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Jesse Lott always has a hand in the action

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"Reach" is among the works on view through Nov. 19 in the Art League Houston show "Jesse Lott: Artist in Action."

Photo: Courtesy of the artist

Jesse Lott's own hands are large and strong, on the slender side, with long fingers and nails that reflect years of an artist's tedious work with metal and wood.

The hands he creates - the ones that are a significant element of his sculptures and drawings - are almost always spread wide, expressing an indomitable human spirit.

The colorful characters he summons forth in his sculptures have highly expressive faces, arms and legs – you sense history, hardship and dignity coursing through their veins. But the hands, which are never the same, make your heart sing.

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"Farmer," an especially good paper sculpture, depicts an African-American figure who dances with the elegance of Fred Astaire, although his denim overalls place him far from any ballroom. Extending gracefully into the surrounding space, his hands could just as easily belong to a prima ballerina.

"You very rarely find that in sculpture – you don't find hands that express what hands do," Lott said. "It's so hard to make them stay (in place). It presents some extra difficulty. It gives you a chance to explore what a hand is all about."

One of Houston's most beloved artists – the sage of the Fifth Ward and one of the founders of Project Row Houses in the Third Ward – Lott, who is 73, recently received the Lifetime Achievement Award from Art League Houston.

More Information

'Jesse Lott: Artist in Action'

When: 9 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesdays-Fridays, noon-5 p.m. Saturdays, through Nov. 19

Where: Art League Houston, 1953 Montrose

Info: Free; 713-523-9530, artleaguehouston.org

Also: Group shows "Friendly Fire," Station Museum of Contemporary Art, 1502 Alabama, through Feb. 5; "From Space to Field," at SITE Gallery, 1502 Sawyer, through Nov. 19; and Mystic Lyon (window installation), 5017 Lyons.

His inspired, retrospective show in the league's front gallery highlights Lott's facility with pretty much every material he touches – from graphite drawings to colorful sculptures

made with his El Pinatero paper process to terrifying metal figures that seemingly contain miles of knitted wire.

He also has works up in three other venues, most prominently in the "Friendly Fire" show that opened Saturday at the Station Museum of Contemporary Art.

"It's a difficult task, being everywhere," he said one afternoon this week, sauntering down the sidewalk outside Project Row Houses in the heat, using a cane for balance. "But it's alright. Better than being nowhere."

Lott, who was born in Louisiana, has made art from wire, paper, wood scraps and other discarded stuff since he was a youngster in Houston's Fifth Ward in the 1950s. He took his first art class at Kashmere High School, then had the good fortune of studying with a great mentor, the social realist Charles White, in California in the late 1960s.

Back in Houston, where John Biggers was also celebrating the African-American experience, Lott found another mentor - and ample encouragement for using his art as an "action" to improve communities. He developed his El Pinatero method while working with young mothers in the Fifth Ward, he said.

"We had a working group that used paper sculpture as an initial methodology," he explained. "Part of the theory was, if you feed your baby cereal and milk, after you finish the cereal you can take the box and make a piece of sculpture that's worth more than the cereal and the milk. ... It helps you get beyond whatever limitation it is that keeps you from being productive. So it allows you to go to here, instead of stopping - pow - I gotta go to the store, I gotta go back to work, I gotta dip into the piggy bank, I gotta do such and such, before I can get into the pure enjoyment of creative expression. 'Cause that's what it is."

Conversations with Lott tend to become philosophical - and musical. While we spoke, he started to sing, in a rich bass, the opening lines of Curtis Mayfield's "Gypsy Woman."

"From nowhere, to a caravan ... that's where the concept comes from," he said. "You're going to start from nowhere - absolutely nowhere, and you can go anywhere you want to go with your caravan."

Lott said he began to make his wire figures as "research into drawing."

"It's a drawing in space. Most of the time you have a drawing, it presents the illusion of space. This particular methodology evolved as a way of drawing in real space because somebody made the statement once that that was an impossibility - that space for drawing had to always be illusionary because you could not leave the page," he explained.

"So it became a part of my task ... to develop a technique in which you could take a line, follow it through real space and allow it to present the illusion that you would get from a drawing and the reality that comes with a piece of sculpture. You see what I mean?"

Lott often punctuates his ruminations with that line - "You see what I mean?" He has a lot to share, but he's patient.

In the catalog for the Art League show, Lott's friend Mel Chin (the Fifth Ward's other great artist) calls him a "Zen Master."

"Jesse Lott is the real deal," Chin writes, "... a rare, great artist in the world, applying meaning and worth to all the people he encourages and all the works he makes."

We'll lift a hand to that thought, too.

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