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CONVERSATIONS WITH CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS: BRAD STORY, SCULPTOR LECTURE FINDING AID & TRANSCRIPT

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Video Description

As part of the *Conversations with Contemporary Artists* series offered by the Cape Ann Museum to highlight current local artists, Essex native and lifelong boat builder Brad Story presents a slide show and talk about his artistic process as a sculptor. Fascinated with the flow of air and water and inspired by the natural organic forms of birds, fish, and flowers, Story explains how his knowledge of boat

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construction and interest in airplanes help to inform the development of his organic shapes. As past exhibitions in such far flung locations as Seattle, Washington, and Seoul National University in South Korea demonstrate, Story's large-scale, distinctive pieces speak to the universality of man's wonder at the natural world.

Subject list

Roscoe Turner	Arthur D. Story Shipyard
Brad Story	U.S. State Department ART in Embassies Program

Conversations with Contemporary Artists

Transcript

I'm Courtney Richardson, Director of Education and Public Programs. Thanks for coming out on this dreary day. Today's program marks our third year of our Conversations with Contemporary Artists series. We are joined by Brad Story. Brad is a native of Essex and a seventh-generation boat builder. He's always been fascinated with flight and winged things, and has been modeling and sculpting all of his life. Throughout Brad's talk and slide show, please feel free to ask questions if you have any as we go along. Right? And please join me in welcoming Brad Story.

Brad Story

Thank you, Courtney. Can you hear? Thank you, Martha and Rhonda, and all of you for coming out. I appreciate the opportunity. I feel honored. A couple of things before I plunge into this. You really can stop me. I'm just going to show slides. Some of them, I don't have a whole lot to say and that'd be the time to ask a question.

Whenever I show these things, people always say, "where do they come from?" That's the question and that's what I'm going to try to deal with now. First, I'm going to show a few images to give you an idea of my work. This is a fine root, it really is a root. In our lives, our families, our work, we all have roots of one sort or another. I call this "Root of Memory". There will be a couple more slides.

I've loved airplanes and flying all my life. The dream of flying, of course, is an ancient one. This slide depicts the myth of Icarus and his father Daedalus, escaping King Minos's labyrinth. Icarus's wings were made of feathers and wax, flew too close to the sun, the wax melted, down he went. Leonardo da Vinci sketched many flying machines. I don't believe any were ever built. And we know now they couldn't have flown anyway, but they're still beautiful, intriguing. That's

Otto Lilienthal in what we call a hang glider. He studied bird flight as Leonardo did but he really did fly, apparently hundreds of times in Germany in the late 19th century.

Wings come in all shapes and materials. This, of course, is a Luna moth. It flies well. Has a wing shape similar to that of a manta ray and other wings in nature, occasionally used by aircraft designers. Now here's a shape quite similar to the moth's. This was the first of Jack Northrop's flying wings. It's made of wood it's entirely wood. It's been restored. It's now down in the Smithsonian.

Along the same lines is one of my sculptures. It could be a flying wing but was actually inspired by seed from a maple tree. (And what is the material?) The translucent wing is fiberglass. It's a very lightweight fiberglass with epoxy resin. This is one of the things I learned building boats. (And what's the size, how big is that?) That one's about eight feet across. (Where are they?) That particular one is upstairs in our house. (It's a hangar.)

This is a Super Marine S4 racing seaplane. This was one of the Schneider racers, in the, this was late 20s. I think it's an elegant shape and it's inspired a number of my pieces. As a boat builder and aviation buff, I think seaplanes are just great. Here's one of my favorites. This is Roscoe Turner. He's best remembered as a prize-winning air racer, and was quite a showman. Take a look at his snazzy outfit and his pet lion cub Gilmore, who flew with Roscoe until he got too big, which I think was less than a year. Roscoe inspired a piece of mine you'll see later.

I learned to fly in a Piper Cub, similar to the one shown here. Cub's were a highly successful airplane design, were manufactured in great numbers, hundreds and hundreds of them. Many pilots first flew in a Cub and still look upon them very fondly. I do.

[Narrative slide: "Thirty years of boatbuilding: techniques...materials...structures"]

06:03

I was a boat builder for almost 30 years, mostly (at) my family's shipyard in the hometown of Essex. I'm told I'm the seventh generation of my family to work on boats and ships. My predecessors built big ships, schooners, trawlers, passenger steamers even. I built mostly yachts and fishing boats. Here's a little schooner on the launching ways at the old shipyard.

I built boats using mostly traditional methods, including the use of...oh, pardon me, I built a lot of working boats. And here's one heading down the Essex River to the Atlantic and hence to Beverly. I built boats using mostly traditional methods, including the use of half models. Half models were used as design tools for centuries, before printed paper plans came along. I used this model, this actual model, to build the boat we just saw. But I've also used them to work out complex forms for my birds, particularly when they involve fiberglass molds.

Here I am working at the bench, shaping a mahogany plank for the side of the boat, and that was similar to the boat you just saw. Caching the plank involves a lot of temporary clamping,

sometimes even steaming. Here's an example of a lightly framed round bottom hull. Between the opposing forces of the plank, the frame and the round shape, the structure is extremely tough, strong, resilient. I often use very old technologies. Here I am melting lead for a ballast keel here. It's hot, especially in the summertime. Here comes the lead. You can see somebody's got a torch underneath that pipe to keep it hot enough.

Early airplanes were often built by boatbuilders. The techniques they used for boats were brought to the new task. I like how much this looks like a boat hull even though it's clearly an airplane. And take note of the enormous jig that this plane is in. (Can't hear.) Oh, I'm sorry. Early airplanes were often built by boatbuilders. The techniques they used for boats were brought to the new task. I like how much this looks like a boat hull, even though it's plainly an airplane, I was pointing out the immensely strong jig that that's been built in.

The shapes and construction of airplanes in this case appealed to me. I've often been in this position, all crunched up like that. This is a wing assembly showing the same techniques, the same goal: light but strong. You can see down in the corner this is this is another racing plane from the late 20s. (Is this all wood?) All wood. This is just a shot from Boeing. You're seeing it just because I like the looks of it.

10:15

My boat shop is sending forth a new boat. This boat is all wood, light spruce frame, a thin cedar and fiberglass skin. It's about 54 feet long and weighs about ten and a half tons. Here' the same boat at the launching dock. Its twin jet drives to 35 knots. It's pretty exciting especially when the water was rough. We tried this out for the first time in Gloucester harbor in January in about half a gale.

We built lots of sailboats. This is a 40-footer. It's a pleasure yacht and it occasionally won races. Here's "Pamela B". Big lobster boat. This is the predecessor of the boat we saw a little while ago heading down the river. We built several of these pretty lively little boats and collaborated on the design of this one with Phil Bolger. And it won a design award at a boat show in Newport.

Well this is a fine boat with bits of fish, sailboat rigging, bird all mixed together and I guess you can see by now where it's all coming from. Here's another flying boat on a much bigger scale and this of course is hanging right upstairs. This one's meant to evoke a large seabird. Now, most of most of you know this is a great blue heron taking off. Take a good look at the shape of that wing. This really is the gesture and the motion and grace that I'm trying to incorporate in my work. Well, this is my version of a heron, I call it "Wading Bird".

So, we'll go over a few recurring themes. I consider the flow of air and water aerodynamic and hydrodynamic movement and shapes. I think of flow as a process like a flower opening, shapes and forms changing as in metamorphosis, forms and structures shifting and evolving in response to flows could be water, could be wind. Keel, backbone breastbone and ligaments,

wing assembly, ribs, skeletons, framework, they're all structure as the essence of design. Keep this stuff in mind as we move through the next few images.

This is time-lapse photography of a small owl about to land. What's interesting to me is the motion and fluidity. Notice how the wings are constantly changing shape. Well, here's my take on an owl. Here's another owl with a pair of jet engines. (Again, can you say the scale of these or the size?) This one is about so big, maybe four maybe five feet. Some of these are not nearly as big as the one you saw. And that's about five feet also.

Here's a Kingfisher. He's just caught a fish and is powering up and out of the water. Here's another version of the maple seed. Think back to the moth and the flying wing we saw earlier. Seems made to fly out of water. This macaw is hovering. Now, if you tip the macaw a little bit and spread the wings, then you could have a flower opening like this. I call this, "Isabella". And that turns into this, another flower bird, which evolved into the next one, which I call "Orchard". This image and the next one are of a piece called "Metamorphosis". Now, there's some big life change going on. We're not sure what, but this piece grows out of my flower bird series, but is plainly moving in a new direction.

16:08

Many of these pieces incorporate hawks. Here's one with talons down and ready. This canard was designed to highlight aviation control surfaces for an art show in Kitty Hawk honoring the 100th anniversary of the Wright Brothers first flight. The theme of this particular show was Roll, Pitch and Yaw, I believe. So, there's a surface there for each one of those, flaps thrown in for good measure. Here's a shot of a hawk that conveys its power. A lot of airplanes say hawk to me. We've got Red Tails, and now Osprey I understand right near the studio, which leads to this hawk-like biplane, which was hung in the American ambassador's residence in Seoul. Okay, here's the same one hanging in Manchester airport. It was there for a few months. And that image led to this rendering, which was prepared for a public art commission competition in Seattle at SeaTac airport. (Is that still hanging at SeaTac?) Yes, it is. (Good. I'll look for it.) Baggage carousel six. And it led to this 16-footer. Here's some additional views of "Roscoe". Incidentally, I named this piece "Roscoe" in honor of Roscoe Turner, who's pictures I showed you earlier.

This shot of me assembling the piece on the floor of the airport gives you some idea of its bulk. (Grant, approximately how much do these weigh?) Well, good question. This was a big one, it was 16 feet as I say and you can see how bulky it is and I weighed it in pieces, and it's about 49 pounds. They're light, I try to make them just as light as I can. That body, a lot of it is made of foam. And it has a skin of glass on it and the wings of course are completely hollow. They're just thin veneers, that kind of thing. (I think you probably have a lot of problems with cabling to get the center point so it hangs just at the right angle. It must be a lot of work to put that that phase of it together when you connect the wires to it.) Actually, that's not so bad. There are three points on this to which the wires are attached. (You can see one of them.) Yeah, you can see the top of that wing there's a bolt. What I did is I put a little stainless eyebolt right through

the structure so that there would just be no chance of the thing falling down. (But you have to be able to move it so you want the right angle, right?) Yeah, well, I can do that just by changing the length of the, in any of the three wires. (But that's an art in itself.) Well, it can be frustrating.

(Do they move when they're suspended like that, I mean is there enough airflow going through with the airport?) This one's the longer and thinner the strand is that holds them up, the better they move. Now this one, the museum insisted that they hang from at least two points on the ceiling. I wanted one point, so the two wires came down to one joint and then to the three wires, which means there isn't a lot of wiggle room. It doesn't move very much. It rotates a little bit.

20:51

Crows are a favorite of mine. I call this one "Brass" cause of the egg he's stolen and for his attitude. This is the agitated crow and there he is again. I call this "The Guys". It's a carved wood relief. It's only about that big. And I kind of think the middle one is me. If she is I'm not saying,

Here's a raven head from the Pacific Northwest region. Ravens are a very powerful spirit. We met them out there. Here's another Raven and you can see there's a lot going on. I can't tell you exactly the significance of all those pieces. These are maquettes developed for the Seattle competition and are now in the airport offices. Included in front of that big column is the germ of a raven boat idea. Here's my finished raven piece and I call it "A Ravens Voyage".

This sculpture hung in the ambassador's residence in Seoul, led to a special exhibit there, which also inspired new work. The exhibit was held at the Museum of Art at the Seoul National University. It's in a new building designed by Rem Koolhaas. And this is a view of the "Root of Memory" and on the next level down is "Metamorphosis" again. This was a really beautiful room. I hadn't fully appreciated what an extraordinary experience was in store for Beth and me until we arrived in Seoul and saw banners for the exhibit hanging from streetlights and bus stops. The graphics for the exhibit were wonderful and seeing a wing of my "Flying Blind" and everything was quite a lot of fun. The exhibit included nine of my pieces and interesting views of the sculpture in the context of cell phone picture takers. There were lots of those. Korea's full of new sites for Western artists and the gracious people of Korea welcomed us everywhere with flowers and bows and smiles. They really were just great. You can call this "Bird in Flight". This is time-lapse imagery in a sculptural dimension. I incorporated handmade paper found in a market in Seoul into this piece and you can see the fibrous texture in the wings.

Well, this is my studio in Essex with the saltmarsh behind it. This is where they really do come from. This is the latest biplane in a long series. I love biplanes. There's a lot of different elements. It's in the middle of a roll. I call it "On a Roll". There's always movement and flow. (What do you use to paint these with?) I use acrylic artist's colors, with a brush. Here's another flying boat. This is "Nimbus". And this one has that same wonderful moth array. (What is the center wood?) Yeah, yeah, again, it's hollow, and it's built like a boat. Those really are spruce

planks on the outside, held on with nails. (How large is that particular one?) That one is pretty close to seven feet, it's a big one. (Are the wings tinted?) No, the wings are just, if anything gives them color, before I lay the fiberglass cloth on the top, I cover the wings with tissue, with paper, just like a big model airplane. And then I lay the lightweight glass cloth on top of that, and then the light coming through the glass and the paper together gives it that nice color.

Some of my airplane pieces are becoming more abstract like "Flying Blind", this is the second one. And some of the bird pieces are evolving in kind of strange ways. I call this "Man of War". It's kind of built on top of an old battleship hull. (Is that copper incorporated in that?) It's not copper, it's copper paint. But you're supposed to think that. (And what's on top?) On top, oh, you can't really see it very well but in addition to having the superstructure that follows the zone of the battleship, there's a long spine, the bony spine, starting at the head and ending up in the tail.

I call this "Bird Cloud". That's hanging right now in the big main room at the Duxbury art complex, that's what you're looking at. Four birds, here, it could be four birds or it could be one, you'll have to decide for yourself. (What's Duxbury park?) Duxbury Art Complex. There's a nice little, Weyerhaeuser built an art museum right in Duxbury. (It has a lot of wood.)

This is called "My Life as a Young Squid". It's a work in progress. I return to it from time. A lot of people don't believe that there are these funny pots on the bottom of the ocean with squids coming out of them. That's all right. You don't have to believe. Now it's time to get out on the river, and dream up some new ones. Be happy to take more questions. Anybody?

29:36

(I have two questions. One is, did you have an aha moment as a sculptor with feather, the feather in the ring? Did this happen like wow and then you ran with it or was this something that slowly materialized over time for you?) I think it was. They started out in the very beginning as airplanes and they had airplane-like wings, like wings, and the little feathers, kind of grew, they came along later.

(Just a question your work is very extraordinary. Have you ever bumped into any artists who work in a similar form?) I haven't. I don't know whether to be glad or disappointed.

(When you conceive an idea, do you this on paper or do these pieces evolve as you are constructing them?) Some evolve more than others. I just about always start with a little bitty sketch, I just do little tiny sketches. I'll make two or three of them. And if I'm still happy with it a few days later, I'll get going. If the, if the bird is going to end up big, really big, then I'll take the little sketch and scale it up onto poster board or something, so I don't lose the proportions of it

Audience Member

(In addition to how meticulous your craftsmanship is, you obviously have a finance degree. Did you major in sculpture?) I graduated from Kenyon. I was in the very first class to ever graduate

from the art department. At that time, I think there were two or three teachers and there were seven of us. And we were we were kind of thought of at the time as basket weavers.

(Did you ever get halfway through a sculpture and then decide to change it? And then it ends up with something else?) Occasionally, I'll just get a better idea as I go along. Occasionally, I'll stop. I'll lose the thread of it. It might well end up in the woodstove.

(About how many hours are those really large ones?) That's hard to say. I've generally got two or three going at once. That great big one that went to SeaTac was probably eight or nine months elapsed from beginning to end. I spent most of it on that one. there's a lot a lot of hours in it but exactly I couldn't tell you

(Have you ever made one that you could sort of fly like a kite? Obviously, you wouldn't put tons of hours into it.) I haven't but I've thought of this is an intriguing idea. And the idea of tethering one, in the summertime especially, I got a big southwest wind right off the marsh and it would be a good place to try. It's a good thought.

(Your work's pretty prolific. And I'm wondering do you struggle with new ideas ever? Are you the type of artist that just doesn't have time to work through all the many designs?) I can't keep up. I can't shut them off. I can't. I can't build them fast enough.

(How did you end up at the American Embassy in Seoul?) That's a long story. I had a piece of work at an art gallery, this little invitational show in Alexandria. A friend of the American ambassador's wife saw the thing and when they moved to Seoul, the ambassador's wife, Lisa Vershbow, told her friend, Gosh, she'd like to have some hanging sculptures. This woman told Lisa, Lisa went to the website and decided that maybe that's a good idea. And then the art and embassy people got a hold of me and said, Would I like to loan them something. And I said, sure.

(Can you tell us something about the range of emotions that your creations are meant to evoke?) Oh, I really don't have a particular thought or if I do I keep it to myself. These are supposed to speak for themselves and different people will get very different reactions. I have one that involves a big snake. Different people have very different reactions to that one. To this "Man of War" with the skull on the backbone, a lot of people just think, that's pretty, don't like it. I don't think about that very much, (But some of them show a real sense of humor.) Oh, absolutely. By and large, I keep them upbeat.

(How many of your works are extant right now?) Well over a hundred. I have no idea.

(How much of your work in this stage of your career involves commissions?) Oh, how much, a third, a quarter maybe. (And on balance that you'll build an inspiration and then they'll be in mobile galleries and other places?) Yes. Yeah. (Anybody who's interested in SideStreet gallery has carried Brad's work from time to time. It's in Rocky Neck.)

(I noticed on your workshop you have a small door. These are pretty big. Do you have a big door that'll open up?) Wait a minute. There's a small door but there's actually the big grey door, the double doors. Okay, it's 10 feet. I built the shop so that I could build a little boat in there if I wanted to. And the big ones of course, are always made in pieces so that I can transport them.

(I really liked the way the light works with them. I was gonna ask what kind of light do you like?) I like to see, I like to see a lot of light coming down from top, either sunlight, or, you know, something like a floodlight, little spotlights don't work. The best thing really is to have them in front of a window and have the sunlight come down through them.

(Do you ever design one to leave outside?) Only a couple. I won't say they're fragile, but if they're outside, they will last for four or five years and then they will really go to pieces. I've built a couple big ones and they're built more like boats. They're a lot heavier, a lot simpler. And they've got a heavy coat of glass cloth and epoxy.

(Could you tell us something about your marketing? You have unusual ideas; how do you get them out there.) That's a hard question. (I didn't hear that question. What's the question?) The question is how do I market these, how do I get them out there? It's hard. I don't do a very good job of it. I apply to shows, you know Invitational shows whenever I can. I get commission from time to time. They're not out there as much as I'd like to see them. Frankly, I don't know how to do it.

(Your website is very good.) Thank you.

(Can you just explain your show in Duxbury?) As I mentioned earlier, they're at the Duxbury Art Complex, the Duxbury Art Complex Museum. There are, I think, 14 big pieces down there. This is kind of fun. This is the first time I've ever seen a whole bunch of them hanging in the air and it's in a big, big room with a glassy front. They'll be there for two more weeks. (Are some of them for sale?) Yep, they all are. My wife reminds me that one actually has been sold.

Well, thank you very much.