

CASTING A VANISHING PEOPLE: THE SCULPTURE OF FELIPE LETTERSTEN

Golden-haired Felipe Lettersten steps back from the life-sized, white plaster-cast of the young Amazonian Bora child. He stares at the sculpture for a moment, then reaches for a piece of sandpaper and runs it roughly over the skirt worn by the child. "It shouldn't be so smooth," he says; "it is a skirt made of tree bark." He scruffs it again then steps back once more and appraises the work. "What do you think?" he asks. "Does it have enough life?" The question doesn't need an answer. The sculpture almost looks as though at any minute it may tire of its pose and ask to sit. Felipe knows this and smiles. "It's a good one, isn't it? I love these pieces." "These pieces" are a series of bronzes representing the remaining indigenous peoples of the Americas. The project is called Sons of Our Land. Lettersten began the work in 1986 and to date he has finished 137 of the sculptures, representing more than 60 ethnic groups, primarily in Peru, Brazil, and Venezuela, though 13 are from Mexico and the United States. Each is made by making a plaster-cast—which he later casts in bronze—of one member of an indigenous tribe wearing traditional clothing and engaged in typical behavior. In the case of the Bora Child, the subject is holding a banana behind her back. In Fuego, Lettersten's Orejon subject, who wears traditional wooden plugs in his earlobes, was cast while starting a fire by rubbing a stick against stone. His Xavante Fisherman is poised with a wooden fishing spear while looking into a stream. They are extraordinary sculptures not only because of Lettersten's casting techniques and subtle patinas, but because they are images few of us have ever seen. It is precisely because so few people have ever seen the indigenous peoples of the Americas that Lettersten began his epic work. "These people are disappearing," he says, "and I don't want the world to forget them. These are the first Americans, and my sculptures are meant to uplift the image we have of them." The 38-year-old Lettersten, who was born in Sweden, raised in Lima, Peru and educated in Paris, the U.S. and Europe, laughs when asked how he came to devote several years to traveling throughout Amazonia putting plaster on people. "It is a long story," he says, launching into it. He explains that while studying at the Jan Van Eyke Academie in Holland, he learned the technique of applying quick-drying plaster to a subject to make a body cast. "I used to spend months working with clay to make one sculpture, but with this method I could finish a piece in a week." When he returned to Lima, he spent several years developing and modifying the basic techniques he'd learned, adding such touches as threading string around his subjects—to facilitate the removal of the cast—and incorporating mud into the plaster to keep the mold more malleable. The first large project Lettersten attempted with his new technique involved making casts of Peru's street vendors—carts and all. "The street vendors are generally looked on very badly," he says, "so I thought I would try to uplift their image. You know, like the organ grinder with his monkey and the man who sells cotton candy. All of these people, as we move into modern life, they are disappearing." When his Street Vendors, complete with fire eaters, fruit sellers, beggars and a host of other traditional characters, was shown in Lima in 1985, Lettersten became something of an instant sensation. It was out of the Street Vendors that Sons of Our Land grew. "The last of the vendors I did was a Shipibo Indian woman in the city of Pulcallpa who sells necklaces and arrows. Her face was the face of a real Peruvian pre-Columbian. So that started getting me interested in these people. Who were they? I wondered. How do they live?" That interest, coupled with a lifelong love of the jungle and a request by the America's Pavilion for a Lettersten work to be shown at Expo '92 in Barcelona, Spain, led to the idea for Sons of Our Land. In early 1986, Lettersten traveled to several indigenous Peruvian communities, selected his subjects, and flew them to his studio in Lima to make the first of his sculptures. Though successful, the process of convincing his subjects to join him on an airplane was complex, and he decided to alter his strategy. He sold a farm he owned outside of Lima, purchased an old double-decker river boat, hired a small crew and began traveling the river systems of Amazonia. Aided by local anthropologists as to the whereabouts of villages, Lettersten's modus operandi when he arrives at a puebla is to approach the tribal elders and explain that he has come a long way to honor them by creating a statue of them. He shows them other statues he has made and puts some of his plaster and string on members of his own crew to assure the elders that it will not harm their people. Generally his methods work, though there have been instances where he's been asked to leave. When that happens he doesn't force the issue. While part of Lettersten's purpose is to educate the public to the vitality of these indigenous cultures, he also feels very strongly that the tribals themselves must be educated to their own worth. "Many of these peoples have been thought to think of themselves as worthless, to despise themselves. When they do that they forget their traditions. But they have so many things we could admire if we approached them trying to learn, rather than always trying to teach them." Lettersten always promises to return to each village with a copy of the sculpture he makes there, and he has done his best to keep his word. "When they see the finished sculpture you can see in their faces how proud they are. For many it is the first time an outsider has told them they are important and beautiful." Asked to assess what the project has meant to him, Lettersten smiles broadly. "These people not only offered me a moment of their lives, their shelter and food, they captivated me with their understanding. I have been fortunate to be able to share with them their innate sensitivity to the beauty of nature. I only hope my sculptures will not become fossils of people who, just yesterday, existed." For now Lettersten has put the remainder of his project, which won't be complete until he has made a statue to represent every indigenous group in the Americas, on hold because of financial constraints. Certainly those would be eased if he sold his sculptures, but he has thus far resisted. "I would rather give them away—for the cost of the bronze—to cities and governments who will show them to the public than sell them to collectors who will keep them in private where they won't be seen." And when they have been seen, in Barcelona, Rio and elsewhere, they have moved people. "At the first showing, in Lima, more than half-a-million people saw them in a large Pavillion. They came in thinking they would see images of wild savages, but they went out thinking of the Indians as brothers." For Felipe Lettersten, that is enough.

About the Author

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