



INSIDE THE GALLERY PODCAST – SERIES 3 (2021)

BASKET CASE – NEW YORK MUSEUM of MODERN ART

Transcript of interview:

KEVIN VanHENTENRYCK

Actor (and master sculptor) – Basket Case + sequels:

Tim Stackpool:

Basket Case is a 1982 American horror film written and directed by Frank Henenlotter and produced by Edgar Levins. It features a formerly co-joined twin now separated from his brother, Duane. Duane played by Kevin Van Hentenryck. Duane now carries his significantly deformed twin in a wicker cane basket, hence the film's name. And they both exact revenge on those who separated them years ago against their will. This is a film of a specific genre. And if you don't think you can face the entire movie, then head to the trailer on YouTube. It pretty much sums up what you can expect.

Tim Stackpool:

It's not for everyone but art and independent cinemas across the world in the mid-eighties would screen the film on high rotation. And while the script and production techniques gave the film a narrow and somewhat underground release, it nonetheless quickly became a cult classic so much so that New York's Museum of Modern Art has preserved, restored and digitised the original 16 millimetre print, which was thought to be lost but was found by the director's mum in her attic, and the film now forms part of the permanent collection at New York's Museum of Modern Art alongside priceless early Edison Company silent films and the world's largest collection of DW Griffith's works.

Tim Stackpool:

But in taking the lead role of Duane, Kevin Van Hentenryck found himself at a crossroads of art and faced with a wave of inspiration while having undertaken formal education in acting, his love at the time as it is today was rock carving and sculpting, and a visit to Kevin's website, easily demonstrates his skill and obvious talent to turn out artistically relevant and objectively striking pieces. There's a link to Kevin's work in the description of this podcast episode at [www.insidethegallery.com.au](http://www.insidethegallery.com.au).

Tim Stackpool:

But right now, let's hear about Kevin's attachment to the film and how life during and since then has shaped and inspired his stone carving work. Kevin Van Hentenryck, joining us via Zoom. Welcome to Inside The Gallery.

Kevin Van Hentenryck:

My pleasure. Thank you.

Tim Stackpool:

Now, your history. I think if we want to talk about crossroads and inspiration for your art here, I think your history is so very important. In high school, you were known for your motorcycle racing, an accident, I understand brought that to an end. Then you went into acting, then rock sculpting, which is your passion today. I'm guessing your love of the arts in general took hold very early in your life.

Kevin Van Hentenryck:

You know, my dad used to tell a story. I was five or six and I found a piece of bark from a tree and I saw a face in it and I showed it to him. And my dad was not an art guy. He was a tool guy. And so he didn't see

it. So I went away and got crayons and highlighted the face and brought it back to him. I'm told that he carried that piece of bark in his toolbox for years afterwards.

Tim Stackpool:

Oh lovely. And when you left high school, you got a position at acting college in New York, but you were picking up rocks from urban New York to begin your sculpting out in the street.

Kevin Van Hentenryck:

Yeah. I was attending the American Academy of Dramatic Arts when I went up to the little Carnegie cinema, which was around the corner from Carnegie Hall. It was an art house at the time, they would play Ingmar Bergman and old Fellini films. And they were showing an old Ken Russell film called *The Savage Messiah*, which is a film about an actual sculptor Henri Gaudier, a French carver. Who lived in the time of World War One. And in the course of the film, they show'd an actual sculptor's hands working a block of marble and marble, if it's a soft marble, you can work fairly fast. And I was so turned on by and to the idea of stone as the plastic medium. That pretty much did it for me. And then, so the academy was on Madison between 31st and 30th and on 30th between Madison and Park, which was half a block away was a place called the Sculpture House, which was a sculpture supply place.

Kevin Van Hentenryck:

And so I started walking back and forth and looking in the window and trying to figure it out. And then after a few weeks of doing that, I would walk in and look around and then walk out. And when I thought I had saved up enough money and worked on my nerve enough, I walked in and tortured some poor salesgirl with every question I could imagine regarding stone carving and walked out with a hammer and three basic chisels and I found a stone in the East Village and I set up a work bench under what's now called the Highline.

Tim Stackpool:

The Highline. Yes. Familiar with that. Yes, yes.

Kevin Van Hentenryck:

Which is way trendy now. But in 1975, it was an abandoned derelict neighbourhood. The only people in that area after rush hour in the evening, were the girls on 11th avenue. And I set up a work bench under the elevated railroad. So I was out of the rain and snow and when I first touched steel to stone, I had what you could call a revelation or an epiphany. This was what I was meant to do, that I had angels swirling around my head guiding my hands. And that moment has powered me to today.

Tim Stackpool:

Now I wonder if you still have that piece, Kevin?

Kevin Van Hentenryck:

Oh no. The first piece I tried carving, I completely destroyed. I had no idea what I was doing.

Tim Stackpool:

And so self-taught, I'm guessing.

Kevin Van Hentenryck:

Yes.

Tim Stackpool:

I'm picturing you here in this derelict part of New York, some guy with a workbench chiseling away at rock in the rain and the snow underneath the railway trestle. And yet you feel as if this is what you are meant to do. I mean, could you see it sustaining you for this long?

Kevin Van Hentenryck:

Well at the time, no. I had no idea. I just knew I had to do it.

Tim Stackpool:

You were talking about your acting college, the work came around, you got the role in Basket Case, coming back to crossroads again, do you think, well, perhaps acting is the way I can sustain myself here and then sculpting will just be my love, my hobby? How are you approaching this mentally at that time?

Kevin Van Hentenryck:

I had actually given up acting in favour of the sculpture. I was completely focused on sculpture and Ilze, who is also in the film. She plays the social worker with the glasses. Ilze is responsible for me being in Basket Case. She said, "I know this guy that makes movies, you should meet him." So I said, "Okay." So I went and met Frank and I guess he liked me enough to, I had three extra parts in the film just prior to Basket Case, which was called Flash of the Knife. And he liked the way I worked apparently.

Kevin Van Hentenryck:

It was always done in this case to use student actors because we need the experience. A few months later, I'm not sure how, four or five months maybe he called me up and he said he had this idea for a film and was I interested? And I said, "Yeah, sure." And on the spot on the phone we spend, I don't know, a couple hours on the phone. And he told me the film. When Frank does a pitch, he's like 100% in it. And at the end of it, he said, "What do you think?" I said, "Sign me up."

Tim Stackpool:

Yeah, here's the thing. Okay. So the budget, as I understand it, around \$30 - \$35,000. So you turn the film out. Frank is directing this at some point he indicates to you that his level of interest has waned because he doesn't think anyone's going to see it anyway. It turns into a classic of its genre. Indeed I think it probably creates a whole new genre. And then you as a sculptor, find yourself signed up for two sequels, which had budgets in the millions of dollars. All of a sudden, do you then have to rethink, well, where am I going in my life? Is sculpting still the love or do I really have to give this acting a good shake?

Kevin Van Hentenryck:

Actually, yeah. That's a great question. And even after, if sculpture remained my primary focus but there were a number of times when I went back to acting and tried to give it a shot, tried to get an agent. For example, Basket Case 2 was playing in Manhattan during the daytime at about 13 or 14 theatres. And somewhere in the archive here, I've got a photograph of the marquee with my name on it. And at the same time I was calling up agents trying to find someone that would even speak to me and you get the

standard thing, send in your picture and resume, if we need you, we'll call you. And that was it and I had no patience for that.

Kevin Van Hentenryck:

And I was primarily focused on the sculpture. The thing about acting, there are hundreds of thousands of great actors but not so many who are willing to give up everything for that. Yeah. And that's what it takes that has to be your primary focus and it wasn't. I also had a band in those days and we would play out sporadically and stuff but I was never willing to give up everything else for the band or for acting because my focus was on the sculpting.

Tim Stackpool:

On the sculpting yes. So eventually you moved out of the city in the mid-eighties. Did you miss that vibe when you went?

Kevin Van Hentenryck:

For me New York City was always the love, hate relationship. I never really liked it but you love aspects of it and you hate aspects of it. I had an old Ford pickup truck when we were starting to move. And in those days the trucks, you couldn't lock the hood. So I had a chain that I would put around the hood in order to keep people out and one trip back and forth between the Catskills, we got back late, I was tired, I don't remember but I didn't put the chain on and the very next day my battery was stolen.

Tim Stackpool:

Yeah. Love hate. There's a few clips on YouTube of you playing guitar. Is that still part of your repertoire as well?

Kevin Van Hentenryck:

I play as much as I can but again, the sculpture is my primary focus. When I was 24, I wanted to have a band and tour, record and all that stuff. The guitar for me now is more like a meditation when I'm troubled or angry or not focused, I pick up the guitar and bang on it for a half an hour and I feel better.

Tim Stackpool:

The other thing, just going back to the film, looking at the original Basket Case and as indicated in my introduction, the Museum of Modern Art actually has it as part of their permanent collection, but it's a great time capsule of New York at the time, which is so different I think today. The narrow corridors of the hotel, the narrow corridors, where the doctors' set is. I mean, so much of that. I guess there's still pockets of it in New York but I think one of the reasons why the Museum holds onto it is because it is that great slice of New York, which has pretty much gone. As you say, the gentrification of the areas that you were living in has completely changed so much the urban landscape there.

Kevin Van Hentenryck:

Yeah. I'm so glad that we got a little bit of the old Time Square in because the late seventies was, the mid-seventies to late seventies was the bottom of an economic trough. And New York City was rough in those days. We got threatened, harassed. The scenes in Time Square, we had people coming out and threatening us but we got a little bit of it on film. Yeah. And it's all gone now. Time Square is like Disneyland now.

Tim Stackpool:

And the, I actually did watch the restored print the other night. And it does, it still has that 16 millimetre, original film format look about it. But the blow up to digital actually holds quite firm, I think. But moving on to where you are now, the Catskills, is there greater inspiration for you there rather than the hubbub of the city?

Kevin Van Hentenryck:

Well, I take inspiration from everywhere. Nature, pictures in a magazine, a sunset, I had a few deer run through the yard the other night. It's not so much where you are but how you are where you are, that creates inspiration. You have to be willing to take the moment to look. Someone once said is you need to teach yourself how to really see what you're looking at.

Tim Stackpool:

Yeah. And do you find that much of the inspiration is drawn, I mean, I don't know what your preference is in terms of raw material, whether it's a straight up cut block or whether random pieces of stone that you see and then you see something in that stone that you pick up and then decide what you're going to make from it.

Kevin Van Hentenryck:

Yeah. Depending on the stone there's stones that I've liked the stone and I would set them up on a pedestal as if it was a sculpture but it's still a raw stone and then spend five or 10 years looking at it before I find it. Yeah literally. And the other stones I know right away what I'm going to do with them.

Tim Stackpool:

Yeah. So the inspiration comes in fits and starts or develops over time.

Kevin Van Hentenryck:

Yes.

Tim Stackpool:

I mentioned earlier and asked earlier whether you were self-taught and in any sort of discipline when you are self-taught, there are habits that creep in which could be considered bad habits. Have you gone back in a way to teach yourself or to have someone else give you advice on moving ahead with your art to try and remove any bad habits or bad perspectives that you may have built up over time?

Kevin Van Hentenryck:

What an interesting question, thank you. Well, to backtrack just a bit in the seventies, the late seventies, when I was trying to figure this out, I looked for someone to apprentice with and there was nobody in Manhattan doing figurative stone carving in those days. That was the exact moment that they started up working on the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, which is all the way up uptown. And I was in Tribeca at that moment. And I went there and I met the master builder and the master sculptor and the master Mason and they had a really cool setup going on but the students were carving rectangular blocks at that point. That I already knew how to do that. And they were only paying like six bucks an hour and it was an hour and a quarter commute away. But as far as bad habits, being self-taught, it's hard for me to

know what my bad habits are. One of them that I could tell you is that I've been told by a number of people from art schools that they try to shy away from stone carving because it takes too long.

Kevin Van Hentenryck:

It's too expensive because of that, it's dusty and messy. It takes up too much space, blah, blah, blah. So one of my bad habits is that when I'm working on a piece, I make the highest quality possible. The only priority on that piece. And that is completely counter to our culture right now. And it's one of the things I love most about it. When I was working on the Rip Van Winkle at the summit of Hunter Mountain. I would go early because it was carved in public so people could watch. And I would go early to just have some time to try to figure out what the hell I was doing.

Kevin Van Hentenryck:

This guy comes and he is already plastered, completely plastered, red faced and all. And I'm sitting there with a book and my file and pictures open and I've got a marker in my hand and I'm looking at the lines in the masks and the volumes and all this. And he sees me just sitting there, looking at the stone and his comment was, "Taking a break, hey?" And in fact, that's the hard part of art. Even in stone carving the material removal is relatively rudimentary. The pneumatic tools we use are from the late 1800s, it's over a hundred-year-old technology. The hard part is knowing what material to remove because once you take it out.

Tim Stackpool:

That's right. And I think as you say, the creative process is the sitting around and pondering, not being occupied at the time. Look, there are some artists who do begin any sort of work, whether it is a painting or dance or whatever and begin moving, begin their work and then they just say, "Well, let's see what comes of it." But as you say, unless you really do the planning, once you remove that chip of stone, you're never going to get it back.

Kevin Van Hentenryck:

Yeah.

Tim Stackpool:

Now we have to think about the commercial considerations here of being a successful artist and looking at your website, there are commissions there and commercial work like hand-carved signage. And in terms of making sure that you remain a commercial success and can feed and house yourself, I guess you have to tailor your opportunities towards what's going to make you a buck in the first instance.

Kevin Van Hentenryck:

At certain times, absolutely. Yeah. I started making signs because it was the closest thing to sculpture that I could find in this area. And the way it worked out is about every 20 or 30 cheap signs that I did, I would run into a customer who wanted something really cool or a carved sign. So that's why I chose that sort of endeavour.

Tim Stackpool:

And does it work for you? I mean, obviously you've survived this well.

Kevin Van Hentenryck:

Yeah. I mean, statistically, there's less than 10% of artists that are able to make their living in art. So I guess I'm very lucky in that sense. Fine art always comes with a degree of poverty as a matter of course.

Tim Stackpool:

And plenty of artists certainly do know that and are experienced in that. We think about sculpting in terms of hammers, chisels. I saw a couple of YouTube videos of you with power chisels as well. What else is in your arsenal in terms of creating your art?

Kevin Van Hentenryck:

Well, again, the main thing is being able to see what you're looking at, that's the most important but we also use saws, hammer drills. If you purchase a large block of stone from a quarry, they have these huge saws. They have all kinds of really cool equipment. So you have them cut the block down as much as they are capable of before you get it. There's one piece on the website, it's around stone with the wreath and a tower, a stone tower in the centre. I had that block, they cut all of these angles all around it to make it almost round before they shipped it to me. So that saves me weeks of carving.

Tim Stackpool:

What's your position on the perhaps computerised or mechanical robotic type systems moving into this artistic field?

Kevin Van Hentenryck:

Yeah, that's a cool question. Appropriate for our time and our culture. No, it's not a threat. So I make carved signs. I think you've seen some of them on my website. These are all carved by hand with a hammer and wood chisels. A good friend of mine that I do a lot of business with, has a CNC router to carve signs with, driven by the computer. And I've seen his work and it's beautiful and the computer makes perfect letters. But what the artist does is not perfection, the artist is interpreting. Artist is retelling the story from a perspective, the machine can never do that. I try to make my lines as straight as perfect and the letters as perfectly curved as perfect. And the serifs has detail and finesse as possible but there's always those little handmade variations. That's what gives it that handmade feel.

Tim Stackpool:

Yeah. So mechanical versions become less of a one-off piece of art. And the other thing I guess, is that the love is missing.

Kevin Van Hentenryck:

Yeah, yeah. That has to have a place in the finished product.

Tim Stackpool:

Thinking about more recently. I mean, artists have had challenges all around the world, not just artists but pretty much the entire population because of what we've been through. Have you had any particular challenges over the past 20 months, both in terms of continuing with your art or personally in terms of your mental health and moving ahead while the planet is in such turmoil?

Kevin Van Hentenryck:

Well, I think everyone shares in the distress that a global pandemic produces. We've been very lucky here. First of all, my studio is way out in the middle of nowhere. So during the worst of the pandemic, we would go into a store once a week and a gas station once a week. Other than that, I was just back and forth between the studio. So it didn't devastate me but it eliminated the cashflow, certainly, which was a real issue. The work has completely dried up and still has not come back yet but I'm much more fortunate than many are.

Tim Stackpool:

And I think there's no magic solution to be honest, Kevin. And everyone suffers, I guess, in their own way. Some people have been doing better than others but I guess it's a level of resilience that we all have to recognise that hopefully we have and we can draw upon.

Kevin Van Hentenryck:

Exactly.

Tim Stackpool:

Within your practice. I mean, it appears as though you're also very generous. Now, prior to us going into a pandemic and lockdown, you would offer something like a two-week sculpting course for people every year free of charge. Is that a way of promoting both your art and I guess giving something back or making sure that a type of artistry is not lost to the community.

Kevin Van Hentenryck:

That is exactly what it's about. You'll often hear that sculpture and stone is a lost and dying art form. I can't think of a better way to change that around than to do this class. I mean I learned it by myself. I would be so much further ahead, I believe, if I had some formal instruction at the beginning. When I first started this, the class is called the Hunter Stone Carving Seminar and we have a website for that as well. It's called [freehscs.com](http://freehscs.com). And that stands for the Hunter Stone Carving Seminar. This is our 14th season and we're going to start up again, September 20th through October 2nd, this year. One of the major misconceptions, as I said earlier, the material removal is fairly rudimentary. I've had four year olds carving with a small air hammer in 15 or 20 minutes of instruction.

Kevin Van Hentenryck:

People say, I'm not artistic. So I grab an Oak leaf and we trace it on the stone and I say, do this. And they have a blast because this is something that they would have never imagined they could do and they can carve, we have 20 blocks of stone at the site, they can carve on those and they remain on permanent public display or they can take a small stone and carve that and take it with them. We have people come and do house numbers. We had a couple did their wedding invitation carved in stone, which they then photographed and sent out to everyone.

Tim Stackpool:

Lovely.

Kevin Van Hentenryck:

I had a couple from the south, one of the Carolinas, for a number of years was planning their summer vacation around coming to the class. When I started it, I get a grant for the class every year from, used

to be the Greene County Council on the Arts now it's called CREATE, they've been very generous and I have, oh man, I think it's about 25 local and regional supporters who pitch in to make it happen. For example, my tool supplier, a company called Trow & Holden up in Barre, Vermont. Norm Akley and his crew have been very generous. They lend us a thousand dollars' worth of tools every year to make sure the class happens. So it's a, takes a village to carve stone.

Tim Stackpool:

Yes and it's excellent that you actually have that level of support around you from the commercial interests and from the community itself.

Kevin Van Hentenryck:

What's surprising, when I first applied to the grant, it was just a lark. I presumed I would never get any money for this. So I just fill out the form and then, yeah, yeah, we'll go for this much and we'll do this, that and the next thing. And they gave me money. Then I had to actually figure out how to pull it off. And it's from the first year, it's just taken on a life of its own, which is very rare in art. Art is usually a major uphill battle.

Tim Stackpool:

When it comes to you and a signature piece. Are you still looking for that elusive commission or that elusive piece? What piece of art is missing from your portfolio? I mean, the Rip Van Winkle work is well known and is a hugely heavy piece as well. It's a few tons I understand.

Kevin Van Hentenryck:

Eight tons.

Tim Stackpool:

Eight tons, yeah. But is there another one in your life still to come?

Kevin Van Hentenryck:

Oh I hope so. I couldn't tell you what it is. I mean, I'd love to get a big commission. That would be nice, not to have to always struggle to get by. One of the interesting aspects about the film and I do horror movie conventions often, I get to go out and for a weekend, I'm a movie star. And then I come back here and trying to figure out how to pay for the brakes on my old truck. So a really cool, big job would be nice but we're all a little bit adrift. And it's about, again, really seeing what you're looking at and figuring out how to engage with it. The one project that I would like to do most, is to play Belial, to make Belial a real character because in all of the films so far, Belial has been this raving thing. I did him in the one scene in the second film. And that was interesting but it wasn't done in a way that could be done for a whole film.

Tim Stackpool:

Okay. So let me just, in the introduction, I didn't explain who Belial was but he is the antagonist pretty much in the Basket Case movies. BBT Kevin, he's just like a blob of fat with two arms and sharp teeth. So you're wanting to then, as you played the character of his brother, you then want to personify himself now older with his and he has his own children now, right?

Kevin Van Hentenryck:

11 of the baby Belials survived that night at the police station and they're in their early twenties now and all hell is about to break loose.

Tim Stackpool:

So you've been working on a script, I guess this has been turning around in your head. I don't know for how long, 30 years?

Kevin Van Hentenryck:

Well, a couple of decades. It didn't start right away. But yeah, I've been working on this for a while and it resolves the difficult issues of Basket Case 2 and 3. And we also get to know all of the baby Belials who are adults now, young adults but adults. And there's a confluence of circumstance. They find themselves at this age, at this moment in a situation that is almost unbelievable. It involves a chemical spill at a military base. You can imagine 11 of them plus Belial.

Tim Stackpool:

And thinking of the genre of films that we were so engrossed in seeing at art college back in the eighties at these art cinemas, I'm wondering, this is sounding like a Toxic Avenger meets Basket Case.

Kevin Van Hentenryck:

Yeah. Or what's the David Lynch one, Eraserhead.

Tim Stackpool:

Eraserhead, yes.

Kevin Van Hentenryck:

It would be very different. It's not Basket Case 4. It would be Case 4 because part of the problem with 2 and 3 is the drastic departure from reality. This would be a much more real much grittier film. And it would be completely inclusive of what's going on now in our culture, these 11 baby Belials have partners as well. And we're going to show all the range of his, her, them, they, there's a lot of potential there, I think you see.

Tim Stackpool:

Yes and this conversation now has taken a rather unexpected turn. However, it has given me an idea because we're finishing on a note of film. I would wonder whether I could borrow how James Lipton on Inside the Actors Studio would end his conversations with the various guests that he would have. So I've borrowed a couple of questions from him and I've added a few of my own. So are you happy to go into these quickfire questions that he became famous for?

Kevin Van Hentenryck:

Absolutely.

Tim Stackpool:

Okay. So the time starts now. Your favourite film apart from your own?

Kevin Van Hentenryck:

Frankenstein, a close second to Seventh Seal.

Tim Stackpool:

Oh yes. Your favourite actor?

Kevin Van Hentenryck:

William Fichtner.

Tim Stackpool:

Oh, tell me about William quickly.

Kevin Van Hentenryck:

Oh, if you haven't seen Albino Gator, you must see it. He is one of the best actors around right now.

Tim Stackpool:

And your favorite song?

Kevin Van Hentenryck:

Life on Mars, David Bowie-

Tim Stackpool:

Very good. Your general preference, the Beatles or the Rolling Stones?

Kevin Van Hentenryck:

Oh, Stones of course.

Tim Stackpool:

Automobile or motorbike?

Kevin Van Hentenryck:

A bike. But my pickup truck is a real close second. I need my truck, man.

Tim Stackpool:

Does pineapple ever belong on pizza?

Kevin Van Hentenryck:

Yes.

Tim Stackpool:

One place you'd like to visit but you haven't yet?

Kevin Van Hentenryck:

Italy.

Tim Stackpool:

What's your favourite word?

Kevin Van Hentenryck:

Love.

Tim Stackpool:

What's your least favourite word?

Kevin Van Hentenryck:

Conservative.

Tim Stackpool:

Show your colours there, Kevin. And what sound or noise do you love?

Kevin Van Hentenryck:

Water on stone followed closely by the wind in the pines.

Tim Stackpool:

And the sound or noise that you hate?

Kevin Van Hentenryck:

The whining of brainwashed conservatives.

Tim Stackpool:

What profession, other than your own would you like to attempt?

Kevin Van Hentenryck:

Teach, teach stone carving.

Tim Stackpool:

The biggest surprise you ever got?

Kevin Van Hentenryck:

Fatherhood.

Tim Stackpool:

If you could do it all over again, what would you change?

Kevin Van Hentenryck:

I would do Case 4 sooner.

Tim Stackpool:

It's still on the cards... If heaven exists, what would you like to hear God say when you arrive at the pearly gates?

Kevin Van Hentenryck:

I'm sorry.

Tim Stackpool:

Great. Well look, Kevin, it's been an absolute delight to catch up with you and talk to you particularly about your art and the struggles I guess, that pretty much every artist suffers irrespective of whether there's turmoil in the world or not even just making sure you meet the rent every month is perhaps some of the greatest challenges or the greatest challenge that any artist may have throughout their life and their career. I think it's very comforting actually to hear that someone of the calibre and of the talent of you can relate to all of that as well. And I really appreciate your time talking to us on the podcast today.

Kevin Van Hentenryck:

Oh man, It's my pleasure. Thank you.