



**Sidney Gordin, (Painter &) Sculptor
American, born Russia, 1918-1996
“Abstract,” Provincetown Massachusetts, 1958
welded iron “Constructivist” sculpture**

Artist Background:

Sidney Gordin was born in Stalinist Soviet Russia in 1918 into an impoverished family. They relocated to Shanghai when Gordin was just two years old and his younger sister, three years his junior, was born there. When he was four, in 1922, the family immigrated to the United States. There was no history of art or artists in his family. Gordin tells a story about being encouraged to pursue art based on input from friends and family who admired his ability to draw.

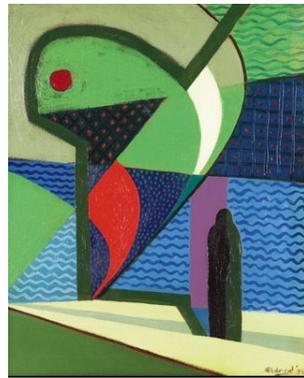
He determined to become an architect and decided to attend a technical school – The Brooklyn Technical High School. Studying three-dimensional design there, he took several “shop” classes that required him to work with his hands, which he found he really enjoyed. Summers, he attended a

WPA¹ art program at the Brooklyn Museum of Art, which was within walking distance of his family home. He studied in these programs under Ralph Rosenberg², Tom Eldred³ and Werner Drewes,⁴ a German American painter.

Influences from Art School:



Werner Drewes, 1940



Thomas Eldred, 1938



Ralph Rosenberg, 1940

When he graduated from High School, he was accepted to the art program at Cooper Union [The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art, New York City.] He attended as a day student and he met several night students who were working as WPA Artists during the day, and going to art school at night. After graduation, Gordin worked as an illustrator and commercial artist for a number of years and then he began to teach, which he found much more rewarding than commercial art. His first teaching assignment was at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn where he taught three-dimensional design to architecture students.

It's not clear why he never pursued his early interest in architecture further, but in 1950, after a decade as a painter, Gordin began to develop an interest in creating sculpture. He said, "And then I got very hot about sculpture. I got interested. I got into sculpture through the process of construction. I never did any carving. But being able to take metal forms and solder them together in any way very freely – which is really, in many ways, a little like painting, the same kind of freedom as painting, where if you take a brush and start drawing forms, in a way you are doing constructions. You know, you place them very freely on a canvas. And I was doing this with wire and sheet metal."⁵

Regarding his process, Sidney Gordin has said, "Yes. Well I'm very much involved with process. That is the process of taking forms and pushing them around, changing them, changing their relationships, changing their color, pushing them around[. It] is not only extremely important to me, but the most exciting part of the work."

"The finished work is, as far as I'm concerned, [only] the byproduct of this process. You know? And I've been working on a – I'm trying to find a process that allows me to do this, where I can – no

¹ What was the WPA? <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/surviving-the-dust-bowl-works-progress-administration-wpa/>

² Ralph Rosenberg, Abstract American Painter:

<https://www.nytimes.com/1992/10/27/obituaries/ralph-rosenberg-79-abstract-painter-dies.html>

³ Thomas Eldred, artist:

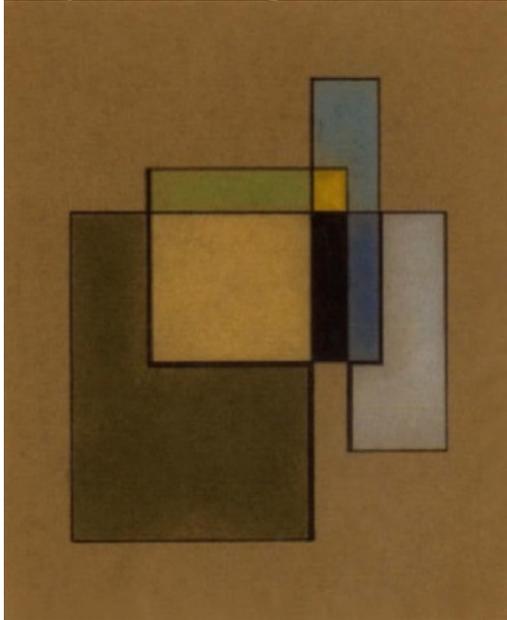
http://www.askart.com/artist/Thomas_Brownell_Eldred/119978/Thomas_Brownell_Eldred.aspx

⁴ Werner Drewes, painter: <https://www.artsy.net/artist/werner-drewes>

⁵ Oral history interview with Sidney Gordin, Sept. 2, 1965 /Smithsonian Archives of American Art https://www.aaa.si.edu/download_pdf_transcript/ajax?record_id=edanmdm-AAADCD_oh_214102

matter what form I choose to place in my work, that form can be changed. Either it can be removed, it can be altered, or it can be shifted [by me.] I want to look at something, and, if I want to change – see, there’s one thing about working in this process, **this constructivist process** that makes it freer than painting. This aspect of it is freer than painting. You can’t take a form on a painting and twist it a little bit or shift it or whatever, you know. It’s like – you can do it with collage. “

Sidney Gordin Paintings:



Sidney Gordin, 1944



Sidney Gordin, 1945

Analysis

Sidney Gordin uses unusual language to describe his work and place his process in the continuum of art history. He talks about his “Constructivist Process,” meaning a process of creating art based on construction, which for him involves adding shapes or colors and allowing those shapes to move around within the composition and allowing the colors to change as well. The subject sculpture is a terrific example of this process. If I were to propose a narrative of how it might have been made, it’s easy to see Gordin beginning with the circular element, then adding the large “leg” element that elevates the circular piece about 24 inches above the block/base. I imagine then, given Sidney Gordin’s explanation of his process, that perhaps he rotated the circle around the axis of the leg element, and allowed the circular piece to “find its proper position” with respect to the base and the leg. I imagine he added the back wire element behind the leg to give the overall appearance of strength and solidity because until that was added the piece would have appeared fragile, and finally, the bent, small iron fragments that are welded together into what almost appears to be an acrobatic figure might have been added to “fill” the space of the circle and also to provide some tension and precarious balance – almost like an acrobat on a high wire, with a long pole in his hands used to lower and strengthen his center of gravity and “spread” his weight lower and more broadly across the piece.

Through this fictional narrative, which is based on interviews with Sidney Gordin, his process is one of adding things and taking things away, stepping back and examining the composition, then making changes and stepping back again – allowing things to be altered and rearranged until the work appears to have settled, almost organically and of its own accord, into a comfortable, “right” composition, at which point, the work is finished. This process is true of his paintings, and then also true later in his career of his sculpture. From his description of his process, it is almost as if Sidney

Gordin is channeling some higher artistic power, allowing outside forces of creativity, gravity, and tension to work through him, guiding his selection of shapes and colors, moving him in a direction that he is only able to fully appreciate when the work is finally complete and the various elements have been locked into their proper place, completing the composition.

Unlike Russian Constructivism from the period 1914 – 1930 whose adherents sought to ‘construct’ works that combined geometric compositions with images from modern technology and industry, considering themselves ‘artist-engineers,’ Gordin’s work which overlaps and extends the period, is based more on the act of constructing, and less on the engineering component or the socio-political tenants of the movement. The Russian, and ultimately The International Constructivists sought an art of order, which would reject the past (the old order which had culminated in World War I) and lead to a world of more understanding, unity, and peace. Gordin’s “additive” approach to the process of creating sculpture is derived from Constructivist tenants (minus the social commentary,) and that process exists in stark contrast to other three dimensional artists who carve off and discard material, “releasing” the completed work from a block of marble or clay. Gordin’s work is more process oriented and entirely additive in nature. In fact, he claims that his interest in the piece diminishes upon completion, except to the extent that it recalls for him the process that lead to its creation.

Gordin’s work is abstract, and entirely non-representational, but it is not a process of abstraction. He says he does not begin with a figurative idea and then seek to abstract that idea by presenting multiple, simultaneous views (ie: Picasso’s abstraction,) or by splitting, refracting and reassembling the figure or object into a unique vision (ie: Braque’s cubist process.) My fictional narrative of the construction of the subject sculpture erroneously contains references to individual, sometimes anthropomorphic elements (leg, acrobat, high wire,) which would not be in Sidney Gordin’s mind as he worked. I include them here simply to identify the individual components of the work in a way that the reader might be able to follow Gordin’s process from beginning to end.

Other Sidney Gordin Sculptures from the same period:



Sidney Gordin, “17-57,” 1957



Sidney Gordin, “46-58,” 1958

How Gordin's piece fits into the PSAM Collection:

"I did some [sculptures] that were six feet high and some that were eight feet high, and of course, a number of smaller ones. [Some] were very large. They got smaller later on. My work changed. [A]t some point I became hungry, I guess, for freer forms. So I began cutting out freer shapes and putting them together [from] metal sheets, and also wires. [M]y first year in Provincetown [Massachusetts,] 1958, I did a series of linear sculptures that were quite flat. I worked that way for a while. Then I began to – [use more] free-flowing forms...."

Sidney Gordin's sculpture entitled "Abstract," from 1958, represents a bridge between Russian Constructivism and Late-Mid-century Modern, non-representational sculpture. Gordin's creative process, which he contends is far more important than the completed works themselves, is entirely additive and is based on "constructing" a piece as one might collage elements together, arranging, removing, rearranging and adding until the piece "locks" into place and the composition appears complete – when no one element needs to be added and no one element can be removed.

Beginning in 1958, Gordin became a professor at U C Berkley. During the academic year, he gravitated toward and was influenced by the Berkley "Bronze Casting Revival" sculptors including Peter Voulcas and Joan Brown, who like Gordin, also expressed their unique vision in paint on canvas. Gordin's lyrical, welded wire sculptures linked mid-century sculptural work produced on the East Coast, with those produced on the West Coast of America. This sculpture, reflects Gordin's mid-century approach to creation as an act of assembly, not unlike the process of Louise Nevelson or some of the later "combine" collage works of Robert Rauschenberg. On process, Rauschenberg himself said, "I don't want [my work] to be just an expression of my personality. I feel it ought to be much better than that ... I've always felt as though, whatever I've used and whatever I've done, the method was always closer to a collaboration with materials than to any kind of conscious manipulation and control."⁶ I think Sydney Gordin would appreciate that sentiment.

This "collaboration with materials" or forms cements the work of Sidney Gordin firmly in the continuum of Modern Art between the Russian Constructivists of the 30's and 40's and the experimental formalist painters and sculptors of the 1950's, 60's, and 70's.

Touring strategy for the small 1958 Sidney Gordin sculpture:

The goal in touring this piece might be to help define "Non-Representational Art" and to help visitors develop an appreciation for "Process" as Sidney Gordin defines that.

Here are some of the things I would say while touring the piece: Take a careful look at this small sculpture. It's quite like a few other sculptures in the museum.... BUT, it's unlike many others. Can you tell me what it's NOT? (*The purpose of this question is to get at a definition of non-representational art. Scaffolding on that premise:)* How does this piece make you "feel?" It's small, and it's very approachable. And the artist talks about his process as "Constructivist." Does that make sense to you? Can you see how it's put together? Can you imagine what order it might have been created in (*first this, then this...and finally that....etc.*)

If I added a second circular element to this piece, would it change the way you feel about it? Can you see how it's structured and anchored and how it "sits on the ground?" Can you imagine it hanging from the ceiling - or does part of its "essential spirit" rely on its relationship to gravity and to balance? Tell me about that....

⁶ Rauschenberg quoted in Calvin Tomkins, 'Profiles: Moving Out,' The New Yorker, vol.40, 29 Feb. 1964, p.59

This artist was also a very prolific painter. What would you imagine his paintings look like?

If I throw out some descriptive words, can you tell me which ones might apply to this piece? 'Lyrical'. 'Symbolic'. 'Unfinished'. 'Uplifting'. 'Precarious'. How about 'Evocative?' Sidney Gordin tells us that his creative process is what's important to him - in his paintings and in his sculpture. He adds and removes elements, moves things around.... tries changing shapes, colors, positions..... until a piece appears to "lock" itself into place - and then it's finished. Can you see evidence of that here?

He also says once a piece is finished, it has no particular value to him except as a reminder of the process that lead to its creation. Don't you think that's an interesting idea?

Artist's Awards/Collections:

Elected to the National Academy of Design in 1993.

Teaching faculty at the University of California Berkeley from 1958 to 1986.

Sidney Gordin is included in collections of the Whitney Museum New York City, the Art Institute of Chicago, and the San Francisco Museum of Art⁷

Sources:

Oral history interview with Sidney Gordin, Sept. 2, 1965 /Smithsonian Archives of American Art

https://www.aaa.si.edu/download_pdf_transcript/ajax?record_id=edanmdm-AAADCD_oh_214102

"Sidney Gordin, The Berkeley Artists Breakfast Club" on Vimeo

<https://vimeo.com/95767403?ref=em-v-share>

"Sidney Gordin, Artist of the Moment"

<https://diattaart.wordpress.com/2013/09/16/artist-of-the-moment-sidney-gordin/>

⁷ <https://diattaart.wordpress.com/2013/09/16/artist-of-the-moment-sidney-gordin/>

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Peter Phinney". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Peter" and last name "Phinney" clearly distinguishable.

- Peter Phinney