

VISUAL ARTS

Man of a thousand faces

Having portrayed many characters, Duncan Regehr now produces art of archetypes

BY MARY FRANCES HILL
VANCOUVER SUN

He's been a swarthy Zorro and Count Dracula. He's fought as a gladiator, reigned as a king and haunted as a lovesick ghost.

After four decades of portraying good men and bad on the small and big screens, Duncan Regehr, who sees himself as a visual artist and writer as much as an actor and performer, has discovered a middle ground.

Regehr, who brings the figurative painting series *Cypher* and works from *Helm*, a series of wooden mask or helmet-like sculptures, to the Petley Jones Gallery this week, has tiptoed for years between the ego-driven, social world of the actor and the solitary life of the visual artist.

These days, it's the visual artist who has come out on top.

"It's a multi-functional life, a juggling act, and it has been for the last 40 years," Regehr says on the phone from his studio in Victoria.

Regehr is one busy artist, actor and writer. He's putting the finishing touches on *Scarecrow*, a volume of poetry and drawings set for spring publication. His next movie, an experimental film, was just submitted to the Sundance Film Festival.

The poet and actor counts himself as a visual artist first. Regehr's *Helm* figures reflect the way men in ancient cultures used masks and helmets to convey high status, or construct a new persona altogether.

He based the colourful *Cypher* series of paintings on the idea that we all come from a design that has been determined for us; that we fit into a template that defines our character and destiny.

Tell Regehr you see hints of Spanish history, of Moorish and Islamic influences in *Helm*, and he's quick to laugh. "I've heard everything from Chagall to Van Gogh to various Spanish artists," he says. But he's diplomatic and accepting of armchair art analysts.

"People talk about what they relate to. If you're seeing Moor, it may not have anything to do with my influences at all. So your comments would say more about you than about my work."

Well said. But whatever the observer might take from Regehr's work, be it African or South Pacific influences, what they're all seeing



DEBRA BRASH/CNS FILES

Actor, painter, poet Duncan Regehr works on his latest project, called *Helm* (short for helmet), some inspired by masks worn for his movie roles.

is a history of myth and archetype.

Raised in Victoria, Duncan Regehr was inspired by his artist father to pursue art (last year, he was awarded an honorary doctorate in fine arts from the University of Victoria to recognize his contribution to visual art).

Inspired by Shakespeare and poetry, he started acting at 12 years old, but kept his eye on visual art as the path that would shape his life.

"It never occurred to me I'd be anything other than an artist."

The prolific Regehr has since written books and volumes of poetry, acted and directed at Stratford and appeared in more than 40 films and television shows, most based in the

U.S. But he's quick to stress that his off-camera, more cerebral achievements define him now.

His early studies in literature, psychology and sociology may have planted the seed of obsession that fed his abiding interest in myth, history and archetype.

Regehr counts Joseph Campbell as one of the major influences in his lives as a performer and a visual artist. The notion of the warrior poet, the leader, the philosopher, the chieftain run through his work in *Cypher* and *Helm*.

To prepare for his roles in *The Last Days of Pompeii* mini-series in 1984 and the 1983 series *Wizards and Warriors*, he turned to Camp-

bell's work. The author's writings have been just as useful today.

"Masks are important to the hero, which I've played as an actor. I've worn this armour as a gladiator and as a king, and as a masked crusader."

Regehr has been to Hollywood and back, and he still keeps a residence in southern California. Now in his late 50s, he remains a B.C. boy.

He says he feels more free to explore his work in more depth north of the 49th parallel.

"I've always found it difficult to do the films, or any other work I wanted to do in that kind of environment. Hollywood is a strange entity devoted to show *business*. They don't call it show *art*."

"It's noise and fluff and superficial. I'm not interested. I'm looking for truth."

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At a glance

CYPHER AND HELM: WORKS BY DUNCAN REGEHR

Petley Jones Gallery

Runs to Wednesday Oct. 27 at the Petley Jones Gallery, 2235 Granville St.