That’s fitting for World War I,” quips artist’s model Christian Ashdale. It is detached leg.

A casualty, not of war, but of the artistic process, explains Sabin Howard — the master sculptor behind an extraordinary First World War monument taking shape in Englewood.

“We’re still redesigning on the fly now,” says Howard, who has that leg — literally — in hand. A perfectly good leg. Or anyway, as good as a leg made of Styrofoam covered with a thin coating of Plasteline clay needs to be.

But it no longer seems to work, in the context of the 38 figures that crowd and jostle on the enormous 58-foot-long, 10-foot high tableau he calls “A Soldier’s Journey.” It will have to be redone.” Everything is relational,” Howard says.

“Making art is incredibly stressful at this level, and so this is a mind-body connection that is critical in maintaining the path to your goal,” Howard says.

He himself is fit — he frequently bikes the 10 miles across the George Washington Bridge to his studio, a 100-year-old derelict printing plant with 18-foot ceilings and skylights on South Van Brunt Street.

But the assistant sculptors and models — generally there are eight or nine people around the place at any given time — also work out.

“When they’re not lifting enormous sculpted figures and anchoring them in place, or standing in tortured poses for six hours at a time to model World War I soldiers charging into battle, they’re likely to be found to one side, doing pushups.”

“I keep joking that I want to do a calendar of the sculptors and models with their shirts off,” says Howard’s wife, novelist Traci Slatton, who has been assisting her husband in multiple capacities. “Like those firemen’s calendars. I think we could make some money.”

MEN OF BRONZE

It’s not by accident that a crew of sculpted guys is at work on a mammoth piece of sculpture. The heroic, in art, isn’t in fashion. It hasn’t been for 100 years. But it goes to the heart of Howard’s vision as an artist. It’s a tradition that goes back to Michelangelo and Leonardo. Further — to the ancient Greeks and Romans who inspired them.

“This is very hard physically and mentally — it’s very challenging,” Howard says. And he has, spacious, cluttered, 5,000-square-foot studio bears witness. All the expected stuff is there: Metal wax tools, clay rakes, brushes, everything that has been part of the sculptor’s toolkit from the days of Donatello. But there are also some other, less likely tools.


“This is very hard physically and mentally — it’s very challenging,” Howard says. And he has a tremendous admiration for Michelangelo. And I don’t think I’ve only one who does. Because if you look at the lines that go into the Vatican to see the Sistine Chapel, they extend for maybe six or seven city blocks.”

Sabin Howard sculpts an enormous work in his Englewood studio that will settle in and start making the national World War I monument in Washington D.C. after it is completed. In an era dominated by abstract art, Howard is one of a small group of sculptors who still do art the Renaissance way. The ‘figurative revival’ it’s been called. From left: sculptor Raymond Frech; model Mark Puchinsky; Sabin Howard, model and apprentice Christian Ashdale and sculptor Charlie Mostow.

Formore on Sabin Howard, watch the interview at: njersy.co/sculpture
Such artists saw nobility in the human form. Also the hero’s form. And that was what drove them—as it did Howard, in the 1980s and ’90s—to study anatomy, to hone their craft. “I don’t know if you ever pushed it to the point of becoming a doctor, but I know he did,” Slatton says. “That kind of art is one of the few pure academic disciplines that still is being pursued. Then the individual figures will be assembled, like a steeple, into the whole of a country, to be assembled on-site.”

“We were allowed an execs’ tour,” Slatton says. “Our contract date is Dec. 20, 2023, but I think we’ll be coming in three or four months early. That’s my goal.” That any World War I monument—let alone Howard’s—will be unveiled at Pershing Park is itself a small miracle.

The site, about a mile from the White House, has been fought over by competing groups since the 1930s. It was dubbed Pershing Square in 1957; a statue of Gen. John J. Pershing was dedicated there 25 years later. But it wasn’t until the National World War II memorial opened in Washington in 2004 that there was a big push to create a large-scale memorial to Pershing’s war World War I. Then, Slatton says, he “thought I’d seen it all.”

Howard’s proposal— he was one of 360 entrants in the competition —was awarded the commission. “I was very excited,” he says. “It’s a great honor.”

“We should have a World War I monument,” he says. “Art leads culture,” he says. “It used to be the World War I era.”

“I thought a lot of art is really crap, garbage,” Howard says. “I was one of the ones who thought an abstract expressionist going on at that point.”

“Just walking into it and getting mowed down.”

“‘Art leads culture,’” he says. “I used to be that art showed people what they could do. But today it’s about looking at a piece of art and being elevated in spirit. That is what is needed today in this country. Guidance and direction.”

“That kind of the lineage I feel connected to,” Howard says. “The motion is emotion. That’s what sculpture is.”

Howard’s proposal — and his sculpture —is based on a study of the sculpture of three artists: Leonardo, Michelangelo, and Raphael. And that’s the type of art I wanted to make. I had no idea there was De Kooning and abstract expressionism going on at that point.”

“One of his sons, Brian, has mostly not been taught in schools. He was lucky enough to find mentors: first Walter Fiechter and Antony Visco from the Philadelphia College of Art (now the University of the Arts) and then Paolo Parisi, Caracce in Rome. And so he began to make his own Apollo and Aphrodites. Some of them are on display in his studio.

“All things are possible, he says. “I don’t know if I was ever 19 when I started making art until I was 15, so I had absolutely no clue what was going on around me,” says Howard, now 57. “I thought there were three artists—Leonardo, Michelangelo, and Raphael. And that’s the type of art I wanted to make. I had no idea there was De Kooning and abstract expressionism going on at that point.”

“Just walking into it and getting mowed down.”

“Just walking into it and getting mowed down.”

“Just walking into it and getting mowed down.”

“Just walking into it and getting mowed down.”