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David Hostetler's "Last Dance"

By John Stanton
Contributing Writer

David Hostetler is looking for a woman. That he finds her in the trunk of a box elder he planted 40 years ago on his Ohio farm, that he carves that tree into a sculpture that stands as a metaphoric bookend to his very first sculpture as a student some 60 years ago, says as much about what it means to take stock of one's life as it does about the process of art.

The life and times of the 82-year-old artist, whose work centers on the female form, is at the heart of the documentary film "The Last Dance," which screens at Bennett Hall tonight at 7:15 and 8:30 p.m. Early in the film, the question is asked whether understanding an artist's personal history leads to a better appreciation of his work. Should the art reach us on its own merit? Or does deconstructing the life and times of the artist make the chiseled curves of a sculpture more beautiful?

It is a question that bounces around the background of this amiable and affectionate, but sometimes rambling, look at a life in the arts. To David Hostetler, the artist at the center of the film, there simply is no way to separate the dancer from the dance.

"Any art that is worthwhile to me is intensely autobiographical," he says in the film. "You can't separate the life and the art, if it is really art."

The filmmakers, director Casey Hayward and producer Keith Newman, lay out the linear history and then cleverly show us the true art at the center of Hostetler's life. An artist's work is notoriously difficult to bring to the screen without falling into cliché, but the two manage to show us both the hands-on work of a sculptor and what Hostetler calls "the wonderful idealized dream" that his work reaches for.

This is a film as much about how to build a life as it is about how to carve a statue.

"In my mind I wanted it to be like a memoir instead of a classic documentary," said Newman. "I kept thinking of how wonderful it would have been if towards the end of his career someone sat down with

Picasso and in his own words he talked about his life and his art."

Hostetler was born in 1926, in an Ohio town called Beach City. "There was no beach, there was no city, there certainly was no art," he says in the film. "The only art I knew was a guy named Art who lived up on Main Street. I think he was a plumber."

The first inkling that Hostetler might want to pursue a life in art came during World War II. He took some shrapnel in his leg, during a live ammunition drill as his platoon prepared to leave for the Pacific. The soldier in the bed next to him at the Army hospital was an artist, and gave him his first lesson while they were both convalescing.

The first indication that art and commerce might meet in his work came in New York City with gallery openings, a story in *Time* magazine, and even an appearance on the old game show "What's My Line." It was too much. Hostetler had taken to wearing a black wide-brimmed Amish hat and soon found that the more he played up the image of the heartland artist come to the big city, the more people bought it.

"It was just spooky," he said. "I began to fall into the noble savage thing, this pure person from the country. It was what people wanted, but it became an act. I had to leave and get back to the farm."

The farm, in Ohio, is where Hostetler has his roots – both figuratively and literally. He planted every one of the trees on the farm, and many of them have offered up the curves of a woman to his art. It is there, among friends and students, sculpture and music, that he looks back on his life in the film.

"It's a heavy emotional journey," he said. "Age brings on introspection, the need to check where you've been. This was not really about art, you see, but about the way I live. I think the film connects with people, because there are a lot of universal feelings in it that we all share."

Hostetler was 80 when filming began. He is 82 today, although his face on camera reveals not age so much as the puckish man he has grown into being. He has spent his life pursuing those things that pleased him – art and playing drums in a jazz band.

Those who know him and those who see the film understand that he still chases both muses. In fact the music of a jazz band, with Hostetler on the drums, is the film's soundtrack.

He is quick to point to an excessive ego as the main quality that drives an artist. "Women are drawn to the artist or poet and then live with them and find out that, if they are very good, they devote most of their time to what they are doing," he says in the film. "This is their love, and it's a jealous relationship."

A few scenes later he adds, "I'm in my studio, totally in love with my art and my music 10 hours a day. Most women resent that. People who cannot be alone, don't go into art, it's an alone thing . . . You've got to

be incredibly selfish to think that what you have to say is important enough, in the first place to say it. I mean you've got to have such an ego."

Even confessional moments such as these are leavened by Hostetler's craggy face and sly smile.

Newman has lived close to Hostetler's farm since 1976, but only met him 10 years ago. He recalled the meeting: "It was like an epiphany, and when I got to know him some more I could see there was a film here."

"The thought came to me that every piece ever done on him was almost like journalism," he said. "You had somewhat of a picture if you put them all together, but nobody had described the whole life. Most of them looked at the art and not the man. I wanted to look at the man."

"The Last Dance" does just that. Hostetler's intrigue with women is about as close as he comes to describing his art. "I like women," he says in the film, by way of explaining his subject matter. "I really do. People say I put them on a pedestal . . . well I do."

His first wife became the inspiration for a series called "The American Wife." Hostetler is not afraid to reveal himself on camera as the reason that first marriage did not work. "As I kept elevating into this self-centered world that is art, her anger grew," he says. "Because I became divorced from her literally."

We are left to watch the work, the chain saws and the chiseled strokes, and let that stand as a counter-weight to his introspection, the past bubbling into the present as the figure emerges from the wood. Much of Hostetler's work is polished and refined, although some of it bursts from the form of the tree itself like some sort of Druid priestess.

The figure he carves in the film sits someplace in between. Many of Hostetler's statues sway and curve, with the easiness of stylized women, but there is a darkness to this piece that seems to say more.

Hayward creates a scene where glimpses of a choreographed dancer slide in and out of the camera's frame as if they lived in the recesses of the artist's mind. The effect nicely sets off both the roughly tactile nature of the carving and the confessional nature of Hostetler's introspection.

"That woman dancing is all Casey," said Newman. "He took that scene past the documentary conventions and into a place where it could be stylized and used throughout the film."

Hostetler's third and current wife, Susan, deals with her man's devotion to his art by simply becoming part of it. Not only is she the inspiration for the figure in "The Last Dance," but she is clearly a partner in the larger process of making a living in the art world.

"All of the other women became angry at the time I spend chasing art," Hostetler said. "Susan just became part of it all. She joined in and away we went."

In the film the two dance around the borders between making art and selling art, each one knowing their role but each role overlapping.

“Susan was going to be a secondary character when we began filming,” said Newman. “But it became clear very soon that she is an integral part of his art and so has to become an integral part of his life, and so she became an integral part of the film.”

In the end there is the statue. It is an elegant dancer with a darkened soul. It is placed back on the stump of the tree it came from, and the difference between life and art in David Hostetler’s world once again seems to be so small that you can hardly notice the gap.