



The Gib Singleton Newsletter

"I'm not decorating somebody's living room. I'm not decorating somebody's garden. I'm decorating somebody's heart."

Happy Birthday, Buckaroo!!

Every artist brings the sum of their life experiences to their work. In Gib's case, that includes growing up as a sharecropper kid in Missouri, working in Italy, the deaths of two of his children and the growing recognition of his own mortality.

In honor of Gib's 78th birthday, we thought we'd share a few stories of his early life, and a bit of philosophy that help us better understand who he is, and where some of his inspiration comes from.

Life's A Carnival

Like every kid growing up in a family without a lot of resources, Gib took whatever jobs he could find. At various times, he worked as a welder, as a machine operator in Dow Chemical's aluminum extruding plant, and running a drilling machine for Arco Steel as part of building a bridge across the Mississippi.

But his favorite 'day job' of all was working in a carnival. 'I did that every summer during high school,' Gib says. 'It was called Paul Metcalf's Traveling Circus, and I got the job because I knew the guys who owned it – Paul, his brother Pete, and Pop, their dad.

'In the circus, everybody does



Acrobat, Bronze, Edition of 25
25" x 20" x 12"

everything. I ran the Ferris wheel sometimes, and worked the games, like the Dart Toss and the Penny Pitch. Sometimes I'd run the pony ride, feeding and grooming them, saddling them up every day, and helping the little kids get on and off. I also painted the horses on the merry-go-round, which were amazing, hand-carved works of art. I was dressed as a cowboy most of the time.

'We travelled all over Illinois, from Chicago down to Cairo, and we'd hire out to little towns for their annual homecoming. It was the Midwest, so nobody actually

came home – because nobody ever left in the first place – but it was a good excuse for a party, and they guaranteed us an audience.

'We'd roll into town and set up, and I'd usually help hang the big banners announcing the show, and put together the Hammer and the Tilt-a-Whirl. We all slept in a big tent, or under the trucks. There was a cook tent and we'd all eat together at long tables.

'You'd be sitting there with the fat lady and the sword swallower and the strong man and the clowns and the midgets. The whole crew. After breakfast, we'd all go down to the Big Top and look through the sawdust for money that people might have dropped the night before.

'We had a photo booth, too, where people could get their pictures taken with the performers. One of them was a real live Indian Princess, and man, I fell totally in love with her. Her name was Princess Two Stars, and she was from Montana, I think. She was absolutely gorgeous and had long, shiny black hair and amazing cheekbones. We'd get together in the photo booth and carry on between shows.

'That was just one of the best times of my life. I wouldn't trade anything in the world for that experience.'

Missouri Mules

‘I know a little something about mules,’ Gib says. ‘In fact, when I was a little kid, I spent a lot of time on mules, working the farm. My dad would put me up on the mule – usually the one we called Red – and I’d guide it while he worked the one man plow. We’d plow a furrow and turn around at the end, and come back the other way.

‘At the end of the furrow where we started, there’d be a jug of water, wrapped in burlap and wetted down to keep it cool. I’d slide off the mule and we’d get a drink, and then he’d put me back up and we’d start another furrow.

‘It wasn’t real hard work, and it didn’t require a lot of attention, because once you got the first furrow straight, the mule knew what to do for the rest of them. So I’d sit on that mule all day long and I’d dream. And all my dreams came true on the back of that mule.

‘I couldn’t have been more than four or five, because we lost the farm and moved to Granite City somewhere around there, but that’s when I first knew that I wanted to go out and see the world.’

Working on a Sledge Boat

‘I grew up knowing I wanted to be an artist,’ Gib says, ‘but I lived in a time and a place where something like that just didn’t seem possible.

‘My dad was from the old school. He was a farmer – at least until we lost the farm in the Depression – then he worked for the WPA and then he drove a truck for the steel mill. When I told him I was going to be an artist, he tried like hell to talk me out of it. He said, ‘You’ll never have a pension. You’ll never be able to retire. You’ll be broke and end up working on a sledge boat.’ (They used to



Sod Buster (Inspired by Gib’s Dad)
Bronze, Edition of 25, 28” x 13” x 9”

have these flat-bottomed boats that horses or oxen pulled up and down the Mississippi and some of the old canals, and in the really old days, people pulled them!)

‘Well, I did end up working on a sledge boat, but not the way he thought. I got a show at the Missouri Athletic Club in St Louis, which was like a country club in those days, where all the rich guys hung out. So I took a bunch of my bronzes down there and I met this guy who was the president of the Boatman’s Bank in St. Louis. He commissioned me to do a sculpture for the bank of a guy pulling a sledge boat on the Mississippi.

‘I did it, and when he paid me, I took the check down to his bank and cashed it. I got the whole \$20,000 – which was like the biggest commission I’d ever seen – in hundred dollar bills. I put it in a sack, and I went to my dad’s, and I dumped the whole pile on the table. I said, “Well, Pop, what you think of this art stuff now?”

‘He looked at me and he looked at the money and he looked back at me, and he said, “It’ll never last.”’

Art History 101

‘You know, you look at archeology, and as far back as we can go, we find art,’ Gib says. ‘Rock art, cave art, decorated tools, fertility figures . . . And you know we’ve only found a fraction of the sites, and

only a fraction of the art people created has survived.

‘But we know what they were doing. They were celebrating life, telling a story, and in their own way, worshipping their Creator. And that’s what artists are still doing today.

‘You know, scientists argue about when we became human. And they say, well it was when

we started using language, or making tools, or hunting in groups, or whatever. But I’ll tell you how I’d answer that. It was when someone sat down the very first time and said, “I’m going to make something beautiful.”’

‘I think historians mostly see art as something that comes from civilization. You know, that you have to have a civilization or an empire or whatever to make art possible. And I see why they say that, because all of history is written in some art somewhere, so it’s easy to think the history happened first, and then people made art to remember it.

‘But I think that’s backward. People have been making art as long as there have been people. In fact, I think making art is one of the things that makes us people. I think the ability to see and appreciate beauty and remember it is a human thing. And when you can reproduce it in some way and share the beauty that you saw, that’s art.

‘And when you can do that, your brain has changed. It’s gone to another level, because now you can imagine other possibilities and make things from your mind. You can bring them into the world because you can imagine them. And that’s power, man. For good or evil.

‘So I don’t think it’s that civilization creates the possibility of making art. I think making art creates the possibility of civilization.’