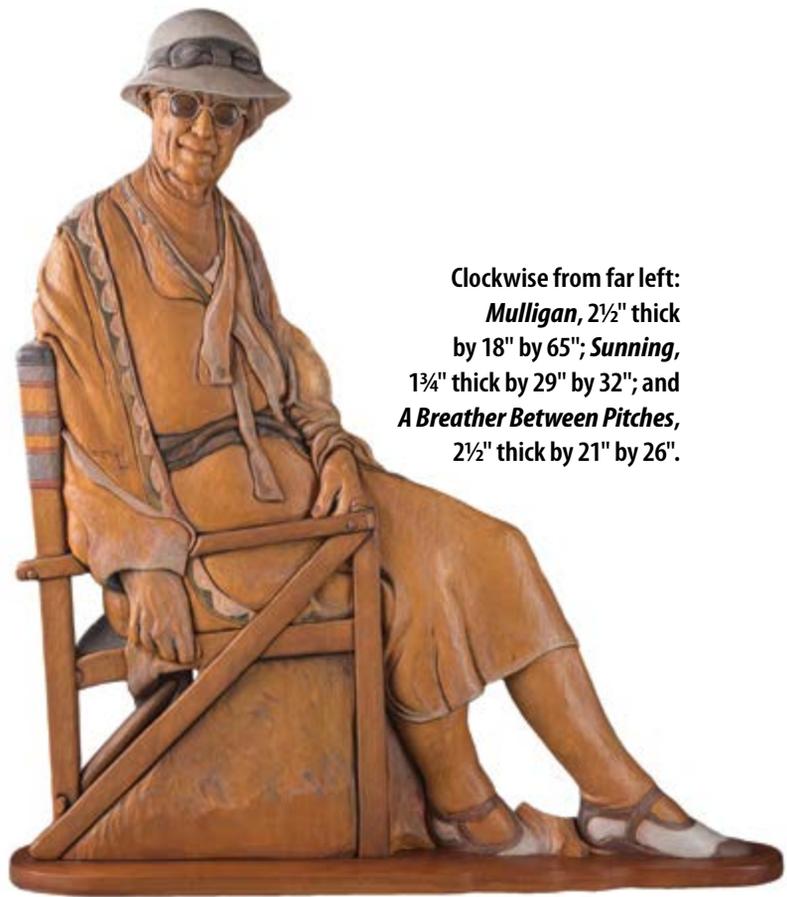
In addition to meticulous carving, another contributing factor of Rick's illusionary art is applying just enough paint to add depth and personality to each sculpture. He starts with a clear sealer coat. “A sealed surface allows me to remove paint, so if I over-apply or just plain goof, I can simply wipe it off,” he explained.

“Then I apply light washes of oil paint, allowing the work to marinate between layers, and build the color slowly until the right balance is achieved.”

Rick enjoys spending his free time with his wife, Betsy, whom he claims is the world's most tolerant woman, and their 27-year-old autistic son, Ben, Rick's walking and bike-riding buddy and puppetry pal. “I also like to pick a guitar and annoy everybody within earshot with my Leon Redbone impersonation,” he said with a chuckle.

Prices for Rick's wood sculptures range from \$2,500 to \$18,000. Even though this artist is approaching an age when others might consider retirement, Rick keeps ratcheting up his work, with no signs of slowing down. For Rick Harney carving isn't just a job—it's a calling. “Some choose to carve . . . but carving chose me.”

View more of Rick's work at www.rickharney.com.



Clockwise from far left:
Mulligan, 2½" thick
by 18" by 65"; *Sunning*,
1¾" thick by 29" by 32"; and
A Breather Between Pitches,
2½" thick by 21" by 26".

