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Tom Duncan: Sculptor

Tom Duncan's love for sculpture began at age 4 when he was given a clay set by his aunt. Born in Scotland in 1939 just before World War II broke out, he moved with his mother and brother to New York City shortly after the war ended. Much of Duncan's artwork reflects memories of his childhood during the war. He is an original tenant at Westbeth, where his three daughters, Rachel, Gwynne, and Jane, grew up. In his Westbeth studio, he has created mixed media pieces like Dedicated to Coney Island *and* Portrait of Tom with a Migraine Headache*, each of which took some twenty-five years to complete. Duncan says he would like to thank the J.M. Kaplan Fund and especially Joan Davidson for creating Westbeth: "Without Westbeth, I'm not sure how I could have survived as a sculptor in New York City." His artwork has been exhibited in the U.S. and overseas. Duncan is represented by the Andrew Edlin Gallery.*

Terry Stoller spoke with Tom Duncan in July 2018 about his father's artistry, the recurring World War II imagery in his artwork, the influence of his mother and his aunts on his artwork, his early jobs, his time in art school, the classification of outsider artist, and his major works.

Terry Stoller: Would it be correct to describe you as a sculptor/inventor?
Tom Duncan: I'm not sure if I would say I'm an inventor. But I love to make things and find out how things work. I guess I'd prefer to say I'm a sculptor.

Is it unusual to create sculpture with the many different elements that you include?
I don't think it's unusual. Maybe what's unusual is the kind of ideas I get. It's not like I'm thinking, What can I do that nobody else has done? It just seems to work out that way. My father was very artistic. He was always making things. During the war, you couldn't buy toys, so he would make my toys. He'd make a sailboat

with a mast that could fold down; the sail would go down these little rings. I can still feel the texture of the hull of the boat. It was magic to see him make these things, and they were for me. He could take the handle of a baby carriage and turn it into the runner for a sled and make the sled out of wood. He would do all kinds of wonderful things. He was like a magician. One day he took a light bulb and said, Watch me. He cut off the filament of the light bulb, removed the filament, held the bulb over the kitchen stove and just gently blew up the light bulb.

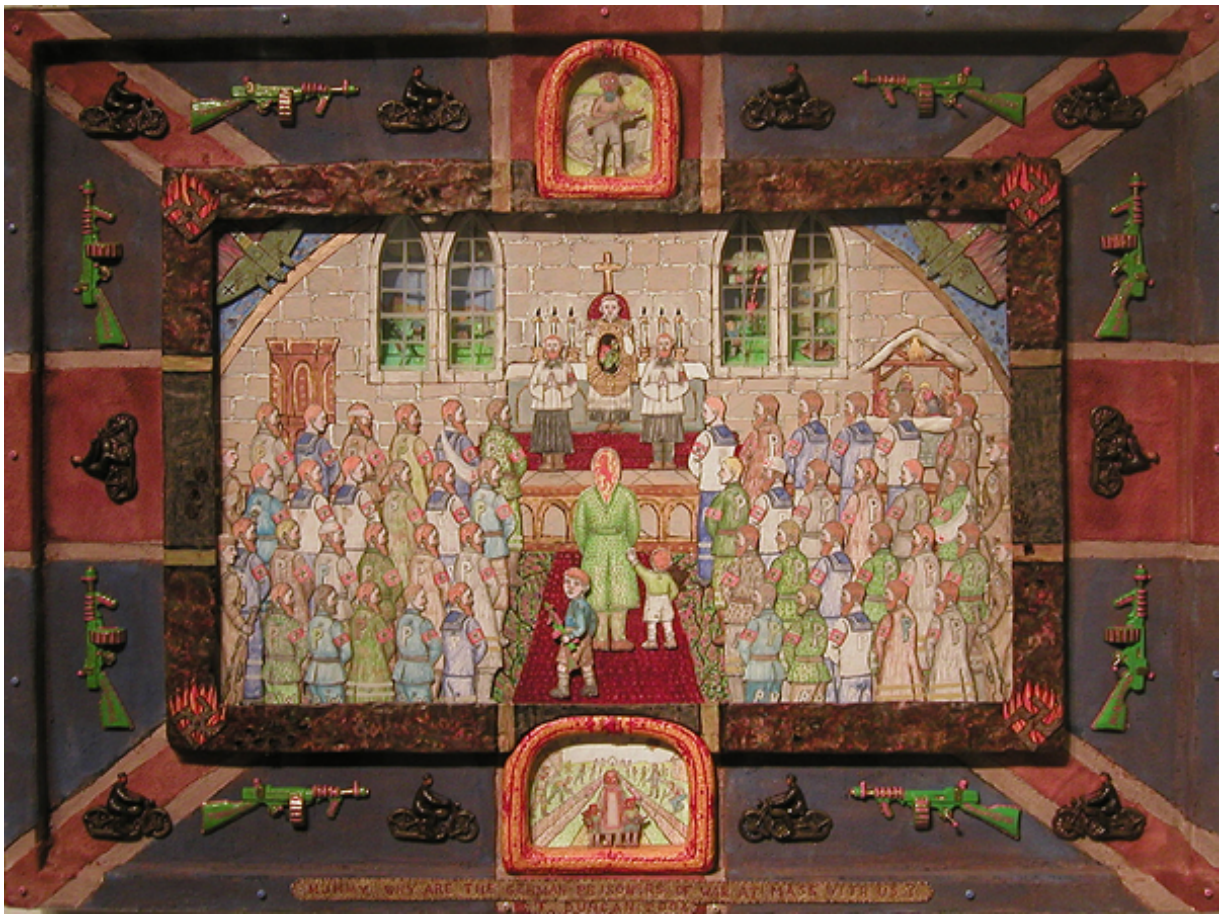
The Magic Trick. **1995. Hand-colored engraving, 4¾ x 5½ inches.**

Don't you have a piece about that?

I do. I have an engraving of it, *The Magic Trick* [1995]. I watched my father like a hawk; he could do so many wonderful things. We left him when I was 8 years old, shortly after the Second World War, and I never saw him again until I was 40. We had no contact with him at all. I think I got my love and my curiosity of working with different materials and different ideas from the early experience watching my father. When I came to this country, I was determined to learn how to do everything on my own. I was very independent, and I taught myself everything. I went to the hardware store—I bought a hammer, a screwdriver, and a pair of plyers, and I immediately smashed my thumb with the hammer. It was hard being alone. I have a younger brother, Ian, who I was supposed to keep an eye on. I

didn't really understand that concept at the time. I was always trying to lose him. He was always such a pest. We're the only ones left of a big family. I'm seeing him tomorrow to celebrate my birthday and his birthday.

What happened when you later went to see your father?
I went to Scotland to see him when I was 40. He was a pretty nasty, violent alcoholic. And he had been very mean to my mother. He did some horrible things to her. Every day I woke up in this country wanting to kill him. At the age of 40, I thought, this is haunting me. I've got to go back and look him up and prove to myself that I wouldn't kill him. And that's exactly what I did. It was a very moving experience for both of us. I continued to write to him until he died a few years later. He was working as a guard in the prison down the road from where we lived, which during the war had been a prisoner-of-war camp for the German Luftwaffe.



Mummy, Why Are the German Prisoners of War at Mass with Us? **2004. Mixed media, 36 x 27½ x 3½ inches.**

You've called yourself a conceptual artist. What do you mean by that?
I think of the traditional conceptual artist as an artist who has an idea that doesn't necessarily go beyond that. In other words, they don't end up with a product. I love to think of different ideas, but I also love to bring them to completion, to

physically make them, whether it's a sculpture or a wall hanging or a relief. [*He holds up a pad*.] This is sketch pad number 91. I write down every idea that I get. Sometimes I wake up in the middle of the night, and I'll have solved a problem. I'll get up and write it down. I just did a study for a piece I was thinking of doing, a burning tank series.

***Tommy and the Scottish Sky*. 2007. Mixed media, 47½ inches in diameter, 1½ inches deep.**

Do you want to talk about your recurring imagery? You have a series of works of burning bombers.

We lived in Edinburgh. I remember dogfights. I don't ever remember a bomber on fire, but I trust myself to know that—there's a saying, if it's hysterical, it's historical. I was born in a little mining town called Shotts, which is halfway between Glasgow and Edinburgh. My mother claimed that to get away from the war in Edinburgh, we went back to Shotts to stay with my granny—and my mother had a brother and sister there. All her other brothers and sisters were in America. What happened was my mother didn't understand that the Germans were trying to bomb the steel mills in Shotts. I apparently was strafed while I was

out in the brandy by a German plane when I was 2 years old. The brandy was a cow pasture that doubled as a playground. My mother heard the siren and came running to get me. I don't remember the event of the strafing. I know unconsciously I must have seen the bombers. Whether I saw them in Edinburgh or in Shotts, it doesn't matter. For me it's an iconic image that reappears in my work.

The Brandy Strafing. **1991. Mixed media, 28 x 28 x 73 inches.**

Do you feel you're exorcising something with your work?
Absolutely. I'm not doing this work just for the heck of it. It's something that happened to me. The strafing affected me, and I know it affected my mother. I never found out about it till I was 32 years old, but the anxiety was there. I found out the story when my aunt in Scotland casually mentioned it. Before I went to Scotland, I was starting to do self-portraits with some kind of narrative story. But it wasn't until after that trip that I started to incorporate the war stuff. It took a long

time to get to this stage. I knew I wanted to do something, but I didn't know what I wanted to do. When I went to art school, I loved working with the figure. I went to art school for five years at night. Toward the end, I realized I was spinning my wheels. I had learned as much as I could. But what I wanted to learn now was compositions with figures.

You've said that you discovered sculpture when you were 4 years old and your aunt gave you a clay set.
I loved making cowboys and horses and little saddles that I could take off. I even made the bridles. I had a little tray with plasteline and some toothpicks. That was my only tool. I made log cabins, corrals, knights in armor. It depended on what movie I went to see that weekend. In the 1950s, there were a lot of science fiction movies, so I got into science fiction.

Your mother and your aunts were prominent in your childhood.
My mother loved to read stories to my brother and me when we were little. I think I learned from her a love for reading. The other thing is, when we were in America, my mom and three of her sisters were in my life daily, and they all had an incredible sense of humor. They would tell stories about different people in the little mining village. My brother and I were not supposed to hear some of the conversations, but we would listen. I loved hearing the stories, and I think that influenced me as an artist to love the idea of telling a story myself.

As an adult artist, you have focused on memories of your youth.
That was a very slow turning point. For instance, one of the early memories I made a piece about was the first summer I was in America when I went to camp. I had never left my mother. I went to sleepaway camp for two weeks. I got into a fight with these kids. There was a station wagon that would take us to the swimming pool down a gravel path. They got in the station wagon, and I was hanging on to the back of the car, and they were hitting me and knocking me off. I was holding on. I'm very tenacious. Suddenly the car took off, and the kids were still hitting me on the hands to get me off. Finally, I realized I had to let go. I let go and ran as fast as I could. I tried to upright myself and couldn't and did a belly flop on the gravel path. I cut up my whole chest. I got back to this outdoor changing area, and a nun came over to me and said, Go to the camp hospital. The nun put Mercurochrome on me, and I had a bright red chest that never washed off the entire time I was at camp. All the kids would come over, and they'd say, Could you show my friend your chest? And I would lift my shirt up. I felt like I had a stigmata, but they were treating me with incredible respect.

You titled a piece *The Mercurochrome Kid Finally Comes Home* [1988].

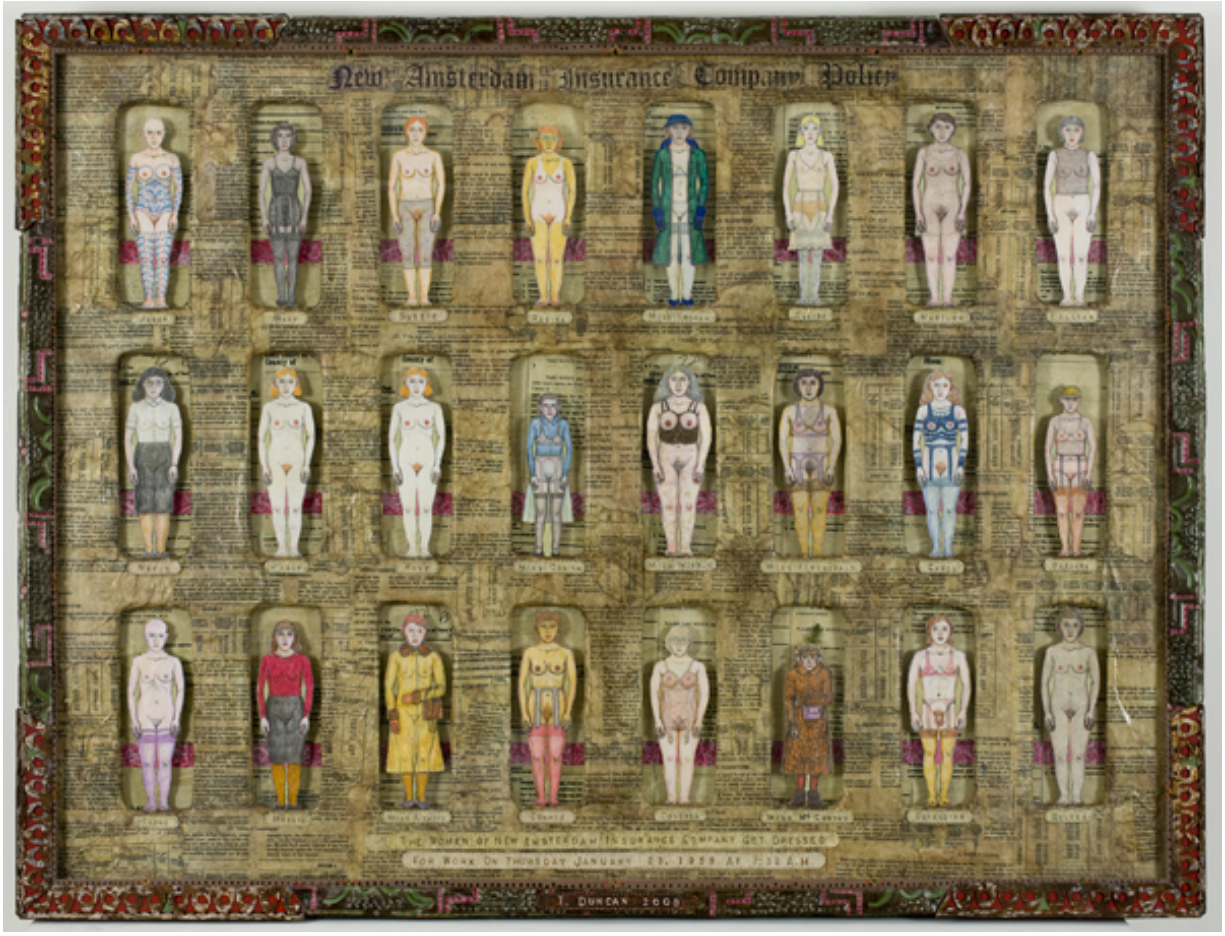
That was the last one of my first autobiographical series. In it, I'm telling my mother what happened. The frame for that piece had been a chair back. I like to transform something into something else.

The Mercurochrome Kid Finally Comes Home. **1988. Mixed media, 16 x 25 x 2½ inches.**

You worked as a model maker at the Port Authority.
I worked for them from 1961 to 1964. I made the original World Trade Center models.

Did you have any other jobs?
I got into model making really early. When I got out of high school, I got an office job. I thought I would have liked to have gone to college, but I had no interest and I had no money. Basically, I was thinking of going to the Delahanty Institute. Back in the day, you'd see the advertisements on the subway. It was sort of like a technical school—they would teach you how to do drafting, maybe engineering. That was something I was interested in, but I never did it. I applied to Pratt and got rejected. So I was working at an insurance company. I enjoyed the

camaraderie, but it was mindless work. I knew that an office wasn't for me. I figured I'd probably like to do something with my hands. My aunt knew someone who knew someone, and I worked for a man after school. He did mechanical displays. I'd go out to Brooklyn and buy electric motors for him. He had a great office on 42nd Street in a penthouse. This was back in the 1950s.



The Women of New Amsterdam Insurance Company Get Dressed for Work. **2009. Mixed media, 52 x 39½ x 2¾ inches.**

Then I met a man who had a little house with an attic in Sunnyside. We made models of houses for real-estate companies. He knew I liked to do sculpture, and one day he asked me, Would you want to make some figures for the houses? I said sure. I started making little figures, and he said, These are really good. Have you ever thought of going to art school? I said, I'd like to. He told me about the National Academy of Design, School of Fine Arts and the Art Students League of New York, and I picked the Art Students League first because it was more convenient to get to. At 19, I paid $30 for one month. I thought I'll go for a month and see if I like it. If I don't like it, I won't go anymore. I just kept going. I loved it.

I also went to the National Academy of Design, and in my second year there—I had been going to school for four years—I was saying to myself, This is getting

serious. Do I want to do this? My family didn't understand anything about art. There was no interest in that. Their conversations were, Are you working? And as long as I had a job, everything was OK. They knew I always did art and that I was a little different than everyone else. They didn't encourage me, but they didn't discourage me.

Did you do a Yonkers garbage truck design in 2007?
Oh, yes. I forgot about that. That was a contest. My partner Lisa Dinhofer did an MTA project, and I was her assistant. It was a 90-foot glass mosaic mural at 42nd Street and Eighth Avenue called *Losing My Marbles*. It's a field of marbles on a black-and-white floor, and marbles are rolling out. I think Lisa's project manager told her about the contest. Lisa told me, I'm applying for this garbage truck thing. Why don't you apply for it? So I did, and my design was one of the winners. I called it the Yonkers Chomper. It's a dinosaur. It was a fun project.

You're with a gallery that deals mostly with outsider art, which generally means the artist is not trained. How do you feel about that categorization?
It doesn't really matter to me personally. But it rankles me a bit that there are certain people in the art world who won't acknowledge my work because I went to art school. I try to tell them, I'm completely self-taught from the age of 4. At 19, I went to art school. I learned how to do the figure really well, but I left school after five years. I taught myself how to do printing, etching, graphics. I taught myself about color, painting my sculpture. I taught myself about collage, assemblage, construction. Everything else is completely self-taught. I find the art world a little hypocritical that way. If I was in an insane asylum, or if I was under a bridge somewhere doing artwork, that would be cool. I think it's dogmatic to isolate things. But it really doesn't affect me that much.

But an outsider label could be limiting.
It definitely is limiting, and I find that frustrating at this stage in my career. I thought I'd be a bit better known. I used to get art reviews in the '80s and '90s, and I'm not getting reviews at all right now.

After you began to do autobiographical work, you also created pieces like *The Execution of Private Slovik,* which you worked on for six years, finishing it in 2009.
I read the book by William Bradford Huie. I was very moved by it. I worked on the piece on and off. Years ago, I found this trunk in the garbage, and I kept it in the studio. As soon as I read the book, I thought, most of my memory work is about the Second World War. And I see this as an offshoot, something very close to what I'm doing, but a different concept. It's also a snow piece. I love doing snow pieces. I came to this country during the blizzard of 1947. The snow was over my head. To me it was like magic land.

One of my iconic pieces is *The Brandy Strafing* [1991]. For that piece, I developed a technique that I made for bullets flying through the air. I knew in *Slovik* that I wanted to have ten or twelve soldiers in the firing squad, and I wanted to have the idea abstractly of these tracer bullets going across the snow, coming in and shooting at Private Slovik. I enjoy taking little 10-cent plastic soldiers and transforming them into sculptures. I cut away certain things; I add certain things. I researched the kind of uniforms they wore. It was wintertime, and it was very cold that winter. They were wearing long coats, so I had to make the coats to add on to them, and I made little scarves and hoods for them. If I can buy something, I consider that a found object that I transform. I was very moved by the story, but immediately I got the concept of the tracer bullets flying in, and the idea of the color, the red and the yellow, going right across the white foam. I think of snow as sensual and peaceful, and here's this incredibly violent scene happening.

This piece has different story frames in it. In the bottom, Slovik is in prison.
I thought, I have to put the trunk on something. I can't have it on the floor. And I had this old milk crate that I transformed into a stockade, and then I put the stockade on a white base, and that was on the snow again. And I bought a helmet and put that on top with little plastic soldiers around the helmet. I went to a health food store to buy a net bag so that I could use that for the netting they used to put on helmets in the Second World War.

You've got an angel and a devil in that.
Yes, he's got a guardian angel and a devil. They're horrified, and they're flying away.

That angel and devil get a lot of play in your different pieces.
As a child I believed I had a guardian angel who was looking out for me. I still think that, although not as confidently as I did as a child. And I was wise enough as a child to realize that everybody has a devil in them too.

The Execution of Private Slovik. **2009. Mixed media, 22 x 17 x 74 inches.**

Let's talk about your two huge works.
I'll start with *Dedicated to Coney Island* [1984-2009]. I did that first. I lived out in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn. I moved there from the Bronx with my mother and brother

when I was 11 years old. We got a big brownstone with two floors. My two aunts and my uncle lived upstairs, and my mother and my brother and I lived downstairs. I had part of a basement—that was my first studio. It was a twenty-minute subway ride to Coney Island. We could ride our bikes there. I really liked it. To me it was the dichotomy of high art and low art, sex and no sex. It was everything extreme, exciting, scary.

Moving forward, at the National Academy, it was a pretty academic place, very straitlaced, and I was doing my half-life-size figures. I remember coming out of there one night and saying, I want to do a piece of sculpture with an electric train running through a fun house, banging the door open. And I immediately caught myself and said that was sacrilegious. I can't do something like that. That's not high art. I censored myself for years, but I thought, Someday I'm going to do something. I don't know what it is, but I'm going to do something with a train, and it's going to be art. In the early '80s, I told a friend who was a painter that I wanted to do this big piece, but I didn't know how to do it. And she said, Just do a small part of it. That was what I needed, that encouragement, that push. I thought, That's a simple solution. I can do that. So I did a small section of it, the middle section. And I liked it and got good response from it, and I exhibited it. Then I built the back part and the front part. Before I knew it, I had the whole thing completely blocked out, and I would work on the thing periodically throughout the years.

Dedicated to Coney Island. **1984-2009. Mixed media, 96 x 90 x 84 inches.**

There are recognizable structures from Coney Island in the piece, like the Wonder Wheel.

Yes, but most of it is made up. I was working on one of the fun houses in the piece and listening to the radio. Some kids out in Brooklyn climbed into the polar bear area in the Prospect Park Zoo after hours, and one got killed. And I put that in the piece with polar bears eating children.

The first two pieces I made were the two fun houses with the section in the middle with the dragon station and crocodile pit. My brother and I as children are in the front car of the dragon train. I think I made those out of terra-cotta and fired them. I'm probably the only person who has put the subway in a Coney Island artwork. I have three subways in the piece, and I have a trolley car underneath that runs back and forth. There are four different scenes inside the fun houses, and I made them symbolically earth, water, air, and fire—the ancient elements.

Amusement parks have a higher rate of fires than any other type of buildings. That's why I have flames all over the place.

I have a Remember Pearl Harbor ride. I also have a tiny plastic dome with the World Trade Center on fire. I had done a concentration camp piece, *1939—War Toy for a German Child—1945*, which I completed in 1989. I was very moved by doing that. So I put in a concentration camp scene on one side.

And the sculpture is interactive.
I have at least nine or ten buttons on the control panel. I decided to make three faces. The eyes, the noses and the mouths all have something to push. The push buttons control the Wonder Wheel, the dragon train, and all the other rides. I have mermaid tin cutouts in between. And the chair I found on Bank Street. It's an old dentist's chair. It's cast iron, and I painted it on fire.

Did you make the other people for the piece—or did you repurpose the figures?
Some of them I bought and repurposed, and some I made and cast with rubber molds and reproduced them. I needed a lot of figures on the beach, and most of them are cast and painted. This piece is not finished. I could work on it another twenty-five years. I keep calling a moratorium. It's in storage now in the American Visionary Art Museum in Baltimore. They were kind enough to have it on exhibition for quite a number of years. It was at the 2013 New York Armory Show and in Paris, France. It's traveled around a bit. It's going to be in the Museum of the City of New York, possibly in the next year or two. I know I'm going to have a lot of work to do to get it refurbished.

You did a great deal of planning for *Portrait of Tom with a Migraine Headache* [2013].
I made a cardboard model and stayed pretty much on target to the original model.

And you have many sketchbooks filled with notes and drawings.
I get migraine headaches. It's like a hot poker is behind my right eye. I wanted to do a piece about getting a migraine headache. I get the idea. How do I do that? I don't know. I write that down: I don't know. When I admit that, then the ideas start to come. I had made a casting of my youngest daughter's face with Paris Craft. (It's like cheesecloth impregnated with plaster.) I cut openings for the eyes. One day I was holding the mask on my face, and I was looking at a Scottish calendar, and I had my studio work light behind the calendar. When I moved, the image on the other side of the calendar showed through. I thought I was hallucinating. Then I realized that when I moved, it was backlighting the calendar, and the image was showing through from the other side. From that observation, I got the

idea to do what I call a magic trick. I sculpted the face of myself and cast it in the negative. Looking inside the viewing chamber, the viewer is putting their head inside my head. I liked that concept. I put figures inside the chamber, and they're all positive things—like my mother reading a story to my brother and me, my aunt teaching me how to make sculpture, my father making me a sailboat, my uncle with a train, my granny with a teapot. And what happens is, the lights go out in the chamber, and then the lights go back on for the magic trick. Those are some of the bad things that happened to me. They're drawn in reverse on the other side.

Portrait of Tom with a Migraine Headache. **2013. Mixed media, 10 feet 8¼ inches x 61½ inches x 46¼ inches. Left: front view. Right: right side view, headache side.**

You also have scenes on the outside.

On the right is the headache side. It was easy to do that side. I filled it with devils and monsters and a hot poker and veins and blood and flames. It took the

longest time to do something positive for the non-headache side. I came up with the idea of doing a birthday party outdoors. I had my angel and my devil come, also my mother and brother and some friends. There's also my father's greenhouse—and the German prison camp, which I made in perspective. I put in a train, and my father and I walking on the canal. Lower down is Edinburgh Castle and my neighborhood in Edinburgh with the church and the school and the brewery and my granny's house. At the bottom is the Edinburgh Zoo. And my "conception" is in what I named the NonHeadache Shoulder Shrine.

***Portrait of Tom with a Migraine Headache,* details. Left: front view. Right: right side view, headache side.**

The back head is about coming to America, and it has a train scene—Grand Central Terminal really impressed me when I came to America. I put in my favorite buildings from the Bronx Zoo and the Museum of Natural History. I even have Teddy Roosevelt's statue. There were beautiful neon signs on Fordham Road, and I would stand in the dark and watch them. I was particularly fascinated by the VIM sign. Back home during the war, it was a total blackout. So coming to America and seeing neon signs in the dark was marvelous. First the *V* would come on; then the *I* would come on; then the *M* would come on. It would all go off, and then the whole thing would go on. I got a friend to design a little computer so that the letters would flash on in my piece.

It requires a lot of stick-to-itiveness to spend twenty-five years on one piece.

When I tell people that I spent twenty-five years working on the Coney Island piece and the headache piece, I mention that I did forty other pieces of sculpture also. If somebody had told me I was going to spend that amount of time on the two big pieces, I would have said, What, are you crazy? I'm not going to do that. I have other things to do. It just happened to work out that way.

Inside—Outside. **2016. Mixed media, 61 x 46 x 4 inches.**

I knew when I chose to be a sculptor that I was picking the most physical of the visual arts. I knew I wanted to do something physical with my body, and I also knew I wanted to do something with my mind. I love to think about things and create things in my head. Sculpture seemed to be the perfect fit for me. I felt fortunate that I was able to pick something that I knew I loved—and that I would sustain that love.

Photo credits—Headshot: Lisa Dinhofer; all other images courtesy of Andrew Edlin Gallery.

Terry Stoller is a Westbeth resident and author of *Tales of the Tricycle Theatre.*