

# Desert Exposure

August 2012 Arts Exposure

## Heady Stuff

Silver City sculptor Tim Read found his muse with steel and giant heads.

by Donna Clayton Walter

"I think people can relate to them," says Tim Read, walking past an enormous blue head almost as tall as he is. "I mean, we've all got one — just not this big!" he adds with a laugh.

Read is walking around his Silver City backyard outdoor studio, in-between giant heads, a bust cut down the middle, various metal coils and rods, chunks of boiler plates and lengths of pipe, a table covered with scraps of steel, propellers and such.

"It's more than that, too," Read, this issue's cover artist, goes on. "I think people like the heads because it takes them back to something we all did back in grade school. Taking a lump of clay and pinching it into a face, a head, creating something that looks like us. We like making something with our own image on it..." He pauses, as if looking for the right word, then brightens and says, "Yes, our humanity!"

He stands back and looks at the sculpture in front of him, a blue and silver-ish bust wearing a hat something like a bowler.

"I think it just makes us feel good!" he says with a smile.

Read says it took him a while to find this direction for his art. Born and raised in southern California, he went to California State University in Long Beach. He had his first studio there in the 1970s.

"I did mainly large concrete forms in those days. Hollow, kind of hard-edged," he recalls. He went on to learn welding when he worked at an oil refinery, he says, which transitioned him into working with metal for his art, as well. "I started doing heads around 1985. Some smaller heads,



Artist Tim Read with his welded steel sculpture, "Large Head." (Photos by Donna Clayton Walter)

I cast in bronze. I was doing abstractions, too, but nature does that the best, I think — shapes and such, trees...."

Then welding transformed his approach and changed his style, he says.

"I had all these scraps of steel around and I started to think, 'How can I do a large sculpture without casting?' Then it came to me," he says, seeming to cast his mind back to the emergence of his idea. "I'm going to make a huge head!"

His piece was exhibited at the Sacramento State Fair. Read says, "People just loved it!"

**In the early 1990s**, Read moved to New Mexico, where he continued to create large heads, busts, in some cases entire bodies, as in "Transformation," a red-brown figure seated in a meditation-like pose. One of his large pieces was on display for a year as part of an exhibit of outdoor sculpture coordinated through the Mimbres Region Arts Council. Another piece was on display at Gallery 400 in downtown Silver City, and in September 2010 he had a show at [a]SP. "A"©E gallery. This spring, his giant steel-mosaic head, "Aurora," was exhibited outside the Frame and Art Center in Las Cruces.

Gesturing toward "Transformation," Read remarks on the color. "I like the oxidation," he says. "It's a great thing about working with steel. The expressions on the pieces' faces, the scale, the textures, all make a different impact. Some of them I paint, but I think the natural rust on the metal here adds a different impact to this one."

Read says of his artistic influences, "Well, Rodin, of course! Also, the ancient Egyptians. Egyptian art amazes me. They worked with stone harder than steel!" More current influences include the surrealists, he says, and famed Petaluma, Calif., artist Mark di Suvero, who sculpts with metal on an enormous scale.

Read touches on another aspect peculiar to his work: selling to the public. "Sculpture is harder to market than painting. People might pick a painting because it matches their home. They just bring it home and hang it on a wall. With sculpture, you have to have the space for it. You have to have space to walk around it. It's a whole different animal," he says, then adds with a laugh, "especially sizeable stuff like what I'm doing!"

He notes that he has done a couple of commissions, including the sale of two nine-foot-tall heads,



Read's large metal sculpture, "Untitled," on display in front of his house. The custom-made scaffolding is a new direction the artist is taking to add depth and a feeling of movement to his large sculptured heads.

"Apollo" and "Athena," to the artist and renowned collector Jonathan Green, whose famed gallery is in South Carolina.

On an even more massive scale is a piece, another "Untitled," on Read's front lawn, shown on this issue's cover. The enormous female head, whose hair seems to flow behind like flames, hangs in a huge custom-made scaffolding.

"I want to do more of these," he says. "Because it's hanging, you can feel the heft of it. I think it adds a feeling of motion, too. Like the classical Greek sculpted figures, it feels like it is about to take a step."

**Read says he enjoys steel** for another reason — its flexibility, on all levels. "It's a modern material, and I really enjoy working with it. You can pound it, bend it," he says. "And you can change your mind and take it apart and put it together in a different way. Or not!"

He walks back to the huge blue head.

"I took this one off the neck," he says. "And I decided that I really like it on the ground! I might put it back, though. Steel's great! You can go back and work on something again and again."

He has also modified another piece, "Untitled," the bowler-hatted one that had been on display at Gallery 400.

"I brought it back here (to his outdoor work space) and decided to just cut it down the middle," he says. The two halves of the now-split figure are jagged, from crown to chest, like a ragged surgical incision, perhaps. "I like the way it opens it up, so you can see the thickness of the skin. I thought of it like a time thing, like showing different dimensions of time and space."

Read says he thinks the modifications he made to the seated figure, "Transformation," add still another, most personal dimension.

Standing behind the sculpture, almost as tall as he is, he puts his hand on the figure's shoulder in an affectionate way and says, "I opened up the back of the head so you can see into it." Looking into the figure's head is like looking into the mind while it is meditating, he suggests. "I'm not done with it yet. I'm going to cut some more off here."

Laughing at his open-ended process, he adds, "They're not really ever done until they actually leave here."

At that, Read gets a far-off look, reflecting on his process and where he gets his ideas.

"Well, what keeps me going is the desire to do better the next time. I think that's any artist," he says.

"In each piece, there are the seeds of the next one. It's like, each new piece answers the questions that were raised in the last one. I see what I did and it gives me the idea of the next thing. There's always something more to do," he says, then adds with a wistful smile, "Always. Always."