

# Cast of Characters

ART & ANTIQUES VISITS GEORGE SEGAL'S PRESERVED STUDIO IN NEW JERSEY, WITH HIS DAUGHTER AND HIS LONG-TIME MODEL AS GUIDES. BY SHARON HAZARD



George Segal, *Street Crossing*, 1992

VISITING THE STUDIO of the late artist George Segal, which sits just steps away from his modest barnyard-red home in central New Jersey, can be summed up in one word: ethereal. Entering the workspace is like climbing down into a great archeological dig; fragments of plaster and a cacophony of unrelated objects lie strewn on the cold concrete floored room, which used to be a chicken coop. According to his daughter, Rena Segal, "His chaos was his order." He has even been called "a sloppy expressionist." Cans of paint, tools, nails and screws line the walls and props are casually cast about. A sagging, crackled brown leather chair stands guard over it all. Rena describes it as "his Monet chair."

When your eyes adjust to the dim lighting, which illuminates the seven adjacent rooms that connect like catacombs, the wonder of this man's artistic magic comes alive. Thanks to Rena, who maintains the studio, each piece of sculpture and artwork is care-

fully and lovingly explained. As she guides visitors, docent-like, through the adjoining spaces of bunker-like boxes, she fondly acknowledges many of the life-size figures that sit on chairs, climb up ladders, rest on beds or take part in tantalizing tableaux. Referring to them by name, she says, "That's Leon, a neighbor in the piece called, *The Liquor Store*. Oh, and there's Donald my father's assistant. He posed in front of one of Dad's favorite backdrops, a wall of graffiti. There's Uncle David in *the Bus Stop*. And there's Wendy, who often modeled nude." Rather sadly, Rena adds, "That empty space over there used to have a sculpture of my Aunt Gertrude. She has since gone to a museum."

As vice president of the George and Helen Segal Foundation, Rena has said goodbye to many of her father's cherished pieces. Founded in 2000, shortly after Segal's death, the foundation's mission is to continue showing his works around the world, bestow

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From top: *Depression Bread Line*, 1991; *Untitled* (foreground); *Rush Hour*, 1983 (background)

grants and donate his art to museums and galleries and to provide an authoritative place to purchase his works.

Family like Aunt Gertrude and friends like Donald were his subjects and muses. Everyday objects were his props. Segal saw the ordinary and mundane and made something lasting out of it. Rena says, "He made art from life." Though he was known as a Pop artist at the beginning of his career because of his interest in mass culture, later work such *The Bread Line* and *The Holocaust* took on weightier social concerns.

In *Street Crossing*, Segal used his wife Helen, daughter Rena and seven others as models, but the figures caught in the act of walking are no more important than the negative space between them. Many of his subjects appear as chalky-white mummies ready to reach out, somber black figures lurking or brightly-painted ones ready to dance. Although they are static simulacra, the acts they perform are vibrantly human. Segal experimented with different colors and mediums and experimented with white bronze. Rena





Clockwise from top left: Barbara Goldfarb in Segal's studio, mid-1980s; Segal casting Goldfarb for *Abraham's Farewell to Ishmael*, 1987; Goldfarb next to a figure modeled on herself, part of *Chance Meeting*, 1989.



says, "He often colored over his plaster with acrylic black matte paint to reflect a mood."

The majority of Segal's sculptures are composed of white plaster, left untouched, making them much like the figures abandoned in Pompeii, covered in lava dust and locked in time. But unlike the people buried in the ancient village, Segal's models are alive, arranged and posed to capture the essence of life in seemingly casually constructed scenes.

One of these models, Barbara Goldfarb, was his muse for many years. Segal met her in 1982 when she was traveling on a barge through Egypt with her family on her way to Israel to celebrate her son's bar mitzvah. Segal was traveling to the museum in Jerusalem for the installation his sculpture *The Construction Worker*. The group had the same itinerary. Segal was struck by Goldfarb's exquisitely-chiseled cheekbones and asked if she would be interested in modeling for him upon returning to the United States. Coincidentally, both artist and model lived in New Jersey and so began a nearly 20-year relationship. Segal affectionately referred to her as "Cheekbones."

Like an acting coach, he set his scenes and applied his plaster, and his models just seemed to fit in. His finished products make it look so natural, as though a person had walked through a cloud and ended up as a George Segal sculpture. But according to Goldfarb, the process was done with painstaking attention to detail. She modeled for 12 of his pieces; the first entitled *Girl on Bench with Sunglasses*, was completed in 1983.

Goldfarb says that she had to sit perfectly still for 20 minutes in order for the plaster to set. The artist used quick-drying Johnson & Johnson surgical plaster bandages dipped in warm water, which orthopedists use to make casts for setting broken bones.

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*Woman on Park Bench, 1998*

Coincidentally Goldfarb's husband is a surgeon. "He wrapped me in plaster," she recalls, "one section at a time, then put all the disconnected pieces together to construct the entire body. If there was something he didn't like, then we had to do it again, or he would hand-carve to perfection." In addition to Segal's social themes, he often used the Bible as a source of inspiration. Goldfarb notes that before she, her husband and her son posed for *Abraham and Ishmael*, Segal read the Koran as a reference.

In *The Dumpster*, Rena poses in front of an urban city dumpster. "He liked grunge," she says. Her wavy hair was covered in Crisco before the plaster was put on. "Dad said it was a good conditioner," she says with a laugh. He often told his models, whose faces he covered in Nivea cream, "Consider it a beauty treatment."

And whatever treatment Segal gave to his models, muses and props, he did it to create something of beauty. According to Rena, "In what other people take for granted, he saw something else." 📷



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