

When a 450-lb gorilla says Take me home, you listen

By Anne Stinson, the Baltimore Sun

Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, they say. What is appealing to one viewer of art may be ho-hum to another.

When I saw the bronze gorilla at Bart Walter's display in the sculpture exhibit at the Waterfowl Festival, it was love at first glance.

Now I know what they mean by a Sicilian courtship. Boom! A lightning bolt of passion and consuming desire. I had to have it.

The price tag put it in the same category as a new, moderate-range automobile. To put things in reasonable context, I drive a 1975 car, so it's not extravagant to think about trading up to a newer model. But I like my old car. And I fell in love with a gorilla.

Sensible Stinson

Sensible Stinson said: The gorilla is just an autumn romance. Go for the car.

Romantic Stinson said: Phooey. In 10 years the new car will have depreciated to junk. The gorilla will always be there for me. This is a love affair for the ages.

By the time I made my second trip to the festival to view the object of my obsession, I was mentally rearranging the furniture in the living room to make room for it. Where would a 450-pound gorilla fit gracefully into the modest dimensions of our converted chicken house?

Romantic Stinson interjected: It's not just a chicken house. It's the Palais des Poulets, and it's elegant and charming and he'll fit in perfectly.

And Sensible Stinson sneered back: Oh, sure. You're going to tell the kids there will be no Christmas gifts this year because Mother fell in love with a gorilla, right?

The gorilla, like all his ilk, was impassive over the argument raging around him. He just sat there, a massive, monumental mound of bronze masculinity. He was slightly hunched in the kind of shrug Sinatra did so well with a raincoat slung over one world-weary shoulder. That gorilla didn't give a damn one way or the other while I stood in adolescent bedazzlement.

Then my eyes locked into his bronze gaze. I was reminded of a story the late garden writer Henry Mitchell told about a mouse that chewed through the dining room ceiling over one year's Christmas dinner. In my head, I substituted gorilla for mouse: "God, he was a good-looking mouse. Bright. Full of beans. Great eyes. He was all mouse. There was something (as I knew at the time) between us," Mitchell wrote. I know exactly how Mitchell felt.

Big bellies

Sensible Stinson knows that not everybody is excited by gorillas. Like most people, I've seen them in countless nature documentaries on television. I've seen them at zoos, and I confess my primary reaction was that they eat a lot, have disgustingly big bellies, lots of hair, and (not to put too fine a point on it) they produce an awesome amount of gorilla poopoo. Not a particularly attractive house pet.

But this gorilla was different. He had presence with his ugliness, like Albert Einstein or Abraham Lincoln.

Nobody in his right mind would consider Gertrude Stein a paragon of feminine beauty, but the monumental sculpture of her by Jo Davidson is a stunning work of art, undoubtedly a thing of great beauty. Like Gertrude Stein, the model for the gorilla may have been physically repellent, but the alchemy of Mr. Walter's artistic vision transformed the live figure into something transcendent. The result is simply part of the magic of art. There's no explaining it. You either see it or you don't.

I saw it. I was Saul on the road to Damascus. I was Edison when the light bulb finally lighted up. I was Heloise to Abelard. I was Dian Fossey in Africa. I was, by God, hopelessly smitten.

Kiss me, you fool

I caught myself whispering, Kiss me, you fool, right there in the Mayor and Council Chambers.

Some dreams are nearly impossible. While not a soul would think needed to be on tranquilizers if I bought a new car, there will be friends who roll their eyes heavenward at my passion for a lump of bronze. She's lost her mind, they will say.

But those who know me (and dare I say, love me) will understand the pull of those dark eye sockets under the lowering brow ridge, the thrust of jaw and faintly smiling mouth. They'll recognize the still power of the seated pose.

And so, stunned by my audacity, I have a 450-pound gorilla in my house.

And when I die, I'm thinking about putting him on my grave.

Some things are bigger than life. He's one of them.

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