

REACH

Man of Steel

After creating his "giants in motion" for more than 40 years, renowned sculptor John Henry is in greater demand than ever.

By Nancy Henderson

EXHIBITION CITIES

Each city in the Peninsula Project will host one or more exhibitions of Henry's work.

BOCA RATON

Public Site: Mizner Plaza
Museum: Boca Raton Museum of Art

MIAMI

Public Sites: Bicentennial Park, Miami Beach Regional Library
Museum: Frost Art Museum

NAPLES

Museum: Philharmonic Center for the Arts

ORLANDO

Public Site: Loch Haven Park
Museum: Orlando Museum of Art

SARASOTA

Public Site: Sarasota Bayfront Park
Museum: Sarasota Museum of Art

TALLAHASSEE

Public Site: Doug Burnett Park
Museums: The Brogan Museum of Art and Science, The Gallery for Innovation in the Arts

TAMPA

Public Site: MacDill Park
Museum: Tampa Museum of Art

For specific exhibition dates, visit www.peninsulaproject.com.

With a baseball cap pulled over his collar-length white hair and a tape measure strapped to his belt, 65-year-old John Henry looks more like a construction worker than an American icon whose "giants in motion," as his sculptures are often called, have been shown from Korea to Japan to The Netherlands. Right now, he and his 23 employees are scurrying to craft an impossible number of sculptures, models and replicas for *Dancing in Space: The Peninsula Project*, a not-for-profit series of simultaneous exhibits in seven Florida cities (see "Exhibition Cities").

A native Kentuckian, Henry was raised in a family of contractors and architects, learned how to wield a hammer with finesse, and easily grasped basic engineering principles. He built theater sets in high school, and his teachers often called on his talent for sketching.

"Growing up in Lexington when I did, I don't think anybody there knew what an artist was," he recalls. "An artist was someone you read about in a book. So I didn't start to understand any of that, really, until I was already doing it."

As a young man, Henry yearned to fly planes for a living. Armed with a pilot's license and one year of art classes at the University of Kentucky, he married and moved to Seattle, Washington, where he applied at Boeing, Northwest and United airlines. Unable to find a job, he asked his father to ship his painting supplies, and during the 1962 World's Fair, began selling his wares on the streets.

After returning to his home state, graduating from college and winning a Ford Foundation fellowship to the Art Institute in Chicago, he began carving sculptures from stone. Henry soon replaced his chisel with a blowtorch. He mastered acetylene torches and hydraulic cranes, attended metallurgy classes and assembled enormous slabs of aluminum and steel.

Defying Gravity

Before long, the free-thinking sculptor had become a pioneer in Chicago's public art movement. His angled, geometric forms sprang up in parks, playgrounds and public plazas, first in Chicago, then across the United States. Some mimicked landscapes, mountain ranges or mesas. Others gave the illusion of tumbling or were suspended from ceilings like gangly spiders. Henry likened his own abstract sculptures, most painted bright red, blue or yellow, to "gigantic pick-up sticks."

His popularity, like his art, grew to mammoth proportions—a reporter for the *Chicago Daily News* dubbed him "Zeus with a blowtorch"—and Henry launched a tireless crusade to educate the public about sculpture. "Shen Blue" was installed in a park in Shenzhen, China by a labor force that arrived by bicycle each morning to scrape the bare metal by hand. The 47-ton "Symphony in Red" was built at the Neptun Shipyard on the Baltic Sea and transported at night via the autobahn, with full police escort, to Hannover, Germany. To date, Henry has sculpted nearly 2,000 pieces, including those displayed at the Smithsonian Institution, the British



Shen Blue, 2001
Installed in Shenzhen, FL
Photo by Kathryn Litvinoff

Museum in London and Art St. Urban in Switzerland. He is constantly forging new sculptures in his mind.

"When people ask, 'What inspired you to do that?,' I'm always at a loss," Henry says. "Inspiration is in everything you do—people that you meet, the ideas you see, the environment—everything you come in contact with."

To those who dismiss his esoteric creations, he responds, "Abstract art is not about a subject matter. It's not about a memorial. It's not about some incredibly important hidden message. It's about the beauty of an object. And it's about activating space. It's about making space do something."

On the Move

In late 2000, Henry moved his studios from rural Kentucky and glitzy Miami, Florida to a former 55,000-square-foot hosiery mill in an old industrial neighborhood in Chattanooga, Tennessee. Henry was drawn to mid-size Chattanooga for its convenience and culture. He could catch a plane without having to drive through a crowded city and buy steel locally to use in his sculptures. Plus, he felt the city was on the verge of an artistic boon.



Wandering Spirit, 2000
Installed in Sarasota, FL
Photo by Bryan Rosenbaum

REACH

Man of Steel continued...

Henry now owns a menagerie of buildings in Chattanooga, some of which he has leased to architects, artists and other creative professionals, in a sprawling, three-block-long complex now known as John Henry Inc. This isn't the first time he's re-created an entire neighborhood despite the fact that, he says, "I swore I would never do it again." He is now part of a movement to turn the revived Main Street district into a mini-Soho.

Four decades after being thrust into the limelight, Henry is at the top of his game. Granted, he would prefer to spend less time in meetings and more in his studio.

"The life of a sculptor is very different than what most people think it is. There are a lot of things you turn into that you didn't intend and never foresaw," says the man who describes himself as "intense with a laidback side." At the moment, *The Peninsula Project* is consuming much of his time. Each host city—Miami, Boca Raton, Naples, Sarasota, Tampa, Orlando and Tallahassee—will showcase a monumental sculpture in a public venue, plus an exhibit at a local art museum. The time-staggered exhibitions, with some pieces reaching as tall as 90 feet, run through early April.

Although he is not as hands-on as he once was—there is simply too much to be done—he remains involved in every critical aspect. He alone operates the crane that hoists each oversized piece into place. He oversees the fitting of large sections. And he painstakingly inspects each work-in-progress when he's in town.

"I can't imagine building a little model and taking it to a fabricator and just handing it to them and saying, 'I'll be back to see you in three months.' I don't believe in it. I don't think it works. Sculptors play their role in society the same way architects do, the same way musicians do, the same way performers do," he says moments later. "It's another creative activity that adds to the mix of who we are as a culture. If you go back to the Renaissance and take out sculpture, you don't have very much left. No one remembers the names of the gladiators, but they remember the names of the sculptors." ■



For more information on *Drawing in Space: The Peninsula Project*, visit www.peninsulaproject.com. To learn more about John Henry or his work, visit www.johnhenrysculptor.com.