

By **RON SHIPMON** Photographed by **JOHN EMERSON**

# A WORLD OF WHIMSY

Montclair artist Tom Nussbaum reinterprets life with paper, ceramics, and his imagination.

THE OFFICE IN TOM NUSSBAUM'S HOME STUDIO is festooned with a well-ordered menagerie of objects he has collected in his travels; each is invested with a story that will eventually find its way into his artwork as subjects or models.

Entering the world of Tom Nussbaum is like stepping into another dimension—one that reveals itself through mysterious details. For example: A tiny man transporting a gigantic crow on his back;

a bird with a man's head resting in its beak. These painted figures and drawings, and their elusive tales, seem both wondrous and subversive.

A technician of color, Nussbaum's figures glow as though lit from within. "My work is not about art history. It's not about moving art forward in history. It is the result of a process of self-discovery, a personal mining of images that have psychological meaning. The images usually first appear in drawings and then

develop through the paper cutting and sculpture-making process," says Nussbaum.

A three-time MacDowell Colony Fellow and a 2009 New Jersey State Council on the Arts Individual Artist Fellowship award recipient, Nussbaum, 57, is at the apex of his career, known internationally for his ability to navigate many artistic mediums. He's a draftsman, printmaker, sculptor, children's book author, and a creator of functional-design objects. He is also in demand for his public and private site-specific commissions.

He calls his ceramic sculpture—most less than two feet in height—"painted figures." They are global meldings of multiple cultures, drawing on the long tradition of painted figures from South America, Thailand, Russia, India, Poland, Mexico, Guatemala, and England.

Nussbaum's personal exploration of these cultures has turned him into an avid collector of dolls, carvings, and porcelain and

plaster figurines from around the world.

"Almost every culture and country has its own history and tradition of creating painted figures, sometimes as pure sculpture, and also as icons, dolls, shop signs, puppets, or even toys. Even classic Greek sculptures like the Venus de Milo were colorfully painted when they were created," he says, explaining the roots of his obsession.

Now, along with figurines, this tireless collector for more than three decades also amasses vintage game boards, folk art, tin toys, and whirligigs purchased from his travels.

His work is an absorbing study where animals, realistically rendered, engage in a physical dialogue with their sometimes diminutive human counterparts while placed in unexpected or surreal situations.

These figures are either disarmingly at ease or under tremendous threat. In almost all cases, the sculpture takes up little surface space.

"Some of my work expresses interior



**ARTIST AT WORK:**

Brush in hand, Nussbaum adds a few touches to his "Bird Man" sculpture in his home workspace.

feelings, and much of it focuses on relationships; between family members and friends, between the individual and society, and between the conscious and subconscious self.

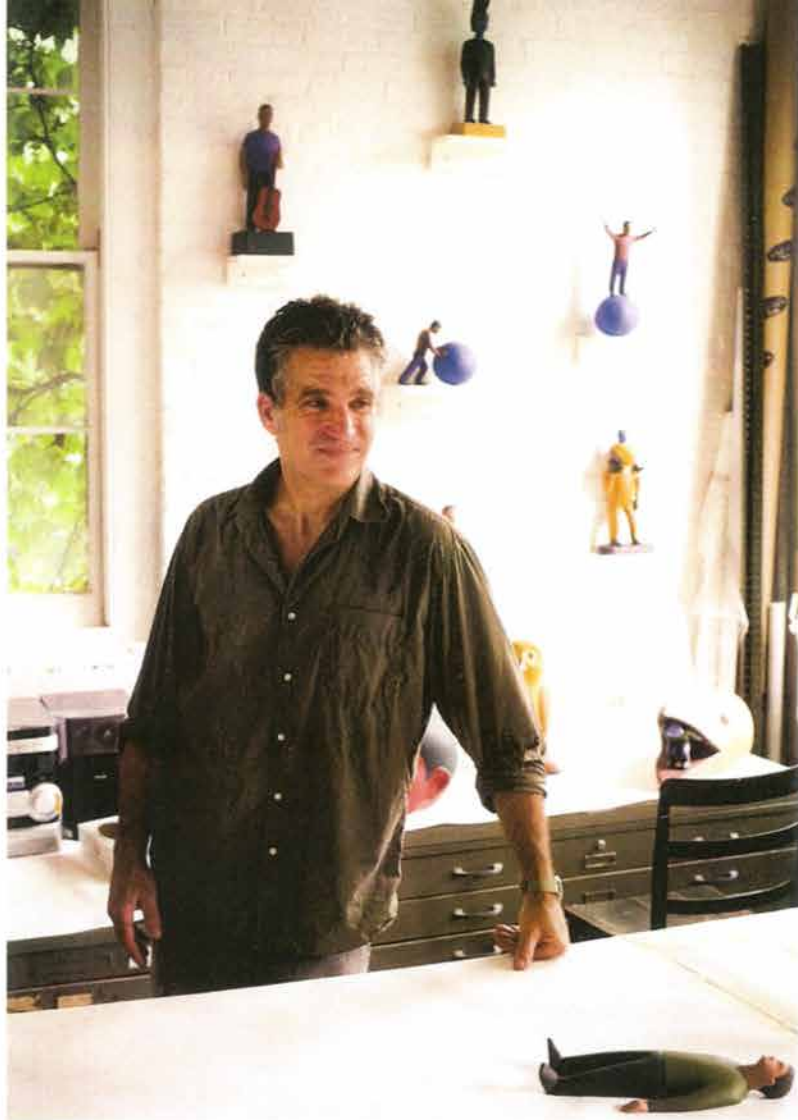
"Other pieces are an intuitive mix of images and words that have personal meaning, and are open to interpretation," Nussbaum says. He points to a small figure of a woman holding an apple. "When my daughter, Maddy, was about 14, the two of us went to a gallery opening and a woman was there with her newborn baby. Maddy asked if she could hold the baby and the woman was glad to let her—for over an hour.

"On the way home from the opening, Maddy and I were talking and she told me she wanted to get pregnant. I just about drove off the road, but stayed cool enough to find out that what she meant was that she just loved holding that baby and someday would like to have one of her own. The 'Apple Girl' sculpture is of a young woman holding a giant apple as if it were her pregnant belly and, of course, this also refers to the Garden of Eden. Though this story is related to this particular piece, most of my work is not so specific. The sculptures are suggestive of stories or meaning, but the viewer often finds their own interpretation."

Philadelphia born, Nussbaum grew up in Minneapolis, Minnesota and attended the University of Minnesota, where he majored in art, though he left without graduating. In 1979, he married Rolla Herman and moved to New York City, where he became the studio assistant to the artists Mimi Gross, Susan Pitt, and Red Grooms while pursuing his own work.

By 1982, he was exhibiting his sculpture and earning a living from his art sales. But the industrious Nussbaum didn't stop there. Three years later, he created the Acme Robot Company, a cottage industry producing nightlights and light fixtures he designed. In 1988, he founded Atomic Iron Works and began designing and producing iron hat and coat racks and other utilitarian items that were sold exclusively in museum shops across the country.

Tom and Rolla's daughter, Madeline, (the "Maddy" who inspired the "Apple Girl") was born in 1984, and their son, Jacob, in 1988. In 1993, they moved to Montclair, where they live now. He has two studios, one at home, and another more




formal studio in nearby East Orange.

In September 2009, the Montclair Art Museum acquired its third Nussbaum, titled, "Listen," a 7-foot-long acrylic and fiberglass sculpture, a gift from doyenne of contemporary art, collector Patricia Bell (see story, page 30).

Nussbaum shows no signs of slowing down. Currently he is at work on six public commissions, including an installation for the entry plaza of the Wildwoods Convention Center, two New Jersey Transit Rail Station projects in Bayonne and Somerville, and projects for the new Capitol State Park in Trenton, which are all slated for completion this year. Until then, his work can be seen at the Montclair Art Museum, the Princeton Public Library, and the Forest Resource and Education Center in Jackson.

Every artist cites influences from art history. But nodding to the past while looking ahead can be a balancing act. Nussbaum has no trouble maintaining his equilibrium, creating work that is as new as it is grounded, and still managing to be distinct, discerning, and decidedly pure.

Visit [tomnussbaum.com](http://tomnussbaum.com) to view his work. 

#### A PLACE FOR HIS STUFF:

Some of Nussbaum's painted figures are showcased on the wall of his light-filled studio in East Orange.