

THE CARBON COLLECTIVE AT PHILLIPS METAL

the Lasting Legacy of Robert Phillips

~ Valerie Ostenak with Cheryl Levin
www.phillipsmetal.com
www.facebook.com/TheCarbonCollective

One should be so lucky to be able to go someplace for even a day and experience the fire, the hammers and anvils, and any other process of metal working. I think in sadness of all the shops that have gone by the wayside, been dismantled and sold off in pieces and parts, or in the worst, hauled off as scrap. Some would make really good continuing workspaces and studios for those who can't afford to put together their own studio, or live in places that are impossible for them to do that. This is a story of a man who built his blacksmithing studio and the co-operative membership studio it became when he passed on. Robert Phillip's work inspired the next generation to continue with the knowledge he had imparted to them. This model of a continuing legacy studio enables those who have an interest, to develop and learn new skills, to feel hot steel between the hammer and the anvil . . . and to build on their dreams in metal.

Robert Phillips, artist blacksmith of Phillips Metal, had his roots in Philadelphia's arts scene beginning in the 1980s when he produced street art, puppets, and mixed media sculptures and installations. As a founding member of High Wire Co-operative gallery, Phillips was part of the community and grass roots organization that turned Old City into a arts destination wrought with galleries and activity that brought First Fridays to Philadelphia. He met his wife and artistic partner, painter Cheryl Levin, at the co-op and together they went on to evolve a puppet theatre with live drumming and marionettes created by Phillips from discarded copper downspouts. A respected teacher, Robert held workshops at Freedom Theatre, Youthbuild Charter School, Westtown School, Merion Elementary School and elsewhere. He offered courses in sculpture, welding, and forging to high-school students.

Phillips' career as a metal artist began in 1993. At that time, he received his first large commission for a noteworthy Philadelphia restaurant. Robert had convinced the owners of the restaurant that a large fish would be a perfect thing to hide the oven hood—Maximillian, the striped bass was born! Made of mild steel, it's 16 feet long, 7 feet wide, 4 feet thick, and weighed 400 pounds.

Phillips' commissions encompassed a wide range of style and application—gates and railings, lighting fixtures and furniture, fireplace grills and hardware. He incorporated a unique, organic quality revolving around natural forms combined with



Robert Phillips with Maximillian install

architectural frameworks. Themes of the life cycles of insects and animals prevailed in his works by creating "wheels of natural forms." Butterflies, dragonflies, turtles, birds, and fish were held together by the central symbolic element for Phillips, of a tree root.



continued on pp. 30–33



Metamorphosis, 2006
Girard Crossing Public Arts Project
120' x 30' x 25'; zinc coated forged steel

Note the woman in the lower left at the base of the tree.. A good reference to the size of this installation.



Phillips, a self-taught artist, concentrated on the energy of the metal and developed a set of working methods to produce works of art that were original, full of surprise, and compelling. Intricate details and stylized elements work together in Phillips designs creating a sense of power and aesthetics. Along with his commissioned work, Phillips continued to produce his own personal body of sculptural works with their own stories to tell. Mask-like forms and abstract shapes turning away from each other along with fragmented elements of dissimilar variety repeat each other in a sketch-like manner.

In 2005, Phillips Metal sought to incorporate public art into the mix, with natural forms dominating design. Monumental butterflies and dragonflies were forged and welded together in the Girard Street Crossing Project, bringing forward to the public an awareness of nature on a grand scale. Working with Levin, who finished the work with metallic paints, a set of mosaic panels were built in conjunction with neighborhood teens and installed on a bridge adjacent to the sculptures. As project facilitator, Levin led

The Carbon Collective at Phillips Metal—a 3,000 square foot working and educational space for blacksmiths and metalsmiths of all genre—was born. For Brann, The Carbon Collective is about sharing.

“Not everybody has the option to have a workshop,” he said. “And they should.”

David who used to work as an electrician, now does custom metalwork, from high-end lighting fixtures to intricate steel gates and large scale art installations.

“Not everybody has the option to have a workshop,” David said, “and they should.”

workshops at Phillips’ Metal studios and at The Mural Arts Building on Mount Vernon Street over the course of two summers.

Since Robert’s passing, his working blacksmithing studio lives on at the determination of one of his students, David Brann. David, now 21 who at the age 13 came to study with Robert, didn’t want the studio to be gutted or turned into condos. So he worked with Cheryl Levin, Robert’s widow, to turn Robert’s studio space into a co-op.

Ann Licka is currently the Carbon Collective’s shop manager. She apprenticed with Robert for the last year of his life and studied with Elizabeth Brim and others at Penland. Her website is www.annlicka.com

The “About” info, which follows, from their Facebook page says it all. They are about metal. They aim to introduce, educate, and encourage any and all who have an interest in metalworking.



The forging station at The Carbon Collective

The Carbon Collective allows creative types to design and fabricate any project, large or small, within our fully-equipped metal-working shop.

We believe that all artists should have access to the arsenal of equipment they need to bring their ideas into physical form. The Carbon Collective's goal is to provide a fully equipped metal fabrication shop to enable artists, craftspeople, and hobbyists alike to build out their fantasy. This space is now open to public month-to-month membership at different levels of involvement. Cut material with our horizontal or vertical band-saws, chop saws, or plasma cutter. Shape it with the forge on an anvil or with a brake, press, roller, bender, or power hammer. Join it by welding (GTAW, GMAW, or SMAW), with rivets, or by traditional techniques, and finish your piece by grinding, sandblasting, polishing, and patinating. Don't know how? Just ask and orientation can be provided on any unfamiliar tools. Want to know more? Full-on classes will be scheduled to further enable and inform participants. This invitation is extended to professional fabricators and curious beginners alike.

Build your fantasy here.

Build your fantasy here—the BEST line ever! These people have the energy, the desire, the drive to make possibilities happen. They definitely aren't wallowing in object boredom!

More of Robert's works follow, along with technical specifications and processes, when it was possible to get them.

Gerard Crossing Public Arts Project

The project was a competition sponsored by The Mural Arts Project of The City of Philadelphia's Department of Recreation and The Girard Street Coalition. Major funders include: The William Penn Foundation, The City of Philadelphia Neighborhood Transformation Initiative, Septa and others.

Originally, The Mural Arts asked for ideas for artwork to be installed directly on a bridge. As it turned out, the bridge could



Robert working on the wings

not bear the weight and the project was moved to a mound near to the bridge. The sculptures, turned into more realistic images than Robert had originally intended. The initial design showed the insects more as specimens with wings spread, painted in one color, along with a series of cocoon lights and caterpillar railings.

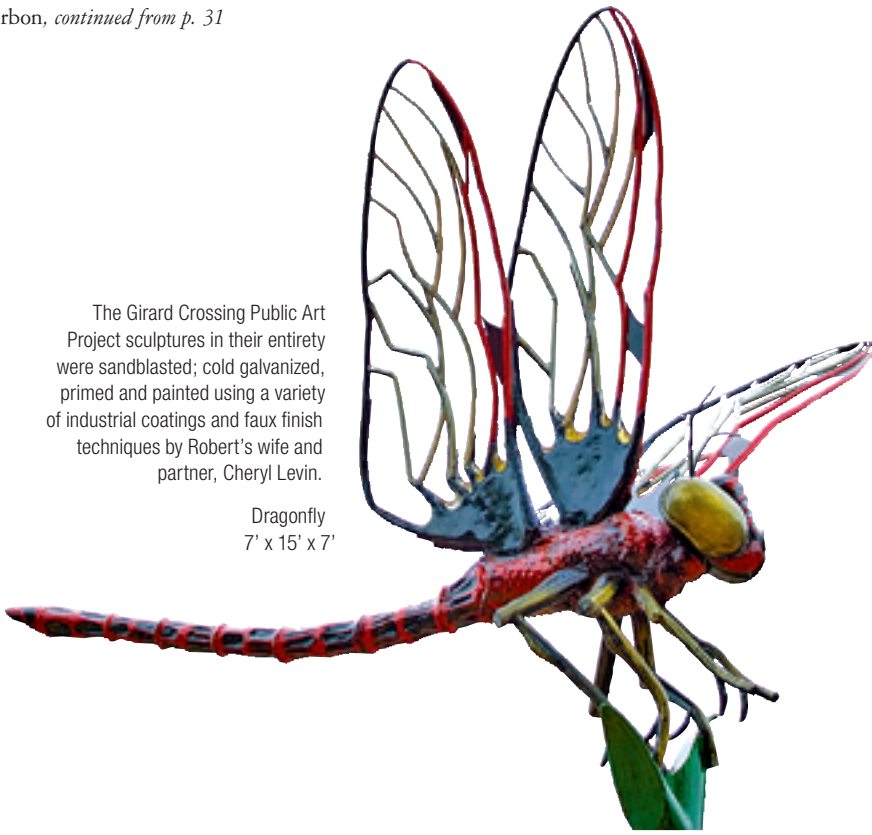
What the project turned into was a series of monumental and somewhat realistic butterflies and dragonflies landing on podiums 10" in diameter, 9'-16' in the air; and ranging in sizes from the smallest swallowtail butterfly, 7' x 5' x 5' to the biggest monarch, 17' x 15' x 17' on a 15' podium. All opening their wings and flying into the neighborhood where they were installed, symbolizing transformation and change.

The sculptures are made using a variety of techniques, but mostly they are forged. The wings, made from steel piping, 1/8" thick, (filled with sand to shape without crimping, and emptied before welding), were shaped, tapered and welded into place. They are supported on the inside faces with an 8" x 8" x 6" web "I" beam. Forged sheet metal, 1/8" thick, formed on the anvil and swage was then welded onto the body of the insects to provide structural support for their bodies, tails, and heads. Piping, 3" x 1/2" wall, was also forged and shaped for the legs and were directly welded to the "I" beam's interior. The feet are welded onto the 1/2" plate where they are landing.

continued on p. 32-33

The Girard Crossing Public Art Project sculptures in their entirety were sandblasted; cold galvanized, primed and painted using a variety of industrial coatings and faux finish techniques by Robert's wife and partner, Cheryl Levin.

Dragonfly
7' x 15' x 7'



Spoonbill Gate



Butterfly, detail

*Works that inspired
the formation of*
The Carbon Collective at
Phillips Metal



Bing's Garden Gate

hot and cold forged, riveted
4' x 5' x 6"



Twig Table

floral and tendril elements hot forged steel
4' diameter

Flora and Fauna Table

floral and tendril elements hot forged steel
82" x 34" x 18"

