PROVINCETOWN BANNER

Arts&Entertainment

Pepitone's constant process of renewal

Sculptor is honored with retrospective at Dennis museum

By Sue Harrison
BANNER STAFF

Sculptor Richard Pepitone may not change his medium quite as often as he changes his socks, but he does like to mix it up often enough to keep himself and everyone else on their toes. He's been through plaster, resin/acrylic, wood, bronze, raku ceramics and stained glass, each done with his love of the human form holding center court. The Cape Museum of Fine Arts in Dennis is holding a retrospective of Pepitone's work through the end of October.

The Banner met with the artist at the museum and talked with him about his work and his life.

Pepitone never started out to be a sculptor, in fact the whole question of what the young man might become was up in the air. Never a fan of school, he dodged the doors of academe as often as he could opting for the streets, parks, beaches and museums of his native Brooklyn instead.

Although he has been out of touch with much of his family (the exception being his own daughter and his ex-wife) he bears them no malice. He understands the constraints of being Catholic and poor.

"I was the black sheep of the family," he recalls of his choices in life. "If you are Roman Catholic you get married, have lots of kids, get a job. I had a good mother and father. They provided for us."

But by the time he was born, his mother had had it, he says. "I was pretty much on my own. She was depressed and used to put me out on the street. As early as two years old I began to wander. I found downtown Brooklyn, the museum, Coney Island and eventually 42nd Street and Broadway."

Instead of the classroom, Pepitone chose the silver screen and Times Square for his education. He used to get downtown and be in line in time enough to get a ticket for the early show at 9 a.m.

"You could see a brand new movie and then there was a live show with Benny Goodman or Tommy and Jimmy Dorsey. You could see it all for 55 cents. That's where I went to school."

Not that he didn't sometimes show up for classes in Brooklyn. He hung in there until he got to the sixth grade but then had had enough. From then on it was a combination of running away, juvenile hall and other institutions until he was grown enough to be turned loose.

The real trouble started when his mother gave him the passbook for a Christmas Club account and sent him to the

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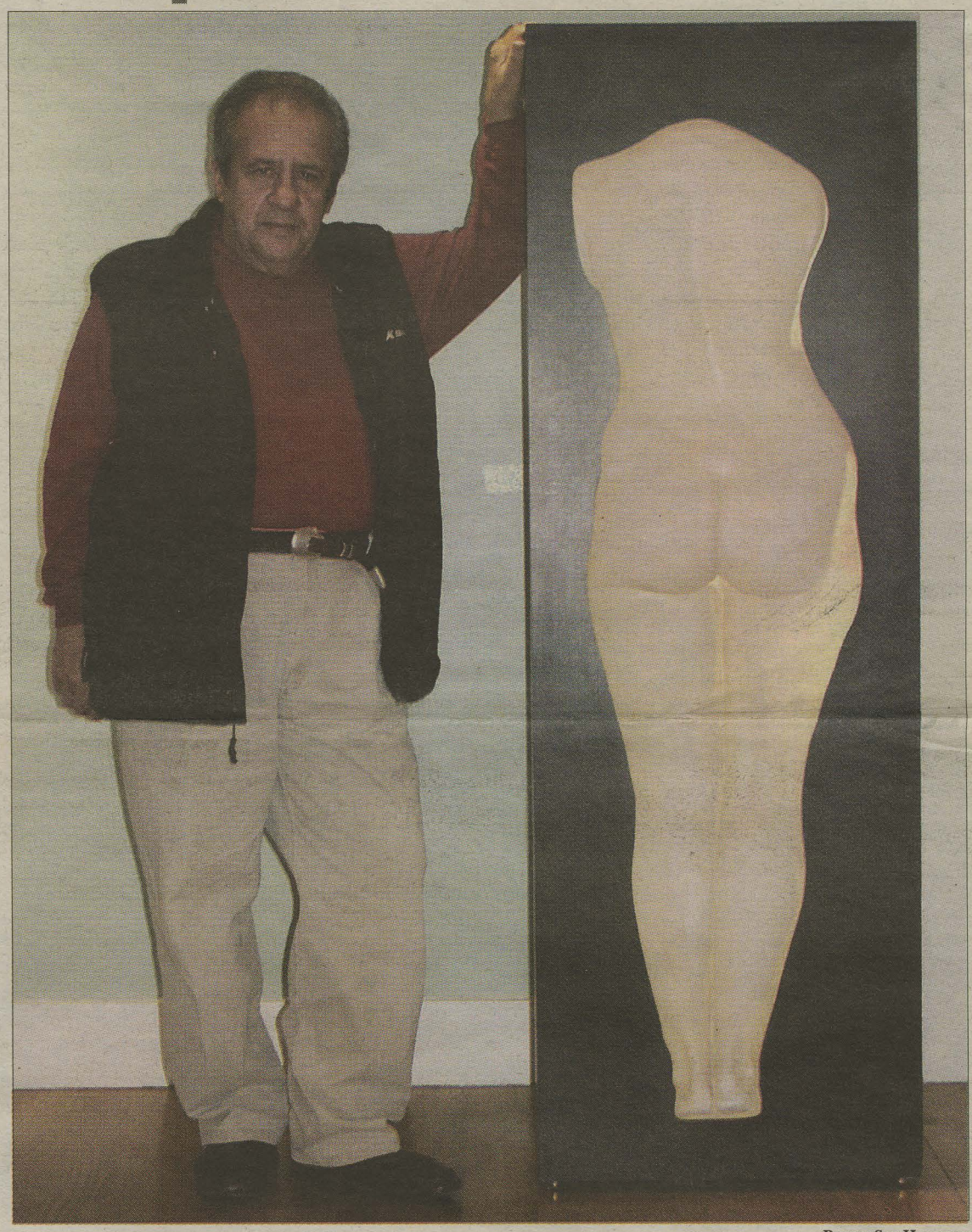

PHOTO SUE HARRISON

Richard Pepitone at the Cape Museum of Fine Arts in Dennis with one of his negative sculptures. Note how the negative image creates a visual positive image.

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bank to get the money. Eleven-year-old Richard never made it back with the cash.

"I bought a suitcase and a ticket to Los Angeles. I was out there for six months," he says.

He got a job selling household goods door to door and stayed in a rented room at the YMCA. Then he met a Mexican man who took him in and taught him tiling. By then, 12-year-old Pepitone was ready to go home.

At that time there were a lot of runaways and every three months the government sent what it called the deportation train coast to coast to take the kids back where they had come from.

"I had just missed the deportation train for bad boys like me," he says with a laugh. They put him in a juvenile home for three months.

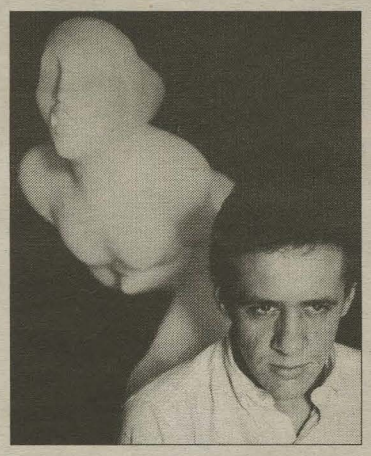
Once back in Brooklyn, he was stuck. His parents wouldn't take him back, fearful he would just run away again, and the Californians who shipped him East were worried that he would head back their way. Although there was nothing mentally wrong with him, the authorities put him in the Rockland State Mental Hospital for two years. "There was nowhere to put us," he says of himself and the other boys on their own. They hadn't really broken any laws, but were too young to be on the street.

"In a way it was nice," he says. "There were only 14 kids and the people watching over us were great. It was tough but better than being in a (juvenile) institution with 40 kids. It's a wonder I turned out the way I did as a creative artist."

Looking back, he recalls spending hours in kindergarten off in the corner with finger-paints, creating underwater scenes. All through school all he wanted to do was draw, not do the other schoolwork. The teachers responded by making a dunce of him. Between the frustration at school and trouble at home, he was set for a collision course with failure but somehow managed to sidestep it.

"My parents never told me they loved me," he says. "I just wanted to be loved. I got into trouble because I wanted to be loved."

Thwarted at every turn, he put aside his love of art until he



Pepitone with sculpture "Flight," *1968 (destroyed).*

was 20 when he realized that's what he really wanted to do.

"I decided to go to Greenwich Village and study art," he says matter-of-factly. "I had $200 in my pocket. I rented a room, bought some art supplies, got a job and found someone to study with."

He spent five "good" years in the Village apprenticed to a sculptor. He got married, had a daughter and started off on his

Pepitone with a selection of his raku ceramic work on hand-worked bases of twisted metal and found objects.

art career. He first worked in plaster, creating negative molds of the human form. He was working on a mold one day and when it didn't work, his temper took over and he walked out after hurling it across the room, breaking it into pieces. When he later came back, he found a large face fragment in negative and noticed that when he looked at it, it appeared to be a positive image. A mixture of accident and temper set him on a path he has followed in some way since: taking a piece of reality and shifting it around for the unusual view.

He started to work with sections of the body, bits of face, chunks of torso. Working with his molds he could create mirror images and merge positive and negative spaces adding an abstract element to his lifecast body fragments.

After that, he says, he was not satisfied with a single view. He moved to casting transparent resin sculpture from his molds in 1969 and continued to work with resin through 1980 when health concerns about the medium moved him on.

He met Clarence Kacergis, the Bradford Street welder, and began to work with metal, casting his sculpture in bronze and creating unusual bases with a machine Kacergis has invented. Another lucky accident showed him a new trick when a wax model he had left at the art association softened from the heat of the woodburning stove in the office. It didn't fully melt but did slump over from its upright position. That led to variations of the positions of his sculptural pieces created by manipulating the original cast.

Then, while walking the beach he began to find old oars that had washed up. They put him in mind of the town's fishing heritage and he started to sand down the old oars and then carve their blades into totemic shapes. Berta Walker wanted to buy them but he balked. Walker countered by offering to make a series of bronze castings. He agreed and now one of those sets, "Homage to the Fishermen," is part of a permanent fisherman's memorial. They were installed on MacMillan Pier and then at the foot of the pier at Fisherman's Park.

In '98 he began to work on large ceramic pieces, many of which had chains of dancers cut into their walls. He made unusual metal bases for them to elevate them into the line of vision.

Finally, two years ago he moved to glass. He creates central medallions of fused glass and then has his assistant completes a traditional stained glass border from a design that Pepitone draws. His glass work can be seen inside Bubala's Restaurant where a five-foot piece hangs over the bar.

One patron of Pepitone's is Ronny Hazel, owner of Shop Therapy. Hazel lives in the former rectory of the old Methodist Church (the site for the new library). Hazel often commissions artists to do pieces for his home and grounds. Pepitone has done decorated railings for the entrance and a large glass piece for inside.

Part passion, part serendipity, Pepitone's life continues to unfold to reveal yet another layer of creativity.

"I'm very lucky," he says. "I'm like a renaissance artist surrounded by people who can help." ❐