

Big, big sculptures: 'It is what it is'

Former Floridian returns to the state with his large-scale sculpture exhibition

By ELIZABETH KELLAR
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NAPLES — John Henry is used to big. Big is what he creates.

His large-scale sculptures, usually destined for outdoor display, are giant stalks of steel that average 75 to 85 feet and are frequently finished in some sense-sizzling paint — fire engine red, bumblebee yellow or sapphire blue.

And big is how Henry exhibits, too. From October to May, 140 of Henry's large and small sculptures will be showcased throughout Florida as part of "Drawing In Space: The Peninsula Project." Henry's 23-foot sculpture "Sun Devil" has taken a spot of honor at the Naples Museum of Art. It will be the only large-scale sculpture to be displayed indoors as part of the seven-city exhibition.

Some of the Chattanooga, Tenn.-based sculptor's models are also being exhibited at the museum, as well as photographs of his internationally-commissioned works. Several of those remain installed overseas, while others have returned to take part in exhibition.

Three years in the making, The Peninsula Project was prompted by Henry's desire to hold an exhibition of his large pieces. Initially, he said, he thought he would take the traditional approach by holding the exhibition in one city. Then, the former South Florida resident considered the Sunshine State, due to the enigmatic allure of its distinctive shape and size.

"From space, Florida is one of the most recognizable peninsulas," he said.

The sculptor initially planned for five cities to participate, but the project soon swelled to seven: Naples, Miami, Boca Raton, Orlando, Sarasota, Tampa and Tallahassee.

Each of the cities took on a distinctive theme. The Naples exhibit has an international element. The Tampa Museum of Art's exhibition is a collection of his Florida-only pieces and the Orlando Museum of Art is a mini-retrospective of Henry's works. At Tallahassee's Mary Brogan Museum of Art and Science, a miniature sculptor's studio has been built.

Henry hopes art lovers will be able to attend all of exhibits and — ideally — begin in Miami, where the Miami Beach Public Library and The Patricia & Philip Frost Art Museum's exhibits offer information about his artistic process. Then there is the as-yet-unnamed piece he has planned for Miami's Bicentennial Park: It will be a soaring 90 feet tall.

"It kind of grew," Henry said of The Peninsula Project. "And it grew based on people I knew in those places who are movers and shakers in the art community."

For Henry, that must be a long list. He estimates there are more than 300 of his pieces in Florida, either on public display or in private collections. He operated a studio in Miami for 10 years and received the Florida Individual Artists Fellowship in 1990.

Myra Janco Daniels, chairman and CEO of the Philharmonic Center for the Arts, described Henry as being a "giant in the sculpture business."

"I have always thought that if you want to make a statement, see John Henry," Daniels said.

Whether patrons will have positive or negative feelings about Henry's statements, the sculptor can't say: He knows his sleek, stretching sculptures often refuse to answer the question "What is it?"

But to borrow the words of his mentor, "It is what it is," he said.

"Take away whatever's there. Some people will love it, some people will hate it," Henry said of his works. "Some people will come away with expanded horizons, maybe."

Contact Elizabeth Keller at ewendt@comcast.net

