

# Susan Hagen: Carving the World Around Her

BY NANCY BEA MILLER



Susan Hagen (b. 1959) is having a busy year. The Wisconsin-raised sculptor, based in Philadelphia since 1984, thought she might have time to take it easy during her 2012-13 sabbatical from Bucks County Community College (BCCC) in Newtown. “I relaxed for about a minute,” she muses, “then, with two overlapping shows scheduled for 2013, panic set in!”

The shows in Philadelphia this season — one at Schmidt-Dean Gallery and the other at the Center for Art in Wood — feature Hagen’s small-scale carvings of everyday Americans, including soldiers, protesters, teenagers, gardeners, the homeless, mothers, and young children. Also on view are sculptures of street artifacts like park benches, parking meters, and newspaper boxes, as well as a selection of the many drawings Hagen makes in preparation for her three-dimensional pieces.

Hagen earned a B.F.A. in sculpture and drawing from the Minneapolis College of Art and Design, then an M.F.A. in sculpture from Michigan’s Cranbrook Academy of Art. Apart from her faculty service at BCCC, she has taught at numerous institutions, including the Penland School of Crafts in North Carolina and Anderson Ranch Arts Center near Aspen, Colorado. Hagen was first inspired to carve wood at Cranbrook after admiring the idiosyncratic wooden figures of Edgar Tolson (1904-1984), the Appalachian folk artist who won national acclaim from the 1960s. Another strong influence, the ecclesiastical wood-carving tradition of northern Europe, came to Hagen’s attention while she lived in Sweden for an extended period. Today, completely by coincidence, her small, neatly arranged studio with rose-colored walls looks out over the cloistered garden of a convent. Standing at her carving bench, Hagen occasionally glimpses the nuns in their semi-medieval garb strolling in meditation or relaxing after prayers.

## OUT IN THE WORLD

Yet Hagen’s sculpture is emphatically not of the cloister, but rather reflects every aspect of the human condition, of people out in the world. Her early work was primarily self-referential, delving into dream states and personal emotional landscapes, but after she became a mother, Hagen’s focus widened to take in more of the world around her. Like most parents through the ages, she developed an interest

*Citizens (People of Philly): Gilbert*  
2012, Linden and oils, 16 1/2 x 14 1/2 x 10 1/2 in.  
Schmidt-Dean Gallery, Philadelphia  
Photo: J. Painter





**Gilbert**

2012, Conté and ink wash on paper, 14 x 10 in.  
Schmidt-Dean Gallery, Philadelphia

in politics and in understanding the social order of the game of life, to which she had now introduced a new player.

“I have a deep interest in the human condition, and in all of the subtle manifestations of its beauty and peculiarity,” Hagen explains. “I’m intrigued by everyone, from the most heroic to the most troubling representatives of humanity, including soldiers, office workers, prison inmates, kids, the homeless and other marginalized people.” Hagen has always tended to work in series, so this year’s exhibitions incorporate selections from four of them. Her latest series, *Citizens (People of Philly)*, depicts the people and objects Hagen sees every day on the streets of Philadelphia. *The Teenager Project* looks at ordinary teenagers, thanks in part to the many opportunities for observing this age group provided by her now-teenaged son. The *Recollection Tableaux* project was conceived as a series of small installations inside the magnificently ruined Eastern State Penitentiary in Center City Philadelphia, all of which examine instances and episodes from that prison’s fascinating history. Finally, the *Lost Army* project takes a compassionate look at individuals who have served in the Iraq war.

Hagen strives for an actual relationship with every one of her human subjects. “They are more than just models, they are participants,” she asserts. “It’s an ongoing relationship. Once they are in my sculptures, they are in my life.” Curator and critic L. Robin Rice admires the sincerity



***Citizens (People of Philly): September*** (front and back)  
2012, Linden, wood, metal, and oils, 15 3/4 x 13 x 9 in.  
Center for Art in Wood, Philadelphia  
Photo: J. Painter





**Citizens: Man in Sleeping Bag**

2013, Linden, wood, metal, and oils, 15 1/2 x 19 x 8 1/4 in.

Schmidt-Dean Gallery, Philadelphia

Photo: J. Painter

painstaking, a feature Hagen appreciates. “People ask why I don’t just use clay, especially as I usually paint or patinate my surfaces. I like the wood grain, though I am not relying on it entirely for all my surface effect. But there’s also something about wood that’s warm and unique, full of surprises. And I need a medium that takes a long time.” Indeed, each small sculpture, typically no more than 16 inches high, can take Hagen hundreds of hours. “I call it the tedium factor,” she explains. “While working, the tedium will eventually drive me into a ‘flow state,’ where ideas can develop naturally and gradually.” Although each sculpture is usually carefully planned, Hagen makes many last-minute adjustments as she works. On such a small scale, each tiny detail carries much aesthetic weight.

Hagen starts by making numerous drawings, first with loosely jotted ideas in sketchbooks and then from photographs and notes taken during carefully planned shoots and interviews with the model. She continues to draw, in ever more detail, until she arrives at her final image. At this point, Hagen makes an exact, almost architectural, blueprint of how she will proceed with the carving. She then glues a tracing of this plan to a wood block and cuts its silhouette out with a bandsaw. After this, she begins working with her collection of gouges, which range in diameter from 1/16 of an inch

of Hagen’s artistry: “There is something so deeply valid about her work, and about her basic impulse to connect people through their humanity.” Having represented Hagen for three decades, the dealer Christopher Schmidt is well positioned to observe that Hagen’s work “is always about myth or legend.” He says, “It used to be personal myth. Now it is the story of the everyday, people and things she chooses from the contemporary world to become part of a story telling a greater truth. Whether they are street people or garden club ladies, you can glimpse the stories they bring with them. It is like Greek myth, but using everyday people.” So maybe the homeless guy on the park bench is getting messages from the graffiti on newspaper vending machines rather than from an oracle in a cave, but in Hagen’s hands, it’s all part of a contemporary legend, the ongoing story of who we are now.

**IN THE STUDIO**

Though she still uses mixed media for some details, Hagen long ago focused her energies on woodworking: “I *think* in wood now,” she confesses wryly. She works almost exclusively in linden (also known as basswood and limewood), the traditional choice of northern European carvers since the Middle Ages. This is a close-grained hardwood soft enough to carve, but strong enough to endure the ravages of time. It is also hard enough that the physical act of carving it is slow and

**Soldier #3**

2004, Conté and charcoal on paper, 15 x 11 in.

Center for Art in Wood, Philadelphia







**The Teenager Project** (studio view)  
2006-12, Linden, wood, colored pencil, and oils  
Each figure approximately 16 x 14 x 10 in.  
Center for Art in Wood and Schmidt-Dean Gallery, Philadelphia

to 1 1/2 inches, gouging from the larger masses down to the smaller details. Finally, after carving and sanding, she polychromes, burns, or bleaches the sculptures' surfaces. When she applies color, she uses thin glazes of oil paint, which tint but do not obscure the natural grain. Finally, Hagen finishes the piece with a coating of paste wax, which receives a careful burnishing.

Hagen has been both stimulated and challenged by the opportunity of holding two overlapping shows in the same city. "This is not a mid-career retrospective," she says. "It is simply a good time to tell my story." Her story, perhaps, is more of an odyssey, a continuing quest to

examine the here and now of American life. Hagen's overall project can be seen as massive, almost operatic, in scope, but it's also intimate and individual. "I am large, I contain multitudes," wrote Walt Whitman, and Hagen concurs, not with words but with small blocks of exquisitely carved wood. ■

**Information:** *The exhibition This is Real/New Work about Life in Philadelphia closes on June 29 at the Schmidt-Dean Gallery, 1719 Chestnut Street, Philadelphia, PA 19103, 215.569.9433, schmidtdean.com. Social Studies runs through July 20 at the Center for Art in Wood, 141 N. 3rd Street, Philadelphia, PA 19106, 215.923.8000, centerforartinwood.org. On July 11, Hagen will give a public talk at the Philadelphia Art Alliance (philartalliance.org).*

NANCY BEA MILLER is a painter and writer living in the Philadelphia area. Her current project, *Women in the Act of Painting*, can be seen at [womenintheactofpainting.com](http://womenintheactofpainting.com).