

Dig: Paulus Berensohn, *A Natural Life*

Statement of Intention

Prisons come in many forms. Cold steel shapeshifts into desultory, dutiful work in front of computers, mind-numbing subservience in retail and fast food, or teaching to the vacant stares of students already dumbfounded by a culture that has packaged all aspects of human activity into a commodity. Paulus Berensohn, dancer, ceramicist and deep ecologist had a contrary wisdom. Berensohn's confidence in the leverage of creativity deciphered a different kind of code that liberates the modern-day prisoner.

Michelangelo's monumental *David* was set free by the sculptor's belief he was inside the stone. The unfinished *Slaves* bear witness to this process. Berensohn excavated his life from the boundaries of ego and matter to in turn become my Michelangelo. Painter Enrique Martinez Celaya asks regarding Michelangelo's *Pieta*, "Is it marble? Is it death? Is it loss? Is it compassion? The power of the sculpture rises from the co-existence of all these questions." Berensohn's confidence in the fulcrum of creativity removed the barriers to a fulfilling life. He embodied an infinite intelligence able to emolliate self-doubt. His life became emblematic of a liberated soul. Thoughtful and assured, like the Renaissance sculptor, Berensohn in the same way — through his creative work and play — explores birth, death, loss and love. In this regard his legacy is a singular majestic dedication to the free movement of the mind, body and spirit.

*To Spring from the Hand* is the inspiring documentary about Paulus Berensohn. It was directed and produced by the celebrated Australian filmmaker, Neil Lawrence (1955-2015). The film has an important scene where Berensohn admonishes the viewer to seek the pleasure of art through their own way. He does not want the viewer to consider his approach to life and art as a definitive program to follow. Here Berensohn echoes his classic text, *Finding One's Way With Clay*. The text has been in continuous publication since its appearance in 1972, and it is founded on this firm ideology. My book seeks to promote Berensohn's philosophy through a literary space that at this point does not exist. There is no full-length book of any kind written about Berensohn, however there is a world of people who I believe would read one. My work will hold a magnifying glass onto aspects of the mechanisms that moved Berensohn's way of being, through some singular event or relationship. It will elicit a proliferation of inspiration for readers to begin, maintain, sustain and inspire their individual creative soul practice.

Our culture has no shortage of goal-driven fame fanatics who kidnap the headlines, the imaginations of our youth, their grandparents and all of us in between. Increasingly, creative action is valued for its monetization and career-building potential. Berensohn's life is a rebellion against this mindset. He defied the consequences of systems absconding his work and pricing it beyond an average person's income. This meant that for twenty years he returned everything he made back into the earth. Literally. Commercialization was no longer a barrier between why he made things and who or what might own them afterward.

Berensohn's masterpiece is not a seventeen-foot-high sculpture on a plinth in Florence. Berensohn's masterpiece is his life. As it is with every masterpiece, the material must be respected, honored and carefully handled. The challenge of dyslexia gave Berensohn's first experience of mystery a definition, but words will explain or own him now. In this regard I have no desire to attempt a biographical overview and an academic tome would be anathema to the spirit of the man. But like the partially revealed *Slaves*, wisdom emanating from Michelangelo's sculptures is complete because they are incomplete.

Creative non-fiction is an ideal form for the book. My intention is to find a story within Berensohn's life story that would be characteristic of the truth by which he lived every day. A masterpiece is made through a series of choices. The choice may be made in an instant or after a long period of introspection and deliberation. However once the choice is made the chisel changes the marble for all time. The next step requires the same deliberation, another instant and the eternal consequence is revealed. Berensohn's life was no different. Sometimes it takes decades to understand the motivations within a choice, or it might take the pages of a book.

Here, through the study of Berensohn's papers at the Smithsonian Institute Archives of American Art, conversations and interviews with those who knew him well in places like Penland School of Crafts, or the Haystack Mountain School of Craft, visits to the site of his farm in Scranton, Pennsylvania, conversations with the family of Neil Lawrence, other scholars who have an interest in the work of M.C. Richards, reading about or meeting Berensohn's peers, and in my own imagination where I've met Berensohn, I'll write a story that he would recognize as his own. At the same time the book can only be "true" if the project causes me to create something new. If I'm very, very quiet, or maybe very, very loud I'll know where to "dig" and find the buried treasure that was Paulus Berensohn, A Natural Life.