ART THAT TURNS LIFE INSIDE OUT

CASTING FRIENDS AND FAMILY IN PLASTER, GEORGE SEGAL CREATES "ENVIRONMENTS" THAT BRING INNER REALITY TO THE SURFACE

By Phyllis Tuchman, *Smithsonian*, January, 1998

When the emperor of Japan this past October awarded artist George Segal the Praemium Imperiale for a lifetime of achievement in sculpture, his nation's equivalent of a Nobel Prize, he was honoring a humble, pensive 73-year-old who had once been a chicken farmer. An originator of Pop Art, since 1961 Segal has been creating, in his former chicken coops, "environments" peopled with friends and family whom he casts in plaster. These scenes may also incorporate all sorts of media, including video, pastels on paper, painting and photography, as well as objects ranging from coffee cups and chair backs to a movie marquee and a New York subway car.

The Diner, 1964-66: a Hopperesque vision that suggests endless cups of joe.

During a ceremony of pomp and splendor, a check for almost $120,000 was presented to Segal, a man who has lived modestly in the same house in New Jersey for 48 years with the same forthright, down-to-earth woman he married 51 years ago and who, ever since his first two galleries closed decades ago, has been represented for more than 30 years by the same New York dealer.

Now a wide audience has the opportunity to see why Segal has been garnering acclaim. A wonderful retrospective sampling of his art, curated by London-based Marco Livingstone, has been organized by the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts. "George Segal, a Retrospective: Sculpture, Paintings, Drawings" opens in mid-February at the Smithsonian's Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C. before traveling on to the Jewish Museum in New York and the Miami Art Museum in Florida.

This is the first large survey of George Segal's work in 20 years. And it is the best—several institutions that refused to lend their casts and environments to earlier shows have loaned to this one. You come away from the exhibition with an appreciation of the sculptor's versatility, his debt to abstract practices and his humanitarian concerns. Besides revealing how he matured, how his early, sketchy forms eventually became more self-contained and refined, the show provides what is probably as fine an introduction as there will ever be to Segal's second-generation Abstract Expressionist canvases of the 1950s; the ravishing pastels with Matisse-like aspects, from the 1960s; the more recent grisaille still-life paintings; and the new, astonishingly candid, large charcoal-and-pastel portraits of Segal's colleagues and relatives.

Last spring, when the FDR Memorial near the Tidal Basin in Washington, D.C. was dedicated, many Americans watching television became acquainted with three signature Segals: *Appalachian Farm Couple 1936*, *Depression Bread Line* and *Fireside Chat* (plaster versions of the first two are in the touring retrospective). The first of the three pieces was conceived at the end of the 1970s but was put on hold like the rest of the project while Republicans lived in the White House. Like a small child, the artist had to be patient—in his case, for almost 20 years—before his two simply attired, gaunt farmers, his five dejected men in heavy overcoats waiting for food, and a rapt radio listener were cast in bronze and installed at the 7 ½ -acre site. During the opening ceremony, Segal talked for a few minutes with President Bill Clinton about the making of these works. The artist mentioned how he had been "overwhelmed" by the chance to portray "how ordinary people felt during the Depression." He remembers those times vividly, even though he was only a boy. To this

day he still reveres FDR and his values and attitudes. Says Segal, "I was trying to reflect my father's admiration for the wealthy patrician who was able to speak beautifully and accurately about flat-broke immigrants."

Segal seems to have captured the imagination of the public as well. The crowds that have been flooding onto the grounds of the memorial pause in front of his sculptures, whether they have or have not heard of the artist. Grandparents who don't understand a thing about e-mail or Websites recognize the radio in the alcove. "That's the kind I sent to my husband the first year he was in the Army. It was his Christmas present," one woman was heard to say on Labor Day weekend. Baby boomers explain to their kids how people who didn't have jobs stood in breadlines during the 1930s so they could get some food to eat. A man in a Dallas Cowboys shirt calls to his son, "Come here, this is America." Another father, looking at two of the bronzes, immediately responds, "You got rural, those farmers over there, and urban, these guys here." Someone else recalls, "He gave these 'fireside chats' and you thought he was talking to you."

And that is how many visitors to the FDR Memorial, young and old, from near and far, in wheelchairs and on crutches, in shorts and T-shirts, or wearing suspenders and squashed golf hats, react to Segal's work. The sculptor is trying to engender all sorts of dialogue. After all, he is talking to them. It is personal, direct, unafraid to pluck heartstrings. You too have these memories or you have seen someone posed or doing something like that, or you recall having once heard about such a thing.

In an age when art has either become obtuse or decorative, George Segal's works occupy a middle ground. Michael Brenson, formerly an art critic for the New York Times and today a commentator on sculpture, says, "I didn't think you could put a figurative sculpture in a public place and have it work so profoundly on so many levels. But George has done that. His pieces at the FDR Memorial touch people so deeply. Everyone wants to be a part of it. It's amazing how they empathize with this work even when they don't know what it means." Like other critics who have been to the site, Brenson noticed that almost everybody seemed to be carrying a camera—and taking a photograph of someone they knew standing in Segal's breadline.

Nothing about Segal's background suggests that he would become the respected and popular artist he is today. He grew up in the Bronx, the youngest of two sons of a kosher butcher. Back then, as Segal recalls, that borough of New York was a "small town," and images from there—say, a couple embracing by a row of mailboxes in a stairway or a woman standing by the doorway of a tenement—recur in his work. He had an aptitude for science; when he scored well on citywide tests he entered Stuyvesant High, still an elite public school that has graduated several Nobel Prize winners. Segal claims he was sent there not to become an astrophysicist but to improve his scrawly handwriting. "Everyone thought the discipline would do me good," he says. While "no one was interested in modern art," he says, he is grateful he was "taught how to dissect what we were reading."

At the FDR Memorial: Depression Bread Line *and* Appalachian Farm Couple 1936 *express "how ordinary people felt."*

Throughout the 1940s, Segal's education was interrupted. His family moved to the New Brunswick area of New Jersey so that his father could become a chicken farmer. Then, during World War II, he had to leave school and help his dad when his brother was drafted. By the end of the decade he had taken classes at Cooper Union, Rutgers, Pratt Institute and New York University. NYU had the most impact on his future. There Segal met fellow students Larry Rivers and Alfred Leslie, who would become famous long before he had even realized he would

become a sculptor. They made their marks as figurative artists, and it appears that Segal did, too, but the underpinnings of his work, unlike theirs, are much closer to Minimalist abstraction. All three studied with nonrepresentationalists, the sculptor-architect Tony Smith—a close friend of Jackson Pollock and Barnett Newman—and painter William Baziotes, also an associate of the Abstract Expressionists.

Listening to them, Segal was puzzled. Why didn't their own art reflect the literature, film, philosophy, psychology, history and politics they were analyzing? Recently Segal described how Smith assigned his class to read James Joyce's Ulysses. "When we came to school the next week he had reproductions of Cubist paintings by Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque hanging on the wall. And he was challenging us to find connections between the way Joyce wrote and Picasso and Braque painted."

Having gotten married in 1946 to Helen Steinberg, whose father's farm was down the road from Segal's father's place. Segal needed to make a living. In 1949 he bought his own neighboring property on which to raise chickens and start a family (in short order he and his wife would become the parents of a son, Jeffrey, and then a daughter, Rena). "Being a chicken farmer," he told me recently, "was simply a mode of survival I learned from my father. That involved physical survival. Being an artist involves mental survival and a world of ideas. I still have to survive mentally and physically."

By the mid-1950s Segal was teaching adult art classes in local schools and community centers. Running the farm had practically bankrupted him. Yet he had managed to stay in touch with goings-on in the art world. Allan Kaprow—who would invent Happenings, the precursor of performance art, on Segal's farm—was teaching at Rutgers and living close by. Anyone who reads Kaprow's influential articles published during the '50s can see how deeply his ideas affected his new friend. He advises artists to be unorthodox, to use ordinary, everyday objects as well as sounds and smells in their work. Then, too, Segal's first three one-man shows would be held during the late '50s at the Hansa Gallery in New York, an artists' cooperative of which Kaprow was a member.

Segal spent the summer of 1956—and the next three—in Provincetown, Massachusetts, where Hans Hofmann ran his legendary school. About paintings such as Segal's Provincetown Interior II, a canvas from 1956 in which an older woman sits at a round table daydreaming beside an open book, Livingstone suggests apt connections with Matisse as well as Bonnard. He could have added that the model, the artist's mother-in-law, suggests comparison with a portrait Larry Rivers made two years earlier of his own mother-in-law, Berdie; and that the still lifes as well as the tipped tabletop from which they do not slide have been rendered in an expressionistic manner reminiscent of Hofmann's style. Segal's painting style will subsequently change—figures will become broader in their handling and more life-size; fewer colors will be used; and backgrounds will practically resemble abstract pictures—but he has already found his subject matter. Countless plaster figures will continue to sit at tables like this one; they will drink coffee, watch television, put on nail polish, listen to poetry, use a computer, merely wait.

Courtesy Sidney Janis Gallery, New York

In Provincetown Interior II*, 1956, Segal had already found his subject matter.*

In 1961 a student, the wife of a chemist who worked for Johnson & Johnson, a major employer in the area, brought to class some newly perfected plaster-impregnated bandages. By adding water to them, even a child could make a mold easily. Segal knew what he could do with them. In 1958, with plaster and chicken wire that he still had in his coops, he had modeled a number of "handmade" statues.

When Segal sat down on an old, once-elegant chair and had his wife wrap him with the bandages he had just been given, he was a painter. Once he stepped out of the shell that had been fabricated, he was a sculptor. He never has called this work a self-portrait, just as he rarely uses titles that identify his other models. Yet none of them are truly anonymous. While they are somewhat generic, they are closer in nature as well as poetics to Everyman and Everywoman. We all eat, sleep, talk. For the most part, that's what Segal's casts do, or seem to do. For instance, while they don't really eat, based on all those empty coffee cups in Segal's works they do seem to have drunk buckets of brew.

The components of Segal's environments, both the figures as well as the objects, are so familiar that it is easy to overlook the artist's inventiveness. For example, when Segal re-assembles the plasters—they are cast in pieces—he literally carves as if he were chiseling in marble the space between, say, the crossed legs of a seated form or the angle at which a woman in a butcher shop holds her upraised, knife-wielding arm. Since Segal has chosen just the right implement or object to interact with his cast forms, we also don't think about what he has left out.

We know, too, that an abstract steel sculpture by an Anthony Caro or a Richard Serra rests directly on the floor of a gallery without an intermediary pedestal. We seldom consider that this is the case with a work by Segal as well; since we identify so strongly with his images, we just assume they should stand directly on the ground without pedestals, as we do. "Paintings used to be put in frames and sculptures on pedestals to mark off the difference between 'banal' reality and the interior life of the artist," says Segal. "When I decided to use real space and real movement, frames and pedestals weren't necessary. I find ordinary life and ordinary space miraculous."

In 1961, the year he made his first direct-cast form, Segal went several times to the Mark Rothko retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art. There, he responded to the amazing way people looked standing in front of Rothko's evocative abstractions. In many of his own works, he has placed his plasters in front of strong, rich, geometric panels of color; for example, there's the deep-red back wall that sets the tone of The Diner.

Segal's method for casting his figures from life sounds easier than it actually is. After discussing with a model—usually a friend or relative—the pose he or she should assume, the sculptor covers any bare skin with cold cream (in 1989, Segal made casts of my own head and torso, so some of this description is based on experience). Classical music plays in the background. Then Segal dips pieces of wide, plaster-impregnated bandages in a bucket of water as he starts to create a patchwork-like pattern around the torso of the model. His touch is so delicate, you don't even feel his hands against your clothes as he creates a mold that, when cut in half and removed, resembles pliant armor. Next, a cast from waist to feet is taken. A mold of the head is made last. It takes about 15 to 20 minutes for each section to set. With a shower in the bathroom off the studio, you can get cleaned up quickly.

Courtesy Sidney Janis Gallery, New York

Girl Behind Bedpost and Chair, *1975: an ancient form-bas-relief-gets a new twist.*

When he began to make sculpture, Segal left his surfaces plain; they retained a rough, hazy quality close in spirit to Willem de Kooning's abstract paintings. More recently, for the past 20 years, he has been making molds of his molds, pouring a thin stream of plaster into the cast-from-life interiors, which are embedded with more details and marks than the outsides. For example, on many plaster ears you can spot the pierced holes where earrings ordinarily are. During different phases of his career, Segal has painted his casts black and in color, applying pigment as if he were making a fresco. In the 1970s, he had a "blue period" reminiscent of

Picasso's. *The Costume Party*, in the current retrospective, is an exception in its figures not being uniformly one color.

Segal rose to prominence alongside the other pioneers of Pop—Roy Lichtenstein, Andy Warhol, James Rosenquist, Jim Dine and Claes Oldenburg. And he is puzzled by the way they are viewed collectively. "My eternal complaint," Segal admits, "is that Pop is defined so artificially. Lichtenstein and Oldenburg do more than witty, detached commentary on American advertising. They plumb the insides of their temperaments. That's what I try to do, too."

Along the way, Segal has had some help from his friends and family. They have been much more than convenient models. They respond just as truthfully to the situations the artist is trying to enact in his work as they would if he were coming to them for emotional support and needed a shoulder to lean on. Danny Berger, who manages the shops at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, has posed for several environments, including two important commissions, a memorial entitled *The Holocaust*, near the California Palace of the Legion of Honor in San Francisco, and the FDR Memorial's *Depression Bread Line*. Asked to portray someone who had starved to death in a concentration camp, he felt he should pose stark naked; and, he says, "I threw my arms apart in a theatrical gesture of death." Since his was the first cast taken, many of the other figures revolve around this prototype. About his experience being encased in plaster for *Depression Bread Line*, Berger recalls, "It was the worst. It was August and I had to wear an overcoat in the unair-conditioned studio. It was so hot, I thought I'd faint." Instead, his man looks truly famished and haggard.

Segal has executed a number of pieces based on Old Testament stories. If they were good enough for Rembrandt and Caravaggio, he reasons, they are good enough for him. The everyday life of people hasn't changed all that much. Take *Abraham's Farewell to Ishmael* (right), which, beneath the high ceiling of a spacious room at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, never looked better. An actual family modeled for three of the figures—the wife has posed for 10 or 12 plasters. In this instance, she and her husband were about to send their youngest son to prep school and their home would be empty. Segal captured their anguish. Their emotional state could not be more appropriate for the scene that he sought to depict. "I've found," Segal says he learned long ago, "that the inner state of the mind connects to the outside surface of the sculpture."

Over the years a number of his friends have refused to take a second look at their plaster doppelgangers. It is startling to confront a duplicate of your body; it's certainly stranger than hearing your voice recorded for the first time. This is your body. Suddenly you discover the meaning of the phrase "You look like your mother."

Fortunately for Segal, most of the people who pose for him are not vain. Berger says he only looks in the mirror in the morning when he shaves. When he confronts his casts, he sees George Segal sculptures. Over the decades, some of Segal's family and friends have posed so often that his oeuvre is also a history of their lives, how they felt at such and such a time, how much they weighed back then, who they were that day. In a way, a number of people have their own living diaries as told by artist George Segal.

Cezanne Still Life No. 4*, 1981, is one of Segal's homages to the masters of modern art.*

Segal's most recent large charcoal-and-pastel portraits are perhaps his most personal expressions to date. In some cases these works on paper are harrowing portrayals, even though some of them are based on photographs

taken by the artist. The retrospective closes with these moving portraits, the works of an older master who is unafraid to face reality.

As a younger generation transforms Segal's environments into installations, and his life-affirming figures facing the issues of their day segue into the latest examples of video art, the older sculptor turns to his distant predecessors. Speaking about Rembrandt, Segal notes how "he accepted everything so that when his pieces come together, you find a simple strong structure meshing with compassion for human drive. His questions, yearning and desire are expressed in a language that includes the nuanced quality of light." As in all the art Segal admires, in his own work, too, one discovers, as he puts it, "the magic of daily life."

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