

## History to Heart to Art: The Work of Preston Jackson

**L**ike a chemist of the psyche, Illinois artist Preston Jackson takes stories from his family's past, mixes them with historic reality, processes them in his heart, and makes art that will pierce your soul.

"I put myself in the shoes of the characters I depict in my work," Jackson says. "I feel everything they feel, and my emotions are recorded in my modeling of the pieces and also in the imagery included in the surfaces of the sculptures."

These soulful pieces are his newest works -- sculptures in a series called "Fresh from Julieanne's Garden," which are currently on display at the Illinois State Museum's gallery in Lockport.

Jackson, a native of Decatur who now splits his time between Chicago and Peoria, "should be recognized as one of the best contemporary artists in the state," says Robert Sill, Assistant Director of Art at the Illinois State Museum. Sill helped organize a city-wide showing of Jackson's work in Springfield last year. "I can't imagine, in the 20 years I've been here, a better response to a show," Sill adds. "It was up there with the best shows we've ever done as far as response. That's Preston!"

Jackson teaches at Chicago's School of the Art Institute and at the Contemporary Art Center in Peoria, which he co-founded. He received the state's highest honor in 1998 when he was named a Laure-

ate of the Lincoln Academy of Illinois. He works in several media, sizes, and environments, including outdoors. Jackson's massive, bas relief bronze sculptures depicting the Mound Builders era adorn the Cahokia Mounds State Historic Site Interpretive Center doors.

Jackson's show currently at the Lockport Gallery is a "mini-review" of his work from 1985 to now, Sill says. It features paintings and sculptures, including nine bronze pieces from his "Julieanne's Garden" series, which depicts characters from the time of slavery. Jackson based the pieces on slavery and Reconstruction period stories he heard from his family (including Great Grandmother Julieanna), as well as research and travels in the south. He wrote a narrative to accompany each piece.

"This work is part of my attempt to understand the effects of animalistic treatment toward other human beings," Jackson wrote in the show's brochure.

"The messages of his narrative are incredibly profound," Sill says. "They affect everyone, no matter what your race. It affects you in matters of the heart, and I think that's the highest calling for art. I felt very strongly about his work and wanted to share it with as many people as possible."

One African-American woman was so moved after seeing Jackson's "Julieanne's Garden" pieces in

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*Preston Jackson's "Claire Michelle," from his series "Fresh from Julieanne's Garden." Photos courtesy of the Illinois State Museum. Photos by Gary Andrashko.*

## The Art of Preston Jackson...

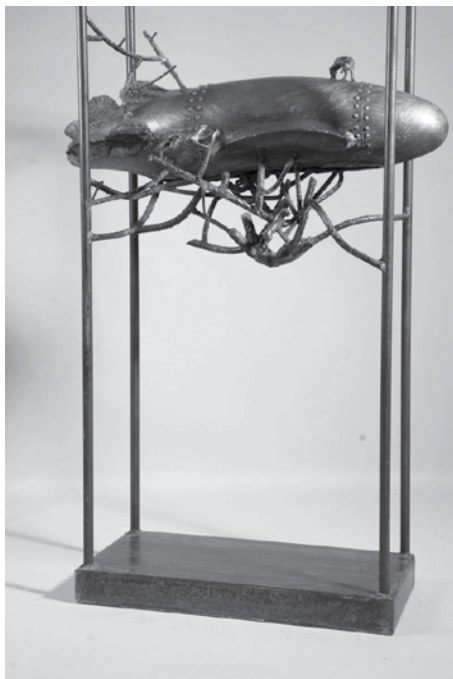
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*Jackson's "Peanut and Momma's Escape," depicts a slave escaping with her son so he won't be sold into slavery. Photos courtesy of the Illinois State Museum. Photos by Gary Andrashko.*

Springfield, she wrote the local daily paper, *The State Journal-Register*, which published her long letter.

"Decades of anger, bitterness, pain and depression rose to the surface and choked me..." wrote Springfield resident C. L. Crockett. "I could feel tears of rage welling up, as I read about the enslaved African woman (one of millions), who after being subjugated to a life of being raped by her captor, had the grace to turn around and care for him in his old age.



*"September Song," one of Jackson's "pod pieces." Photos courtesy of the Illinois State Museum. Photos by Gary Andrashko.*

"Preston Jackson was bearing witness for us all..." she continued. "It brought a healing peace to my soul and for that I am grateful."

One particularly poignant sculpture in the series is "Hog Killin' Time," which depicts Clara, a female slave whose twin was sold into slavery and whose master is preparing to sell her two young sons into slavery. The piece shows her with ax aloft; the narrative says the coming blow is for her master, so he'll know how it feels to be "two twins separated."

Sill remembers observing the crowd that attended Jackson's exhibition at the Chicago Cultural Center. "There was a young, black professional woman and she was viewing 'Hog Killin' Time'," he says. "She read the narrative, and when she turned around, not knowing anybody was watching her, she said softly, 'Yes!'"

"Jackson breathes life back into those narratives and those people (in his sculptures)," Sill adds. "That's when it becomes like a real person and not just history."



*A close-up of "Peanut and Momma's Escape," 2005, bronze. Photos courtesy of the Illinois State Museum. Photos by Gary Andrashko.*

When discussing his work, Jackson likens himself to his characters. "Lashing out against injustice and pain caused to innocent people is a natural reaction," he says. "Each person confronts evil with the weapons they have. In 'Hog Killin' Time,' Clara attacks her master with the hatchet that is in her hands. My art is my weapon, and I use it to combat the ills that I reveal in my sculpture."

Jackson's works will be on display at the Illinois State Museum Lockport Gallery from now through August 3, 2007. Sill says Jackson's works will then



"The Glimpsing," 2003. Photos courtesy of the Illinois State Museum. Photos by Gary Andrashko.

be displayed at the Museum's Southern Illinois Art Gallery at Rend Lake in the spring of 2008, and again at the Museum's Chicago Gallery in 2009. New works may be included in the Rend Lake and Chicago shows, he adds.

For more information about Preston Jackson, visit his Web site at: [www.artic.edu/~pjacks](http://www.artic.edu/~pjacks). For more information

about Jackson's shows at the Illinois State Museum Galleries, visit: [www.museum.state.il.us/ismsites/](http://www.museum.state.il.us/ismsites/), or call the individual galleries: Lockport's number is 815/838-7400, the Southern Illinois Art Gallery at Rend Lake is 618/629-2220 and the Chicago gallery is: 312-814-5322.



A glimpse of Preston Jackson's exhibit at the Illinois State Museum Lockport Gallery. Photos courtesy of the Illinois State Museum. Photos by Gary Andrashko.



## From Tomboy to Senator: Florence Fifer Bohrer

Illinois' first elected female senator was an unlikely candidate in some ways. Bloomington native Florence Fifer Bohrer skipped school so much as a child, her father (a state senator and one-time governor) finally withdrew her. Years later, Joseph Fifer admitted he thought school was a waste of time for his precocious daughter. That's according to an article by Lola Devore, who chronicles Bohrer's life and accomplishments in the Autumn 2000 "Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society."

Although Bohrer was a chronic truant (with her lenient parents' permission), she loved to sit in her father's office while he met with other leaders to discuss the issues of the day. Perhaps Bohrer's political career was the result of osmosis. Between listening to her father's conversations and growing up next to Adlai Stevenson, she was immersed in politics



Florence Fifer Bohrer receiving congratulations on her election.

from the time she was young.

But politics wasn't on her mind then. To raise money she would sell salamanders she'd caught; to have fun she'd skip school and wander, once riding atop a train. During her father's inaugural ball at the Governor's Mansion, Bohrer slid down the Mansion banister in her nice dress, landing -- plop! -- in the middle of the receiving line, according to Devore. Another time she trained her pony to walk into the Mansion via the front steps.

Bohrer finally settled into boarding school as a teen and loved it. After graduation, she married lawyer Jacob Bohrer and rejoined her family in Bloomington. Soon she had two children and became active in charitable and civic causes because she felt it was a mother's duty to ensure there were laws to

protect and help children.

She helped establish the McLean County Tuber-

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**Florence Fifer Bohrer...***Continued from page 3*

culosis Association after her daughter contracted TB, she helped create a Girls Industrial Home in Bloomington, and she worked for the Red Cross during World War II.

In 1920, women were granted the right to vote in every election and there was “a country-wide feeling that women should have an opportunity to straighten out the political mess made by the men,” Devore writes. So, in 1924, Bohrer’s friends urged her to run for senator.

Bohrer scoffed, but relented when her friends refused to give in. After getting the approval of most of her family, she agreed to run. Her father and brother did not support her decision.

She ran as a Republican and easily won the primary (defeating the incumbent) and the general election, much to her father’s surprise. Bohrer’s first bill, which passed, fulfilled a campaign promise by tightening controls on dance halls.

During her two terms as senator, Bohrer passed bills to start a state park system, decrease election fraud, help the welfare system, and help children and mothers overall. She’s also responsible for making “Illinois” our state song, though she felt the matter was too trivial for legislation.

Being the state’s first female senator did lead to some unusual situations for Bohrer, according to Devore. Bohrer visited the state’s institutions for the poor and disabled because she headed the Public Welfare Committee. When she visited the state hospital

for the insane in Moline she told them she was a state senator there to investigate. They thought she was insane and locked her up.

After two successful terms in the Senate, Bohrer lost her third election, as many Republicans did that year. She returned to Bloomington and threw herself back into civic and charitable work. The group of women who organized to help her get elected and re-elected became the League of Women Voters and Bohrer served on its national board.

In July, 1960 Bohrer died. She was 83.



In 1922, Republican **Lottie Holman O’Neill** of Downers Grove became the first woman elected to the Illinois General Assembly when she won the campaign for her district’s House of Representatives seat. She was re-elected three more times, then lost a fourth re-election bid, but was elected to the House again in 1932. Twelve years later she was elected to the Senate and won re-election twice. O’Neill served a total of 38 years as a state lawmaker. A statue of her stands in the State-house.



## Transitions

Former state **Representative Bob Brinkmeier** died March 9th. He was a Democratic lawmaker from Freeport between 1967 and 1977.

In early March, Central Management Services Director **Paul Campbell** resigned to become vice president of United Health Care. **Maureen O’Donnell**, formerly the CMS Assistant Director, became the Acting Director.

In mid February **Governor Rod Blagojevich** appointed **Carrie Hightman** as Chair of the Illinois Board of Higher Education. Previously she was head of AT&T Illinois. The former IBHE Chair, **James Kaplan**, retired.

