

Final Project for Docent Training, May 15, 2017  
By Vanita Aloisio

**Choice, No Choice**, 1992-1993 by Steven MacGowan

**Possible tour questions:**

Even though no people are shown, what does the work say about people?  
In what ways are you surprised by the work?  
What does the title mean to you? Have you made big choices in your life? Have you ever felt that you had no choice?

**Introduction**

Every culture has included the ancient craft of woodcarving. Native Americans carved pipes and totems. Africans made masks. Egyptians carved furniture and mummy cases, some found in King Tut's tomb. Christian images were carved in low relief on the doors of St. Sabina in Rome and early altarpieces were first painted on wooden panels. Muslim wood carvers created elaborate panels and Hindu temples were decorated with carvings of teak. Typical American galleries, however, do not focus on collecting such carvings.

So for each viewer strolling among the paintings here, there is a moment when he or she discovers that this work, Steven MacGowan's *Choice, No Choice*, is more real than a painting, more real than a photo. Actually, it is a woodcarving. It is a carved relief, realistically textured and painted, and it is large – approximately 5 X 8 feet. This piece was first exhibited as part of the Art of Healing Exhibition at the West Michigan Cancer Center in 1999, and it was the MacGowans' gift to the KIA in memory of their daughter Samantha that same year.

**The Work**

The composition represents an urban scene of a subway entrance with wooden benches and graffiti on the blocks of the wall. The words "No Choice" appear above the benches, but the word "No" seems to be blurred or smudged. There is a view to the street level. Pieces of litter appear under the benches and on the floor.

The formal qualities of the work are mainly texture, composition, and the illusion of depth. The work is quite realistically gritty, both literally and figuratively. The concrete blocks appear pitted, where the carving is shallow. The benches give the illusion of coming out into the viewers' space and here the carving is deeper. The artist has recreated the wood grain of the bench with his tools. There are deep cuts between and under the benches. The floor has the solid appearance of smooth concrete, yet it is covered with the grit of dirt and sand. The detritus turns out to be real bits of paper and plastic straws.

The subdued earth tones of the brick and concrete are relieved by the brightness of the blue, red, and white of the graffiti, the focal point of the work. The curves of the bench legs and the arch of the ceiling offer just enough contrast to the dominant, straight diagonal lines of the benches. The vanishing point perspective draws the eye to the exit at the street level where the depth of the carving of the tree actually creates a shadow.

Both the technique and the materials achieve a careful realism that captures a moment in time, a moment noticeably absent of people, yet one that clearly depicts the evidence of people.

### **Materials**

Butternut – a favorite of wood carvers; now rare and endangered; acquired from a mill in Highland MI which is south of Flint

Heavy-grade sandpaper, sand, crushed glass, small papers, real straw or stirrer; lollipop stick; paints, gesso, glues

Tools: traditional carving tools like chisels, gouges, v-tools; dental picks, tack hammers, and files

### **Technique**

MacGowan made several trips to Chicago and New York to take photos of urban scenes. He began with 2" thick boards, laminated together. He made a drawing, which was usually a composite of photos, and then used a transparency and overhead projector to transfer the drawing to the surface of the wood. He completed the carving, and perhaps at this point applied two layers of gesso to conceal the natural grain of the wood. He then applied the paint, and finally applied crushed glass and small papers.

### **Title and graffiti**

MacGowan's pieces are typically smaller than *Choice, No Choice*. Only one or two others are as large. He chose the title "No Choice" originally because he felt that this work demanded to be large. He said he felt he had no choice but to deal with the physicality of a big piece of wood. His graffiti that he adds usually has a theme, but one not always discernible by the viewer. Both the title and the graffiti took an ironic turn as the events with his daughter's health unfolded. The wall label includes the story of the discovery of his daughter's brain tumor and her subsequent death at age 8. MacGowan had said that children in hospital wards have little or no choice if their disease is serious, yet he acknowledged that many people do make the choice to help in many ways. The graffiti includes names of other children the family met in the hospital, names of hospital employees, and even some medical slang. The litter includes a copy of a drawing Samantha had done in school and a

get-well wish from her father. There is also a drawing of Mario, a video game character that Samantha liked to draw. Finally, on the floor is a scrap of a *USA Today* newspaper with a headline referencing Hillary Clinton's efforts on health care reform dated January 1993.

### **The Artist**

Steven MacGowan was born in 1953 and lived in Hartford, Michigan where he graduated from Hartford High School in 1971. He attended Lake Michigan College and then moved to Arizona for three years where he pursued his passion for music. While there, he said he received some rudimentary art instruction, but returned to Michigan in 1976. He worked a day job at Bangor Cooler and began honing his artistic talents, beginning with drawings and stencil etchings.

In 1984, MacGowan was impressed by a woodcarving of a western scene and he sought to learn more about the art. A friend of his father's, Lewis Brachett, organizer of the Fruit Belt Carving Club of southwest Michigan, introduced him to shallow wood relief carving. In 1986 he attended the International Wood Carving Exhibition and met acclaimed wood carver Fred Cogelow who became his mentor and included Steven's work in his own exhibitions. Another member of the Club, Al Sopelsa, urged him to experiment with deeper relief and paint. His teachers at Andrews University, Greg Constantine and Rhonda Root, also encouraged him and took him on an educational trip to New York City to learn the ropes of galleries and art dealers.

His style evolved over the years. MacGowan's early relief work included skies, people, and street scenes that one curator called "Hopperesque." Eventually, though, the people and skies disappeared and he concentrated on urban tableaux that created illusions of depth and reality. His use of graffiti has been compared to Cy Twombly's scribbling technique and his realistic illusions to those of photo-realist Richard Estes, only "grittier, dirtier."

He worked for 30 years as a painted wood relief artist and exhibited his works throughout Michigan, as well as in Chicago, New York, and Philadelphia. He died in 2012 of pancreatic cancer. Steven MacGowan has created works that show us "a manmade world in which man is noticeably absent" and often a "sad awareness of what once was and is no more." His work helps us to see familiar things in a new light.

## Sources

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