

ART & DESIGN

An Artwork Turns to Mush, All According to Plan

By WILLIAM GRIMES MAY 13, 2013

In December 2006 James Grashow, a sculptor and illustrator, went to Purchase, N.Y., to visit the family of Allan Stone, the art dealer who had recently died after representing him for four decades.

He got a big surprise.

There, on the lawn, two of his sculptures, giant papier-mâché figures that formed part of an installation from the mid-1960s, were lashed like hostages to an oak tree. Nearby, several other figures, once part of a fight scene titled “Murder Mâché,” lay in a disintegrating heap, undone by the wind and rain.

For 20 years the works had been on loan to Purchase College, part of the State University of New York, which had returned them to Mr. Stone about six months earlier. Mr. Stone, a notoriously acquisitive collector — equal parts connoisseur and hoarder — had no room left in his house for art, so he had put the work on the lawn.

Mr. Grashow was left reeling. “To see my dealer lump the work like a piece of garbage in the backyard was almost a verification of all the negative feelings that I’ve ever had about myself, my work, my own aspirations to do something great,” he told Olympia Stone, a daughter of Mr. Stone’s, in an interview for her film “The Cardboard Bernini,” scheduled to be shown at the Art of Brooklyn Film Festival on Saturday. The film, five years in the making, is a documentary record of the artist at work on “Corrugated Fountain,” an assemblage of figures inspired by the Roman fountains of the Baroque sculptor Gian Lorenzo Bernini and animated by an insight that came to Mr. Grashow as he stewed over the fate of his papier mâché figures.

All art decays. Why not embark on a grand work that admits its own mortality, that embraces its own destruction? The ignominious end of his papier-mâché figures was, Mr. Grashow decided, a blessing. “I was liberated, in a way, to be the architect of what was inevitable, anyway,” he told Ms. Stone.

Filmmaker and subject were not strangers. Far from it. Mr. Grashow, now 71, was an occasional visitor to the Stones in Purchase from the time he started showing at the Allan Stone Gallery in Manhattan in 1965. Ms. Stone, who was born four years later, sometimes tagged along with her father on visits to Mr. Grashow’s studio. Some of the sculptures stood on display in the family’s art-stuffed house, where they worked their way into Ms. Stone’s nightmares.

“His work really terrified me when I was little,” Ms. Stone, 43, said in a

telephone interview. “I was afraid that these pieces would come to life and chase me. People often see them as cute and cartoonish, but there’s a scary edge to it.”

After Ms. Stone graduated from Barnard she did documentary work for the cable television series “Biography,” on A&E, and “The Justice Files,” on Discovery Channel, before moving to WGBH, the Boston public television station, where she helped produce a local arts program. In 2001 she began making a documentary about her father, “The Collector,” and reconnected with Mr. Grashow, known as Jimmy, who was one of several artist-commentators she relied on to tell the story of her father’s life and career.

The film started making the rounds at the end of 2006, just before Mr. Stone’s death. When it was shown at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum in Ridgefield, Conn., the next year, Mr. Grashow invited Ms. Stone to his studio and talked about the cardboard fountain he had just started working on. “I asked him, ‘How would you feel about me following you?’ ” she said. “He was definitely into it.”

For the next three years Ms. Stone would fly in from her home in Chapel Hill, N.C., to watch the work evolve. With a hand-held camera, she hovered as Mr. Grashow cut out hundreds of fish scales for the fountain’s two leviathanlike sea creatures; followed him as he picked up sheets of cardboard from the Danbury Square Box Company; and listened as he philosophized about art, life, death and cardboard.

Slowly the fountain emerged, a turbulent assemblage of rushing waves and dolphins, of nymphs, holding trumpets to their lips, astride rearing horses. At the center Poseidon sat on a rock, trident in hand, flanked by two meditating figures, one in the chin-on-hand pose of Rodin’s “Thinker.”

Cardboard might seem an unlikely medium, but not to Mr. Grashow. As a child in Brooklyn, he says, he impatiently discarded the wrapping on presents and threw himself at the boxes, which he regarded as precious raw material. After graduating from Erasmus Hall High School and earning an art degree from Pratt Institute, he studied in Florence on a Fulbright grant, surrounded by masterpieces in marble. But a visit to the 1964 Venice Biennale, where he saw a giant hamburger by Claes Oldenburg, pushed him in a Pop direction.

His early work tended to be whimsical, grotesque and obsessively detailed, a style that carried over to his woodcuts, which supported what he calls “my sculpture addiction.” As an illustrator, he worked steadily for a variety of magazines and newspapers, especially The New York Times, and for Columbia Records. He designed the cover for Jethro Tull’s 1969 album, “Stand Up,” and the 1971 album “Live Yardbirds: Featuring Jimmy Page.”

In time, corrugated board became his preferred medium, and the object of an almost parental fondness. “It’s so ephemeral,” he said. “It’s so grateful for the opportunity to become something, because it knows it’s going to be trash.”

His more recent work includes the continuing series “Houseplants” — flowers that sprout meticulously rendered houses instead of pistils — the similarly small-scale “Cardbirds,” and the large-scale “events,” which he often completes with the help of volunteers. In January he and a group of art students and faculty members at the University of Tulsa made 26 giant letters for “Corrugated Alphabet.”

In the same vein, he has executed brightly colored fish in “Under the Corrugated Sea,” a colony of monkeys in “The Great Monkey Project” and, in “A City,” an anthropomorphic Manhattan made up of humanized buildings wrapped in patterned fabric.

“Corrugated Fountain” made its debut, indoors, at the Taubman Museum of Art in Roanoke, Va., and after stops in Manhattan and Pittsburgh landed at the Aldrich in April 2012. There, for the first time, it was exposed to the elements. Six weeks later, the battered and buffeted remnants were collected in a Dumpster and hauled away. But where?

“I swear I have no idea,” Mr. Grashow said. “Probably to a landfill. Maybe I should have followed it and watched.”

In other words, “Corrugated Fountain,” as the artist intended, made its impression and then vanished. Almost.

“I took some of the toes,” Ms. Stone said. “I have them in my office.”

