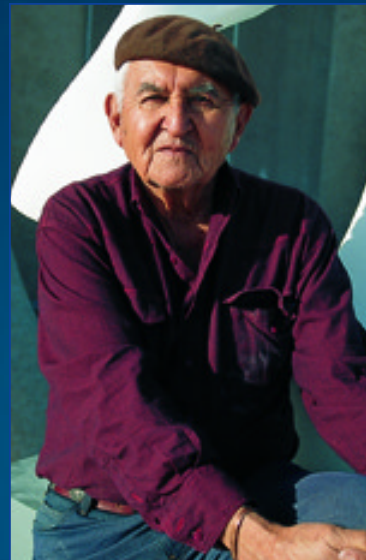


The Allan Houser Touch

Artist influenced three dynamic sculptors to follow their dreams



Allan Houser

Great artists blaze a trail that other artists follow even as they trod their own personal creative paths. Allan Houser (1914-1994), one of the foremost sculptors of the past one hundred years, forged a virtual highway to artistic expression for those who knew him and were inspired by his genius. Houser's contribution to the art of his century was vast. He also made seminal contributions to the lives and work of many sculptors who followed him—as a friend, a mentor and a champion.

Sally Hepler, David Pearson and Bob Haozous each experienced Houser in a different way. But they took something of his remarkable spirit into their work—and into their hearts.

Story by Joseph Dispenza • Photography by Mark Nohl

Sally Hepler



Left and below—Sally Hepler is shown with her sculpture Trinity.



Sol y Luna, one of Hepler's hand-fabricated bronze sculptures.



Full Circle, a hand-fabricated steel sculpture designed by Sally Hepler.

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Sally Hepler's work invites not only interpretation but also a certain amount of participation from viewers. You can't look at her elegant abstract metal ribbons without going immediately into a contemplative place. Mostly, you find yourself tracing the curve of the ribbon around in a circle, through a loose knot and out again. It's like an amusement park ride for the eye—and the soul. No wonder that among her collectors are adherents of Zen and others pursuing simplicity as a spiritual path.

Like her work, Hepler has an air of refinement and sophistication. Her large brown eyes are framed by straight blonde hair, simply styled, accentuating a no-nonsense but friendly manner. When she speaks about her art and her life, it is with a candor and clarity that has come from living deeply. In 1993, just as she was beginning to make art, her husband died. Echoes of that fundamental loss seem to reverberate in her curvilinear sculptures, like a thought or a memory that loops around, becomes entangled and loops out again endlessly: The metal ribbon, like the loss and its transcendence, is infinite.

Sculpture is not Sally Hepler's first avocation. Before moving to Santa Fe from the East for the climate and the stimulation of the town's cultural diversity, she pursued careers in international travel, publishing and architectural design. She entered the visual arts program at the College of Santa Fe and earned a bachelor of arts degree. Earlier, she had studied at the University of New Hampshire, the University of Connecticut and Fairfield University.

"Probably the single greatest influence in my art has been Allan Houser," she says. "His generosity was beyond measure. Once he called me just as he was leaving for the airport. He said he had wanted to give me some feedback on a piece I was working on. When I told him that he might miss his plane for taking the time with me, he just ignored that, as if art—and in this case, my art—were more important to him than missing a flight."

Houser began looking at her work when she was still a student. She credits him with taking her in another creative direction, especially with the medium for her constructions. "Allan saw my wood pieces and suggested that they would be better and stronger in metal," she remembers.

Hepler works in fabricated, rather than cast, metals. Her method: first a design is drawn on paper, then a preliminary model (maquette) is constructed of petroleum-based clay; templates are pulled from the model; templates are enlarged; metal plate pieces are cut, shaped, welded, re-shaped hydraulically, welded further, chased, patined and sealed. Each edition of a series is handmade as opposed to casting where several editions are cast from one mold.

"I am always trying to educate people about abstract art," she says. "When a piece of art is abstract, it's not just an empty design. It is based on real emotional, mental and spiritual experiences. It has meaning."

Hepler sees her work developing into larger formats. She would like to do some monumental pieces—perhaps 40- or 50-foot high. With a piece that large, one can only imagine a Hepler abstract amusement-park ride for the eye. If her work now is exciting in a quiet, meditative way, in the future it is likely to soar to new aesthetic—and spiritual—heights.

Hepler's work can be seen at Karen Ruhlen Gallery, 225 Canyon Road. Call (505) 820-0807 for information. 