

## John Nigh, Student of Life

By Sharon Olmstead

John Nigh is an unusual student at Penn State, Harrisburg. Until several years ago he was a high school drop-out, but next month he will graduate with a bachelor's degree in humanities with plans for an M.A. and Ph.D. Nigh's art and sculpture is respected in the northeastern United States and Canada and by students and faculty on campus. This winter he exhibited his wood sculpture in the Gallery Lounge in the Olmsted building.

In an interview in his North Second Street home in Harrisburg on a sunny, winter day, Nigh, 33, talks about his life and his work. He is a Canadian from Fort Erie, Ontario, a refined, articulate, gentle man with a soothing voice. His blue eyes are penetrating, his hair and beard are a sandy-blond, and his words are chosen with care.

Nigh has prepared hot tea, and his cat, Aloysies stalks around the room. He says he has traveled to Europe four times. On two occasions he lived there for one year, and twice for less than a year. "My love for fine art started in Europe," he says.

While he was in high school, he wrote and directed his own plays and was an advanced piano student. He is also a poet, writer, artist, wood sculptor and craftsman, and photographer. This winter he taught woodworking courses at Messiah College, and went to school full-time, and worked 20-30 hours a week as a production wood-carver. Nigh says he enjoys the diversity of life. "But," he admits, "It's my Achilles' heel."

Nigh is also a father. He talks about his three-year old daughter, Leslie, and what she teaches him. "It's a wonderful education all over again. It's just trying to see through her eyes, observe the things that she observes, and feel that happiness and optimism and vitality that she has."

He stirs his tea, occasionally strokes his cat, and talks about his reserved nature. "I'm not as quiet as other people think," he says. British and American cultures are very different, he says. Canadians are more reserved, but they are friendly, open people, while Americans have energy,

bravado, frankness, a willingness to take chances, and are more experimental.

Nigh says this is reflected in their art. "I have some Canadian friends who are artists who are wonderfully expressive and imaginative, but there is a sense of underlying restraint in their art when you compare it to the sorts of things that artists in California and New York are producing.

"I grew up in a culture where you just did not talk about yourself in a laudatory way. It was considered immodest and improper," he says.

His father is a Mennonite minister and farmer. He was a classics scholar at the University of Toronto and a theologian at McMasters University and was the principal of a private Christian school. "He's quite remarkable," Nigh says.

His mother is an occupational therapist and head of the O.T. department in a city hospital in Ontario. When his father went on sabbatical, he took the family to Europe and the Middle East. His parents are adventuresome, and they visited every little historical site down every dirt road imaginable, he says.

Nigh is pretty adventuresome himself. In the middle of his senior year, he says he dropped out of high school and worked at various jobs to earn money, then went to Europe to live. He calls it his "baptism into life."

reflected in his art, which he says is quiet, contemplative, and understated.

Nigh learned art and art history first-hand as he backpacked and hitchhiked his way around Europe, sometimes sleeping under haystacks.

"The whole aspect of creativity is very important to me," he says, calling himself a passionate amateur artist. But his sculpture has gone the furthest in terms of having matured as an art form and having received critical acclaim, he says.

Nigh has exhibited his sculpture from Toronto to Harrisburg, Houston, Texas, to Long Island, in

"I have always been a little outside life," Nigh says, quoting an Edith Sitwell poem which puts in a nutshell how he has always felt. People he has loved and admired have fit that description too, he says.

It is living "a bit on the fringe," being spontaneous and susceptible to impressions, sensations, and perceptions to both positive and negative things, he says. "You can't do this if you are sheltered in a nice, safe cocoon."

"I can see as I grow older, I'd like more of a cocoon around me--a comfortable environment. But I hope that it never becomes a rigid shelter from the work."

Nigh's photographs have been displayed on campus. He says a photographer, like the artist, should be sensitive to images on a continual basis. "You can't just pick up a camera and go out and take good photographs. There has to be a certain rawness in your receptivity."

He tries to cultivate in himself and values in other people a capacity for taking chances, he says. "Being a little outside of life is a territory that involves risk. You're deliberately rejecting a style of life and an attitude towards life that locks you into a routine and a pattern of living," Nigh says.

He says that most people have gravitated into a comfortable life style, but they have surrendered a vitality about their personality. He doesn't suggest violent, imprudent risk, he says, but a sense of trying to keep alert to the reality around you--and keep yourself susceptible to things.

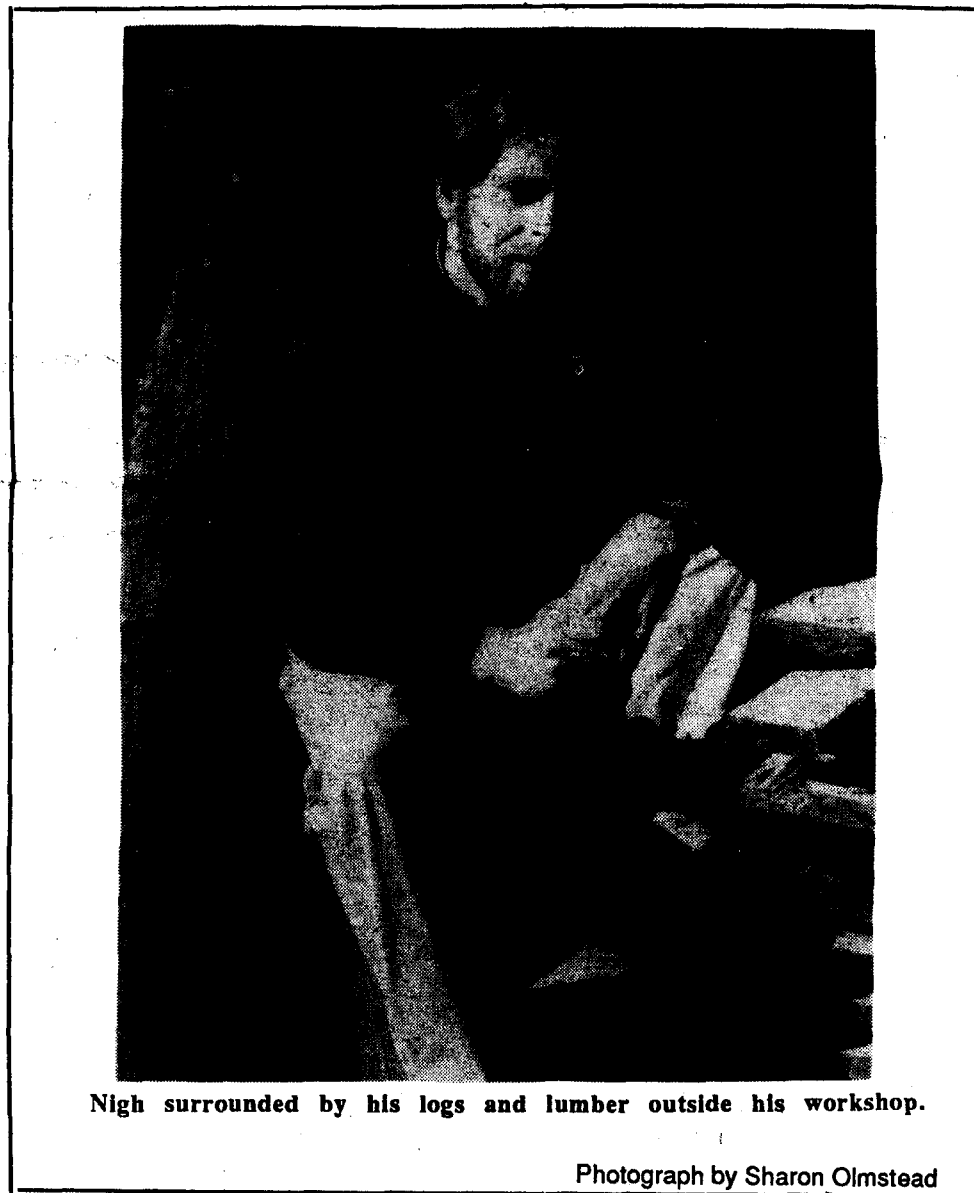
Another quality he values, he says, is sincerity. "When I sense insincerity in someone, I tend to arbitrarily go the other way." He stirs his tea and pauses.

"Definitely, one of my strengths is that I love to laugh! I love humor," he says. His strong sense of humor has helped him acclimate himself to society, he says. "I enjoy it when professors are humorous in class...like Dr. Hagberg. It's a wonderful, added spice to the salad."

"I get that from my Dad. He has one of the best, most subtle senses of humor I have ever encountered," Nigh says. "There's never an occasion that he doesn't have exactly the right story or joke to tell."

He talks about the vulnerability of artists which accompanies the necessary sensitivity for creating. "Artists I know are tough, and they're able to take care of themselves, probably intellectually and emotionally better than most people." He says you "toughen up" as you get older. "It's one of the heavier prices you pay for being an artist--or even pretending to be an artist."

Nigh says he wishes he were a little less absent-minded and more



Nigh surrounded by his logs and lumber outside his workshop.

Photograph by Sharon Olmstead

He spent several months living in a small room with a hard bed on a board in a monastery on the island of Crete. At the monastery, which was a self-sufficient community, Nigh says he learned the art of wood carving as well as a lot about Orthodox theology. The bishop would take Nigh with him as he traveled throughout the island, he says.

Life in the monastery had a great effect on him--the ritualism, symbolism, the traditions in Byzantine art, the icons and the ceremonies--"The romance of it all was very compelling," he says.

"At that point in my life, I was very interested in a sort of contemplative view of life, primarily through ritualistic means. Ritual led me deeper into art, a fact that is strongly

Corning, N.Y. and New England; and locally at Messiah College, the Harrisburg City Government building, and at the Doshi Art Gallery. He says he has given up on making a living from his art.

"I just became burned out with tremendously hard work. You compromise your whole reason for being a craftsman if you have to resort to mechanistic production methods," he says.

Nigh says he wants to continue working as a sculptor. "But I don't want that cloud hanging over me that I've got to sell either craftwork or art to make ends meet." He no longer does craft shows, he says.

His present goal is to get an M.A. and possible at some point Ph.D. to teach studio art and art history.

(continued on pg. 12)