

Interview with Cathy Malpass

by

Amanda Heidel

New Jersey State Council on the Arts

Michael Malpass, was a sculptor from Brick, NJ who passed away in 1991. His current retrospective up at Monmouth University's Pollak Gallery, showcases the artist's large body of work ranging from found object metal sculptures, to collages, and jewelry. I interviewed his wife Cathy Malpass, about the exhibition and what Michael's inspirations were. The exhibition is up until August 18th, on the last day of the show at 7pm there will be a 45 minute documentary playing in the gallery's theatre on Michael's life as an artist. After the documentary there is a guided art walk around Monmouth's campus to see more of Malpass's sculptures throughout the campus grounds.



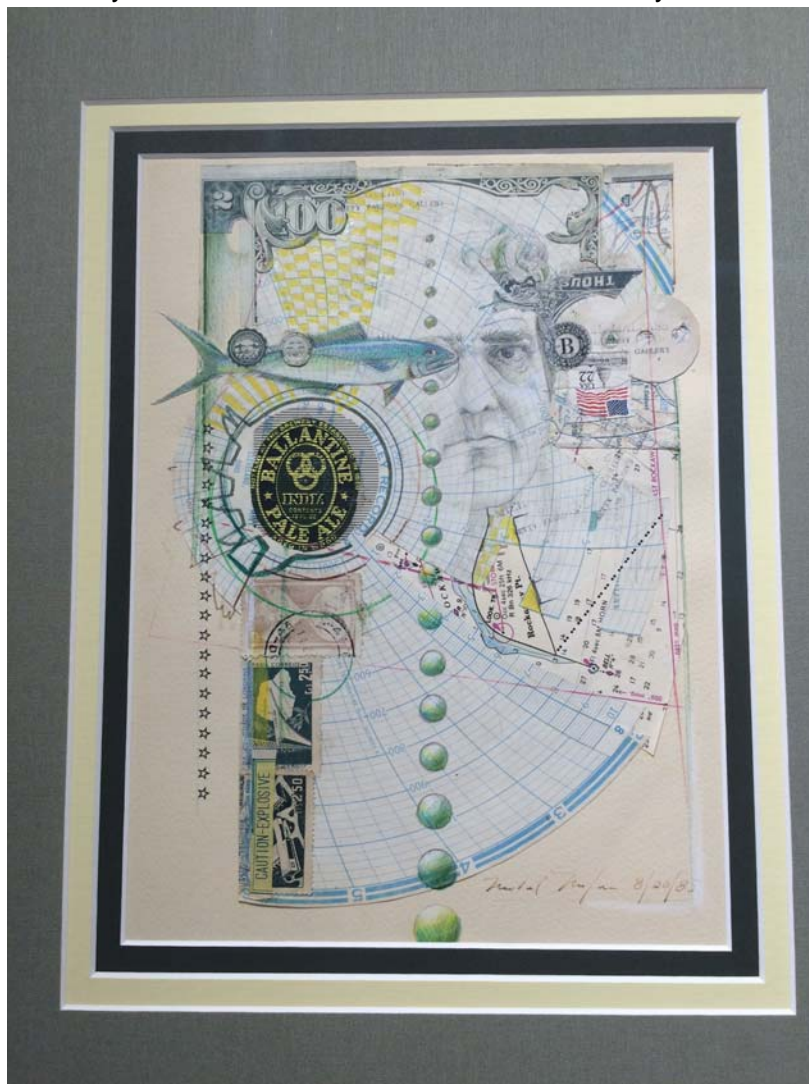
A: The use of found materials in Michael's work ranging from a sardine can in one of his collages to the endless amounts of found metal in the spheres- what was it about found objects that he felt drawn to?





C: Michael was working with found materials way back when people weren't really doing it. Working with these found objects makes his work one of a kind, it all came from his head and he didn't draw out much beforehand. All of his work went together; his prints, collages, jewelry, and sculptures were all intertwined. It fascinated me that he could make delicate pieces of jewelry and then these large masculine sculptures. Michael liked to experiment with different states and textures and was interested in their response to heating and hammering. He was such a curious person by nature. We would be driving and he would yell out "stop!" because he would see a pile of junk on the side of the road that caught his eye, and we would stop and load it into the car and bring it back to this studio. He had a cigar box full of things he would save; he loved nautical maps and fishing. I'm still not sure why he would do this but he liked cutting the corners off of money to incorporate into his collages.

One time I caught him snipping at a one hundred dollar bill, it made me so nervous because we were experiencing tough times financially, but he insisted that it was fine and that maybe someday he would be able to do this and not worry about it.



He liked to take risks- he didn't expect to have a lot of money, he just loved what he did so much, it gave him so much joy to do what he loved to do. He loved the shapes of found objects. He would go searching for factories that were closing to gather up materials for his sculptures. He created over 300 spheres before he passed away. Him and my son would bring fishing buckets to the scrap yard and sort through scrap metal, coming home with buckets filled of found objects. He would come in smiling saying to me, "It feels like Christmas!" Sometimes the scrap yard would call him and let him know they found some things that he might be interested in. He would go and get them and come home and say "I feel like a pirate who just found my treasure!" He loved life and nature and always noticed things that most people never notice.

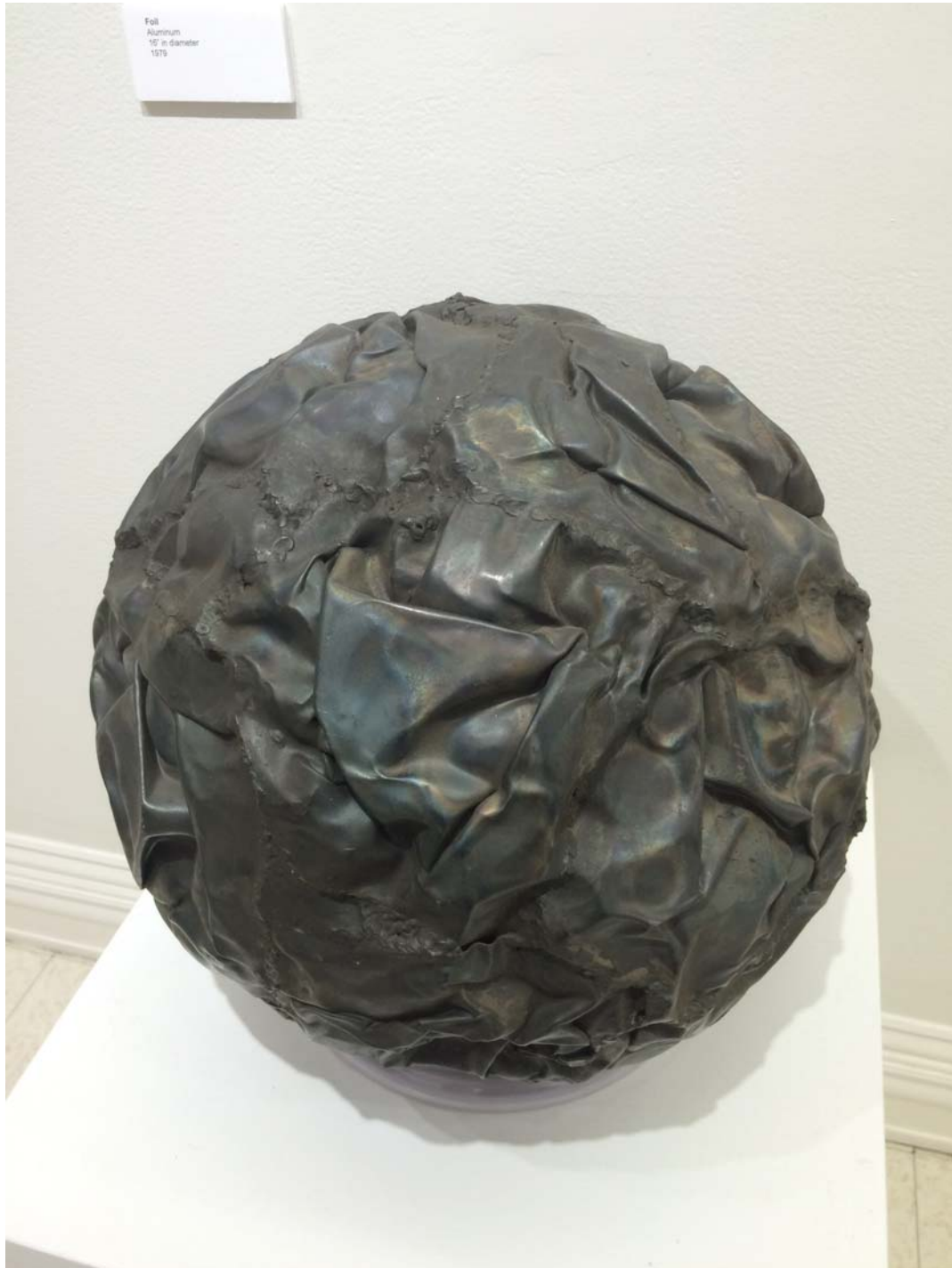
A: To me, a sphere feels very emotionally charged, what was the deeper meaning behind the sphere shapes?

C: Michael had said, "The sphere is the most perfect form. It is efficient-for example, with the most volume for the least surface area. The sphere is both amorphous and geometric and the center is always equidistant from the surface. The sphere is whole. The form is simple, yet the surface is complicated. The sculpture is animated, yet peaceful. "



I think it all goes back to mother earth; he was very interested in the environment and was always thinking about recycling. Michael loved nature; he loved the circle of life. We had a compost in our backyard and he was always thinking about how he could do things to better the environment. His mother told me that the first word he ever said was "ball". I want to stress his focus on recycling, he not only recycled objects, he elevated them. He made something beautiful out of nothing that people can think about and discover. I think his work was really

about the process of discovery; he wanted people to constantly discover something new in his work. He did this one print of a butterfly, when you get close up to it you realize that it's made up of body parts and fish. He made it so fun and interesting to be curious and discover.



A: What was Michael's earlier work like?

C: When I met Michael back in high school he was an artist and a football player. He was different than the other guys because he was genuinely kind and sensitive. He showed an

interest in art at a very young age so his parents encouraged him to take art classes. He continued drawing and painting throughout high school. His parents were friends with an older couple who owned a bakery in town and Michael asked the store owners if he could have a show outside of their shop to sell his work. They said yes and he sold almost all of his work! After high school he went to Pratt, and after that, he got drafted during Vietnam and we were sent to Berlin, Germany. He was going crazy in Germany because he couldn't make any art. He started to stretch the army tents to use as canvases and he painted people, Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, John Lennon, people loved them and he started to give them away. Eventually he started to sell them, when we returned back to the states, he returned to Pratt and began working on the spheres somewhere around 1975.

A: What was it like being around Michael and supporting his vision?

C: I am a better person because I knew him. I loved him so much, he was my soul mate. I admired him for what he did; he was a man of integrity. He used to say to me, "Thank you for freeing my time for me so I can do my work". He would also say to me that raising children is like making art- you have to be firm but gentle. It was an interesting way of living and raising our children because our house wasn't like a normal house. We had no furniture, just sculpture everywhere. He was always working on his art. In the summer he would stay outside in his studio all day making sculpture and in the winter he would work outside until he couldn't take the cold anymore, and then come inside where it was warm and make his collages.

Eventually, once he had a body of work, I encouraged him to go out to galleries and take his portfolio around. He got the courage around 1977, he had his big black portfolio underneath his arm and he told me he was going to start at the galleries in SoHo and make his way up 57th street. A few moments later he quickly changed his mind and said, "actually I am going to start at Betty Parson's Gallery on 57th street and make my way down". When he got to Betty Parson's gallery, the person at the front desk was nice enough to look at his work and took a liking to it. He asked if he could keep the portfolio to show Betty when she came back from lunch. Sure enough, Betty loved his work and she gave him a solo show.

It is exciting being around artists, most artists that I meet are some of the nicest people I've ever met. Living in the Pratt faculty houses was interesting in itself. I am still friends with most of the people that I had met while we were living there. I am not an artist but I've always loved art- that's what attracted me to Michael in the first place. It was nice because there was no competition, I just tried to help him with his work and it made me happy. Eventually I took on the role of promoting his work while he spent all of his time making his art; it was a fun time.

A: Who were some of Michael's greatest inspirations?

C: Alberto Giacometti, Theodore Roszak, and his mentor at Pratt, during his sophomore year, John Pai, who had a large impact on Michael. He had become his mentor, he was a welder, and that's when Michael realized that was what he wanted to do. John let Michael live in his studio to help him with his work. Working with John inspired Michael to get into welding in his own work, but the spheres didn't come until about 10 years later.

A: What was one of the strangest materials that someone had given Michael to use in his work?

C: On his birthday one year, one of his friends, Paul, came by with a U-Haul truck with a five foot buoy and dropped it off on our front lawn.

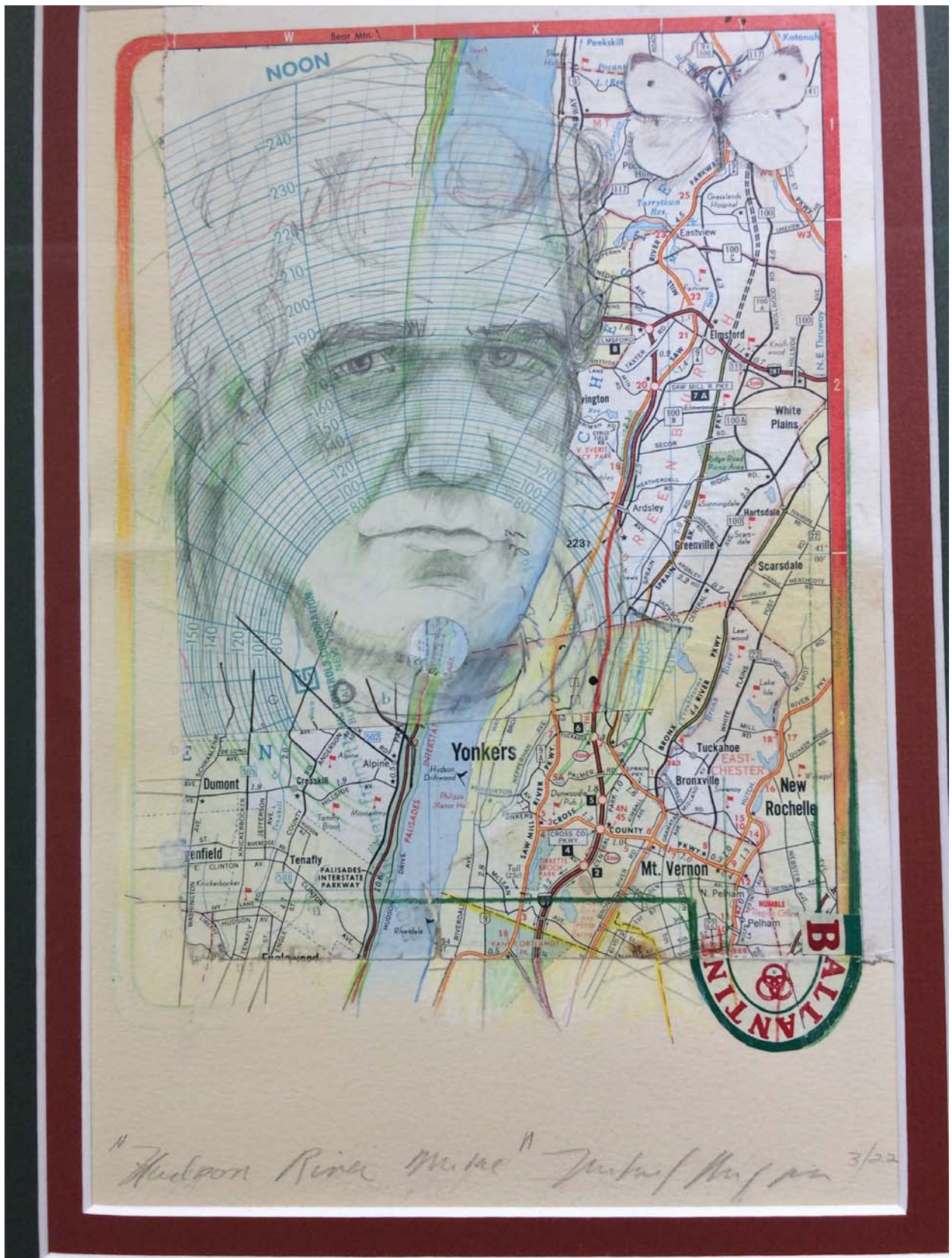
Besides that I really just remember a lot of people giving him tools for his sculptures. With all of the forging and hammering he did he developed a disease called, Kienbock, which caused him to lose 70% of movement in his right wrist. This was devastating for him because he couldn't continue with his process that he loved so much of forging and hammering. During that time his sketchbook became really depressing, he would sketch skeletons and very depressing drawings. But what eventually came out of this setback was his bronze series of sculptures.



He bought a band saw and started slicing the objects in half, this way he didn't have to forge and hammer. This all happened around 1970 and during that time he also started making the "chicken men".

A: I was very impressed by his drawings and the smaller, “chicken men” sculptures. Do you think that were they more of a meditative outlet from his larger sculptures?





NOON



"Hudson River Mike" *[Signature]* 3/22

C: He believed you had to work hard at some things but you always had to do something else as a relief. The collages and chicken men were like that. I remember watching him and he was smiling and looked so content, so focused, and happy. The collages tell the story of his life.

A: What is it like having people come up to you after all of these years and talk to you about Michael's work?

C: People reach out to me all of the time saying how much he inspires them. I turned Michael's studio at my house in Brick, NJ into a gallery that is open to the public, and people come through all the time and I have conversations with people about how Michael's work has inspired their own work. It is amazing to me that even though he is gone he is still inspiring artists everyday.



