



Bentley Le Baron & the Great Mother Dragon

by David Morrison

Since moving here from the UK in 2006 my wife Susan and I have developed quite a relationship with the extraordinarily rich arts scene of this region. This has led to the gradual acquisition, within our means, of a diverse collection of beautiful pieces, often picked up when visiting somewhere new, as a treasured memento of that place. But within our gallery there is just one local artist represented more than once, being the Denman Island potter, sculptor and painter, Bentley Le Baron.

Like many, we are utterly smitten with this man's work, but it is little wonder considering the magic that runs through it. Predominantly thematically bound to mythology, the animal kingdom and the natural world, Le Baron's creations are a joy to gaze upon. This is particularly so when viewing them at his enchanting home studio and "sculpture garden," a place of true mystical ambience set deep in tranquil Denman Island woods.

Much of the 73-year old Le Baron's work also possesses glimpses of the wit and mischievous spirit of its creator. When, for example, Susan asked the artist what inspired him to craft his range of ravens with such big, chunky feet, he replied with a cheeky grin that "they would fall over if I made them any smaller."

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All in all there can be no doubting Le Baron's distinguished standing in his field(s), a situation neatly reflected in his elegant, aristocratic name. Yet what makes the thirty-two years he has made his living this way so remarkable is that he entered the arena relatively late in life, having taken no formal training. He is creating wonderful art simply because he loves to do it, and because he is blessed with the innate talent to match his drive.

"I was pushing thirty when I first touched clay, in London, England, when doing my doctorate," he explains. "I was moonlighting at Slade School of Fine Art and hanging around there, I learned to sculpt with clay. All of my education was academic, but all of the art has come from hanging around artists, in a kind of informal apprenticeship. But I've been formally apprenticed to three different potters to learn different skills I wanted to learn, the last one being Gordon Hutchens, here on Denman Island. He's probably the best in the world."

When wandering around Le Baron's studio and garden, as previously mentioned certain thematic threads become apparent in the stunning work of this untrained master.

There are many representations of the female form; figures such as Pan; mounted masks and torsos; creatures real and legendary, and lots of dragons.

"The themes developed... came along with the clay," says Le Baron. "The kiln always seemed like the 'Great Mother Dragon,' 'The Transformer,' so just hanging out with the kiln got me interested in mythology! The elementals – earth, air, fire, water – all took me in a kind of Pagan direction and made me interested in those things and themes. Then I started finding imagery from mythology around the world – the sun and the moon, the dragon, the bear, lots of animal creatures that had been sacred to early peoples in different parts of the world.

And the female figures came from goddess lore, goddess mythology. I was fond of some of the early goddess figures and thought some were so beautiful, instead of being tiny little figurines they deserved to be made larger, so I made them lifesize."

The artist and one such lifesize goddess figure can be seen in the image presented here, captured in the atmospheric sculpture garden alongside Le Baron's studio. This is his take on Demeter – the Greek goddess of the harvest, overseer of grains, the seasons, and the fertility of the earth. She is in many ways an apt presence in Le Baron's corner of the world, considering the lushness of the verdant setting in which she greets visitors.

Le Baron has been resident as an artist and active member of the community on Denman Island for over thirty years, but his background until arriving could hardly have been more different.

"My childhood was ranching in the foothills of Alberta," he tells me, continuing with a further display of his sense of humour when explaining that his family moved to the "Excited States of America" (specifically Nevada) when he was 11-years old.

"Then on our way back to Canada we had a two or three-year stop in Montana, where we had a little farm, finally coming back to ranching country in Alberta. I went to the University of Alberta to do a four-year degree, then to Wisconsin for a one-year degree, then London for another two years, coming back with a doctorate in Politics and Philosophy. I then taught at Brock University in Ontario for six years and when I decided I'd had enough of that, came out to BC, eventually turning myself into a clayworker. I imagined that I probably couldn't make a livelihood as a sculptor so I learned to be a potter and made a modest livelihood, but as I couldn't quit sculpting – especially the dragons – I started selling my sculpture as well as my pottery."

While best known for his wonderful pottery and sculptures, Le Baron has also been making a mark as a painter in recent years. Needless to say, he possesses as much natural skill for this discipline as he does for pottery and sculpture.

"Painting and drawing, I've done since I was a youngster," he says. "Maybe I would have tried to make a living as a visual artist,

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but probably didn't have enough confidence to think that I could do it, so went to do academic studies instead. It is actually the reason I tended to hang out with art students and at art departments. I was interested in painting and wanted to paint. I figured I could take some time off to paint once the mortgage was paid and the kids were raised, so that's when I started painting enough to put shows together, only about ten years ago."

I can only stand back and admire people like Bentley Le Baron, those for whom their creative gifts flow effortlessly. Too often I find myself staring at my PC monitor or with pen in hand at a piece of paper, scrambling for words to effectively convey what in my mind are the simplest of concepts. But will they come? No, they will not! I suppose it could be said that, at least with magazine work, I am handcuffed by the parameters of my subject matter, while Le Baron is limited only by the outer reaches of his imagination, but for him the creative process moves along with little strain, regardless.

"I don't really get blocks," he says. "Some things come easier than others and I sometimes struggle with a painting or a sculpture, but it doesn't discourage me from wanting to do it. There are always unfinished projects, so I have the choice of starting something new or working on something that's underway already. I always have something on the go, always."

I know... when the words will not come I'll go take a good look at the lovely Bentley Le Baron works we own; they are bound to get my creative juices flowing! Yes, that's the answer! ~

Until August 9 "Voluptas", an exhibition of Bentley Le Baron's Georgia O'Keefe-inspired, flower-themed acrylic paintings, is showing at the Summer Art Gallery above the Senior's Hall in Denman Village. Bentley's sculpture and painting can also be discovered at the Salish Sea Market in Bowser. Bentley Le Baron's studio is situated at 4200 Beaver Drive, Denman Island.

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