

# A TALL ORDER

Sculptor Doug Kornfeld takes symbolism to new heights at DeCordova



Doug Kornfeld's "Ozymandias" appears to be sinking into the grass at the DeCordova Museum and Sculpture Park in Lincoln.

By Laura Bennett  
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**L**INCOLN — Doug Kornfeld's business card is a squat black figure with an enormous orb for a head. The word "ARTIST" is printed in a white font where the forehead might be. The neck is nonexistent and the arms dangle stiffly. It's a glib distillation of the sculptor himself: a small man with a burnished scalp, thick-rimmed spectacles, and a habit of accenting his words with energetic gestures. "Everything I do is trying to get you to think about symbols," he says, striking the table with the edge of his palm. "To notice how they represent us and how they don't."

For the past two decades, Kornfeld has been making art installations that examine modern iconography. His latest creation, "Ozymandias," was completed in late May and sits on a prime patch of real estate outside at the DeCordova Museum and Sculpture Park. The 18-foot-tall sculpture is a great red slab that appears to be sinking into a swath of lawn. "Ozymandias" is shaped like a giant man — more precisely, the smooth-edged, cartoonish species of man that is plastered on countless bathroom doors around the world.

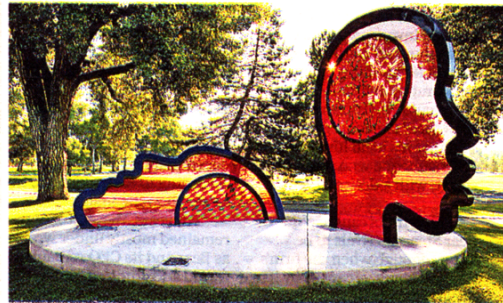
Now 54, Kornfeld was wandering through the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston more than 20 years ago when he stopped to use the restroom and saw a symbol of a dapper little figure in a tuxedo. "I remember thinking, 'Oh, I'm not well-dressed enough to use this bathroom,'" he says. "Then I started thinking, 'What are the symbols we use today? And do they really represent us?'"

He went home and cut a stencil of the classic female figure on the restroom door, with her triangular skirt and impossibly round skull. He spray painted it onto a canvas. Though he has since abandoned the two-dimensionality of paint in favor of the messy bulk of wood and paper and steel, his signature icon is still the same.



DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

"Everything I do is trying to get you to think about symbols," says Doug Kornfeld. Below: His "Meeting of Minds" in Denver.



Kornfeld grew up in Denver, where his father spent hours hunched over the grand piano in their living room. But instead of becoming a pianist, the elder Kornfeld had studied horticulture and opened a garden supply store at the urging of his own father. The house was always filled with strains of ragtime and classical melodies. Kornfeld has two brothers who inherited the hard-nosed practicality of their grandfather, he says. They are now a doctor and a businessman in Colorado. "People always wonder about me and where I came from," he admits, "because

I don't seem to fit in too well."

He studied landscape architecture at the University of Oregon, and his first job out of college was an entry-level position with a firm called Sasaki Associates in Boston. He was assigned to work on 12 kilometers of Kuwait City's coastline. Though he was never actually sent to Kuwait, Kornfeld watched in awe as the architects planned an artificial island scattered with parks and outdoor attractions.

The budget, he says, was at least a billion dollars. "For a kid getting out of school, seeing all this was like dying and going to

heaven," he says. "The government of Kuwait would look at the blueprints and say, 'Spend more money!'"

But while taking drawing classes at the MFA to fine-tune his landscape renderings, Kornfeld realized that his chosen career didn't quite suit him. "Art is so much different than design," he says. "Design is practical. You make things happen. You have a program. Things have to work; they have to have a real reason for being. But art is poetry. It doesn't need to have a function."

After almost three years as a landscape architect, he left Sasaki Associates and became an artist. His brothers gaped. "At that time, I never said, 'I don't want to be like everybody else,'" he says. "But I'm thankful that it turned out that way."

In a sense — whether consciously or subconsciously — this is the key trope in Kornfeld's art: the push to differentiate the individual from a world full of icons and expectations.

His first sculpture was a mosaic made of 4,000 wooden cubes, each emblazoned with a male or female figure that was warped in some way: an elongated torso, a big head bulging on a stocky frame, shoulders stretched to bodybuilder proportions. In the center, the standard man and woman posed squarely. Later, he installed a long white wall lined with cut-outs of distorted icons along a chain-link fence in Providence so that passersby would step through the shadows.

"Ozymandias" is slated to be displayed at the DeCordova for several years. "There's almost a Pop art reference in Doug's work because he appropriates a very common symbol," says Nick Capasso, the senior curator at the DeCordova. "There's a billboard aspect to it; it has the bold graphic quality of an advertisement. A lot of contemporary art is puzzling, but Doug's is eloquently clear."

The sculpture was inspired by a poem written in 1818 by Percy Bysshe Shelley. In the poem, a traveler stumbles upon a statue

in the desert and reads the grandiose inscription at its feet. But when he looks up, he sees nothing but smooth sand and crumbled remains. As the poem goes: "Half sunk, a shattered visage lies. . . / And on the pedestal these words appear: / 'My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings: / Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!'"

Seemingly half-submerged in soil and pitched precariously to one side, the piece is a vivid image of a fallen icon. "The sculpture looks like someone took a big generic stick figure and dropped it out of the sky," said Esther Binstock, 15, of Cambridge, who was wandering through the park on a recent Thursday afternoon.

"It's like a symbol that you see all the time, but in a situation and angle that you don't normally see," said her sister, Mahalia Binstock, 13.

Kornfeld began on a gutted stretch of land in a corner of the park. Then contractors built a foundation of concrete and steel. The whole thing was encased in marine plywood and painted an electric shade of crimson. The end result, which took a week to complete, is stark in its simplicity: all sharp red lines against a lush backdrop of green.

Commissioned by the museum and funded in part by a grant from the Nathaniel Saltonstall Arts Fund, "Ozymandias" had a budget of \$20,000. Kornfeld has constructed other installations with as little as several hundred dollars. He teaches art classes to make ends meet.

But the piece is a big step forward for the sculptor. "This is a real star in my constellation," he says. His last piece, a stainless steel knot in Golden, Colo., was a mere 8 feet in diameter. "Ozymandias" stands 18 feet tall and is 18 feet wide.

"My work is all about how people interact with it," Kornfeld says. "To have such a visible piece in a prestigious museum like this might be as good as it gets."

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