

FABULOUS HORSE SHOWS • A GUIDE TO THE EMPIRE STATE GAMES

Hudson Valley

3 Delightful Day Trips

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IDEAS AND RECIPES

THE BIRDMAN OF OSSINING:
ON THE NATURE TRAIL
WITH CHARLIE ROBERTO

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Eyeing Eric David Laxman's art

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Creative Explorer

For sculptor and furniture maker Eric David Laxman, finding the materials that go into his work is part of the fun



Laxman's living room (right), filled with his sleek sculptures and furniture, feels much like a gallery. "Even my more abstract pieces are related to the figure," he says

When the road crew arrived on Eric David Laxman's street and began tearing up the pavement to lay pipes for a new sewage system, the neighbors were miserable. So much noise and dust. And all those rocks. Only Laxman was smiling.

Like a kid in a candy shop, the sculptor foraged among the dug-up diabase (the igneous rocks that are the stuff of the Palisades) looking for suitable specimens for his work, especially shapes reminiscent of human body parts. He trolled for them relentlessly, up and down his road, loading them into his dark green Toyota pickup.

Now they sit outside his home studio, a converted garage in Rockland County, along with sundry other found objects — rebar, parts of fans, twisted pipes, even a monstrous rubber tire "blanket blaster" used in road demolition (courtesy of the bewildered workmen).

"Sometimes this stuff sits here for a long time before I decide what to do with it," Laxman admits, sipping from his ever-present coffee mug. "Other times, I can make very quick decisions and work around the clock 'til something is done."

Known for his sleek sculptures and furniture incorporating stone and metal in sweeping lines, Laxman seems the perfect candidate to live in a glass box or some other ultracontemporary dwelling. So it comes as a surprise to see the cheery yellow Cape Cod he shares with wife Marta Siberio, a freelance consultant for not-for-profit health-care organizations, and five-year-old daughter Sofia. Perched at the top of a windy mountain road in Valley Cottage, the late 19th-century house has all the trappings of cozy domesticity: a white picket fence, pansies in the windowbox, a Staffordshire terrier named César greeting you at the front door, slipper in mouth.

Despite the quaint beamed ceilings, however, the interior feels more like a gallery. A carved marble nude from Laxman's undergrad days sits on an oak table near the entry. A bust of Sofia at 10 months

By Mary Forsell • Photographs by John Fortunato





contrasts with more recent, African-inspired work incorporating found metal and nails. Perhaps most riveting of all is a freestanding sculpture of granite and steel called *Defining Boundaries*. Face it head on, and you notice the twist of the metal and the roughness of the stone. View it from the side and it startles by taking on a human form.

"As much as my work has changed over the years, I've always come back to the figure," observes Laxman. "Even my more abstract pieces are related to the figure."

Laxman's preoccupation with the human body originally took a different form. After graduating from Ramapo High School in 1983, he went on to Tufts University, in suburban Boston, as a premed student. Though everyone in his family was convinced he was going to be a doctor, Laxman had a not-so-secret passion for the visual arts.

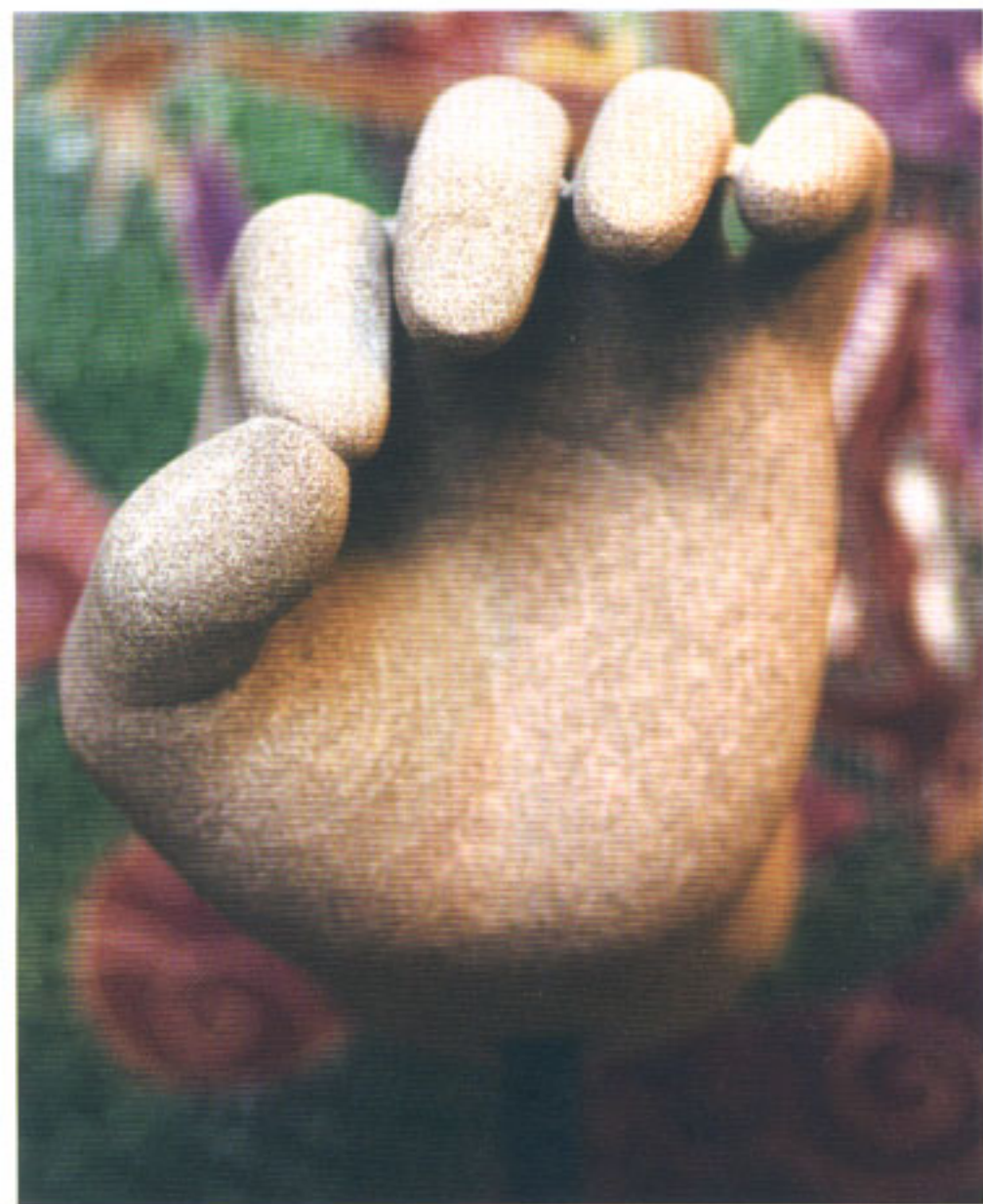
"I really chose Tufts," he says, "because of its affiliation with the School of the Museum of Fine Arts" in Boston. In his junior year, Laxman took a stone carving class taught by B. Amore and was smitten by marble. That summer, he headed to Vermont for a workshop at a marble plant, and emerged a committed sculptor. Despite graduating summa cum laude in 1987 with a bachelor's degree in chemistry and acing the MCAT (Medical College Admission Test), Laxman pursued sculpture at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, where he would study for two and a half years.

"I was in art school at the end of the '80s, the era of Keith Haring and Julian Schnabel, and carving in stone wasn't really fashionable," says Laxman. "My teachers encouraged me not to be so literal. I think all artists start out traditionally because it's most accessible. I was influenced by classical artists like Rodin. But over time I've become more influenced by materials."

His post-art school days are a bit of a blur. A working studio in a converted factory in south Boston. A cross-country trek to "find" himself. A return to Vermont in 1991. The realization that while Vermont has an abun-



Above, Laxman's myriad finds, destined for his sculptures. "Sometimes, this stuff sits here for a long time before I decide what to do with it," he admits. Below, several of his finished works, created in his indoor/outdoor studio (far right)





dance of stone, it does not overflow with single women and a happening social scene. The next year, it was back to Rockland County, where he set up shop in a one-room studio over a garage in Monsey. He calls it "the best decision I ever made."

Like any artist not endowed with a trust fund or patron, Laxman had to make compromises. To avoid having a dreaded full-time job, he worked for a caterer, refinished floors, assisted a faux painter, even taught the Stanley Kaplan course for the MCAT to premed students. "Imagine me with long hair, straight from the dusty sculpture studio, standing up in front of West Point cadets."

The turning point came in the mid-'90s, when Laxman started to explore possibilities for working with metal. A self-taught welder, he experimented with making metal stands for sculpture display. "Other artists admired that I could work with both materials — stone and metal — and encouraged me to combine them in my work." His sculpture began to change. Found-metal parts slowly crept in, wrapping around the stone. At the same time, he was able to take on small-scale commissions for metal furniture.

In the beginning, it was a bed frame here, a coffee table there. But after attending the International Contemporary Furniture Fair at the Javits Center in Manhattan in 1997, Laxman had yet another breakthrough: "I realized I could do this for a living, as a way of supporting myself and not having to do all those odd jobs. To be

When I do have time to sculpt, I really have to push the envelope

beholden to the gallery scene and the commercial side of art is very troublesome. I didn't want to be working on a sculpture wondering if someone's going to buy it and I'll be able to pay my bills."

The furniture-making side of the business took off from the start — at just around the time he met Marta and they bought their home. Commissions for tables, candelabra, chairs, and mirrors for private residences remain a constant, with prices beginning at around \$1,500. There have been commissions as well for outdoor sculpture entirely made of steel. Laxman's work can also be seen in several Manhattan businesses, most notably the awning and interior of Sugar Bar, the restaurant owned by R&B music artists Nick Ashford and Valerie Simpson. His most recent installation was at the Royal Thai Consulate on Manhattan's Upper East Side, where he refurbished the entry doors.

To accommodate his growing business and expand his studio square footage, Laxman recently took space in the Garnerville Arts & Industrial Center, a converted dyeworks factory that dates back to the 1800s and now houses light industry and artists. "Because I'm spending a lot of time with my functional design work rather than pure art sculpture, when I do have time to sculpt I really have to push the envelope," says Laxman. "It's an antidote to all the planning and precision of metalwork. I want to have a sacred place that's just for me."

Now that the roadwork is done, the rocks aren't as plentiful. So Laxman has to keep an eye out. "I found a great granite chunk in a supermarket parking lot. Or I'll be driving with Sofia in the back and spot a great rock on the side of the road and have to get it," says Laxman. "One time I apologized to her, saying, 'Your daddy's a nutcase.' She said, 'No daddy, you're a sculptor.' I was so happy that she gets it." ■

Eric David Laxman's full body of work can be viewed at www.ericlaxman.com.



Laxman with his Staffordshire terrier, César