



Rising from the Ashes

THE FOURMILE CANYON FIRE DESTROYED HIS STUDIO AND EVERYTHING IN IT, BUT FAMED BOULDER SCULPTOR JERRY WINGREN HAS RECLAIMED HIS LEGACY WITH A VENGEANCE.

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JERRY WINGREN'S DIRECTIONS TO HIS STUDIO HIGH ABOVE BOULDER IN FOURMILE CANYON SAY MUCH ABOUT THE MAN. PRECISE AND NON-SENSIBLE, THEY ALSO FEATURE A WICKEDLY CLEVER TWIST: "FOLLOW THE WHITE ARROWS," HE ADVISES FIRST-TIME VISITORS. WHAT HE DOESN'T MENTION IS THAT EACH ARROW ALONG THE SERPENTINE ROAD UP DIME HILL CONTAINS A MYSTERIOUS, SEEMINGLY RANDOM ARRAY OF DOTS.

"Ah, yes. You noticed those, did you?" the rangy, white-haired sculptor asks in his sonorous, almost hypnotizing voice. "It's the Fibonacci series [a 13th-century sequence in which each number after the first two is the sum of the preceding two]. Hardly anyone ever gets that."

It makes sense that Wingren, who has worked out of his nine-acre artistic aerie since 1972, would turn to Fibonacci: He is inspired by the mathematics in nature and he likes a good puzzle. His minimalist sculptures are both quiet and complex, formalistic and playful, influenced by Japanese aesthetics as well as his Scandinavian and Northwest heritages (he grew up in Alaska, where he was surrounded by both nature and totem poles).

"It's really a very subtle art he does—and it's all based on light," says Tom Miller, a Boulderite who has known the Alaskan-born sculptor since the mid-eighties. He is also, Wingren says, the only collector who has a piece from every one of his sculptural series over the decades, including Cut and Fold, Resting Stones, Totems, Interiors, and Voids. "I've always liked modern,

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abstract art and I just fell in love with his work,” says Miller. “He works with metal, wood and stone and he does really interesting things with all three, a lot of it about geometric abstractions. I don’t know if people in Colorado really understand the jewel they have here.”

Besides his sculptures—which are in private collections all over the world, including Germany, Spain, Italy, and Japan—Wingren stands out for his longevity in Boulder. “He’s sort of a local folk hero,” says E.J. Meade, principal in the Boulder architecture firm Arch11. “He’s the last of these pretty hardcore sculptors who were around in the seventies. He had a work outside the Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art for years and he’s also got public works at the library and in park space.”

Meade has known Wingren for two decades, so when he heard that the sculptor had lost his studio and all of its contents, including numerous stone and metal sculptures, in the devastating Fourmile Canyon wildfire in September 2010, “it was the right thing to do” to help out. Wingren was already back on site, sifting through the ruins and trying to sculpt outside. “I got back to work in short order,” he says. “It kept me from going nuts. I don’t believe in art therapy, but the work was definitely therapeutic for me.”

Wingren recalls the moment when he realized his longtime friend wanted to come to his rescue: “I was talking to my insurance adjuster and my lawyer in Boulder one day and E.J. just walked by and said, ‘I’ve been to the county and you can rebuild

The space around Wingren’s new studio is filled with his works, including (top right, on roof) “Skate,” in Swedish black granite, from the Visitors Series; (right and above) “Threesome,” a trio of pieces in Western red cedar, and (next to the open garage door) “Vertical Totem,” also in Western red cedar.



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without a site plan review if you build on essentially the same footprint, not over 10 percent more in square footage.' And then he kept walking. I was totally surprised."

"I knew the old space, which he had organically assembled over four decades," says Meade. "It was a hippie-built, low-slung structure with rooms stacked on rooms, but there were special places inside where you could sit and get views out north; it had collected its own sense of place. It was a challenge to re-create that from scratch, but it was also an opportunity to build something completely new. I wanted to structure things so he could have a raw indoor workspace where he could hang stone from tractor beams, drive a truck into the space, upload it, and have room for all of his equipment, as well as an office and outdoor workspace. I think the process

of designing and making the new space reinvigorated his desire to make art. The last two years up there he's been prolific."

Wingren almost became an academic rather than a sculptor, but in the early seventies, while in Germany on a Fulbright Scholarship to work on his dissertation, he found himself walking through a park every day where sculptors were making their art in public. "It took longer and longer to get to the library," he says, "and I ended up apprenticing with two of the sculptors." After studying origami with Hiromi Hoshiko, Wingren came back to the U.S. intent on sculpture and began creating three-dimensional "folded" sculptures in steel. "I was on the verge of a PhD, but if I'd stayed in the academic world, I would have ended up another bitter, crotchety old professor. I've known since I was a little kid →173

ABOVE: The sculptor, chiseling Colorado marble for a piece to be called "Anomaly," says, "I learned by doing. My teachers did mostly realistic pieces, so I learned technique from them, and the tools will lead you into different places, different textures. The hammer is like an extension of my hand because I've been using it for 30 years."

RIGHT: The long drive up Dime Hill to Wingren's studio contains glimpses of his past works, including (top right) "V Form Totem," an Alaskan yellow cedar piece that a Seattle critic once described as "evocative of Northwest Coast Indian art," and "Cut and Fold #15," an early work made out of machined aluminum in which Wingren aimed to get dimensionality out of a flat plane of metal by folding it.





"Give me my chisel and hammer, and give me an ambitious, energetic young assistant," says Wingren, who works in the background as steatite pieces in the Vessels Series line a table in the studio foreground. **TOP RIGHT:** One of Wingren's posse of assistants, Anael Resino, flattens planes in a sculpture in the Void Series; **BOTTOM RIGHT:** Finished steatite Void sculptures. "Doing these super-geometric, rectilinear forms is totally unforgiving," Wingren says.





Three Wingren works, **CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:** "Panino," made of Alaska yellow cedar, steatite and steel; "Double Cedar #5," made of Alaska yellow cedar with a fire patina; and "Vertical Totem," made of Western red cedar.



Wingren's new studio, erected on the same spot where his old one burned down in 2010, looks west to Sugarloaf Mountain. The house across the lot and slightly downhill miraculously survived the fire.

that this is what I was supposed to do." No matter what task Wingren sets for himself—from sculpting to hosting (he is famed for his annual Summer Solstice party and his occasional Swedish pancake breakfasts)—he is exacting in his work. "It's all of a piece," he says, "from how you set a table—there's never any chips and dips at my parties—to how the lilac hedges are weeded, to how the sand gardens are raked out, to how the sculpture is placed. The raked sand is every bit as important as how the finished sculpture looks."

It's starting to drizzle when Wingren opens up one of the wide garage doors that gird his studio. Outside,

an assistant is polishing a sculpture, surrounded by blocks of stone waiting to be transformed by Wingren's vision. Inside, a number of his cedar Suspended Totem sculptures are floating overhead, and on one counter is a Jerry to-do list: "Get rid of sad flowers." "Make firewood pretty." He sits down in a chair looking out over the mountains, a Camel straight in one hand. "This is where I hang out a lot," he says, "and watch the clouds move. This place has been my anchor for decades. I always had the dream of living and working in the same place, but now I have to leave the mountains to relax. Everywhere I look there's something I want to work on." ■