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Highlighting the News and Lifestyles of Pittsburgh's East End, Fox Chapel and Oakmont

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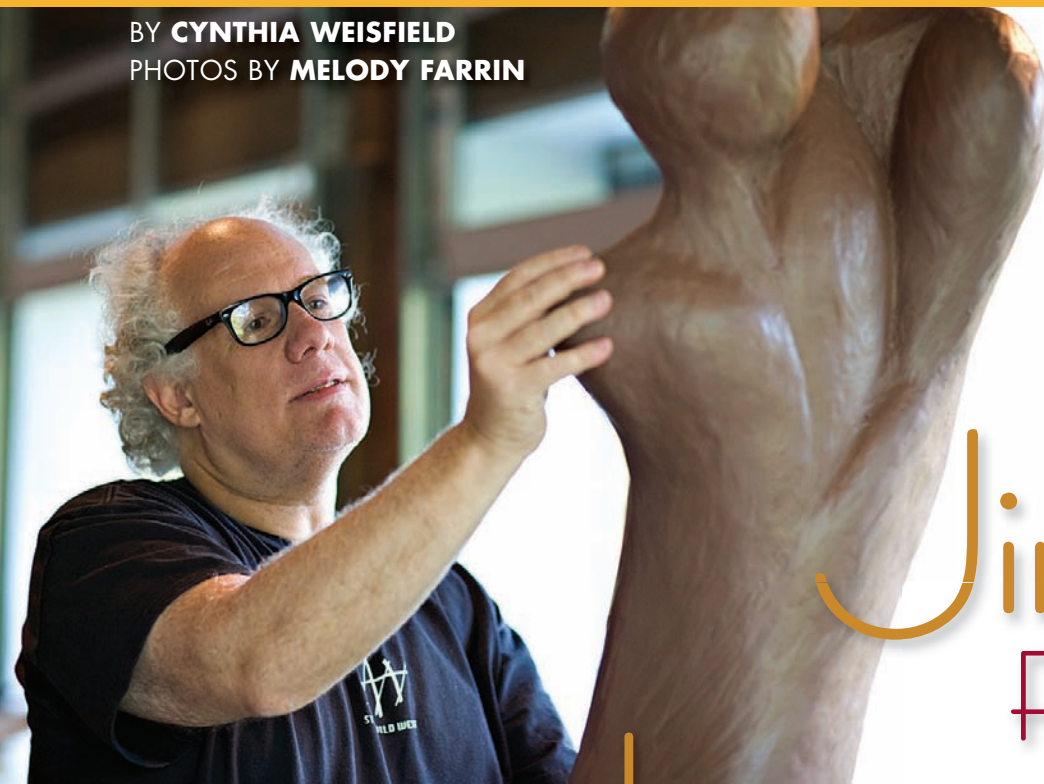
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Jim West Finding a Balance

Above: The artist at work in his Blawnox studio.
Inset: A clay figure takes shape.

Below: *The Walk* is turning heads on Shady Avenue in Shadyside.

ocal artist Jim West is in perpetual motion creatively. He is also a philosopher. If raw materials from the Earth are the warp of his artistic vision, theoretical ideas are the weft.

This complex weaving is visible in West's iconic *Point of View* sculpture of George Washington and Seneca leader Guyasuta on Grandview Avenue in Mount Washington. Now you can experience the artist's mastery closer to home in his second public work, *The Walk*, in front of a Franklin West apartment building at 521 Shady Avenue.

The bronze sculpture was commissioned in 2009 by the family of Frank West—the artist's late cousin—in memory of the founder of the Shadyside-based apartment management company that bears his name. It was dedicated on March 13, which would have been the real-estate developer's 79th birthday, and has been piquing the curiosity of passersby ever since.

At first glance, the sculpture might seem almost Kafkaesque, a bronze man trapped between hand-cast, rectangular concrete arches, hunting for a way to escape. But take a moment to savor the installation up close and from all angles. The man is slightly bigger than life, but he's thoughtful, kind, easy to behold, not muscular, an "everyman."

According to West, the work isn't a likeness of his cousin, but is actually a parable on life. The arch nearest the extended leg where the left hand points represents the past, while the arch nearest the head where the right points is the future. The face is turned toward the time in between—the present. "We can learn from the balance between past, present, and future," West says. "It's the balance we all have in life."

Surprisingly, the 55-year-old land developer never went through a formal art program. "I've been drawing since I was a child," says West, who grew up in O'Hara Township and still lives there. "It wasn't until my late 40s that I began taking classes at the Pittsburgh Center for the Arts in Squirrel Hill."

From there he selected an eclectic mélange of sources to hone his skills. Books and classes in anatomy and patinas, the greenish color that settles on bronze, have been inspirational. In classic fashion, works by great artists at the many museums West visits double as teaching tools. Bernini and Rodin are favorites. "I like movement, which Bernini captured," he enthuses.

Drawing. Sculpture. Add architecture to the list of West's talents. His Blawnox studio—fondly referred to as "the shack"—is built around a century-old farmhouse that he took apart in Washington County, then reassembled next to the Allegheny River. It is reached by a gently curving driveway protected by a retaining wall built of stones from the old Blawnox workhouse; West avidly recycles building materials. He has left the barn wood exposed inside, along with some of the interior features, but did add a new roof and metal exterior.





Erected on Mt. Washington in 2006, *West's Point of View* quickly became an iconic symbol of Pittsburgh.

The resulting home for his muse is a huge open space. Window-paned garage doors let in light, while also giving bucolic views of the river. Except for some lawn around the patios and a few flowers, West has left nature to design the landscape. At strategic places inside are drafting boards and stands for modeling in clay.

From the clay model to the final bronze statue involves a complex series of steps carried out as a collaborative effort with the foundry. One of the steps is to cut a full-size, yet still rough model of the work in foam. West is currently refining a piece in foam for a private commission.

Between commissions and his work in land development—"You still have to put food on the table,"



West enjoys a stunning view of the Allegheny River while he works.

the artist says matter-of-factly—he carves out time to pursue his passion and is currently crafting a three-figure interpretation of the First Amendment.

"I'm a storyteller, an American, and I have to tell the story of us," he says. "I'm not sure where that leads me, but it's what I have to do." SA



The artist's tools.