

Wednesday, May 20, 2009

'Poetry in Steel' told in Vail

Four pieces by found-metal sculptor George Tobolowsky are on display on Vail's International Bridge

Vail, CO Colorado



VAIL, Colorado – Early Tuesday morning a bombshell was unloaded on International Bridge in Vail, Colorado. The 200-pound steel bomb casing is part of a sculpture called “Outside the Circle,” which is one of four new steel and stainless steel sculptures installed on the bridge Tuesday. Texas sculptor George Tobolowsky made the pieces, which will stand sentry on the four corners of the bridge, just north of Checkpoint Charlie, for the next year.

“I thought it looked like a torpedo head,” mused Leslie Fordham, the Art in Public Places coordinator for the town of Vail. Fordham watched early Tuesday morning as two of Tobolowsky’s employees – Joe Miller and Mead McGee – installed the nearly 7,000 pounds of sculpture, which they towed for two days on the back of a flat-bed trailer from

Mountain Springs, Texas to Vail. Smaller pieces by Tobolowsky are on display at Masters Gallery in Vail.

The bomb casing, which likely didn’t meet strict specifications and therefore was scrapped, was found in a junkyard, Tobolowsky said over the phone. At the time of the interview, Tobolowsky was heading back to his ranch after “roaming around scrapyards and such,” he said. Asked if he found anything interesting, he replied, “Oh, 900 pounds of stuff. It was kind of a light day.”

On average Tobolowsky and his crew haul around a ton of steel from various junkyards to his 170-acre ranch where longhorn cows roam and large sculptures are fit together like giant abstract puzzles.

There are “spotters” at some of their favorite junkyards – people who “know what we’re looking for and set it aside,” said Miller, who calls himself Tobolowsky’s “left-hand man” (because he has a hook for his right hand). Mostly Tobolowsky lets the pre-bent, molded and punched scraps of steel he collects tell a sculptural story. He doesn’t like to manipulate the pieces very much, he said.

“The important charge is that when I’m working with each found object that it works with the next found object and relates to it size wise, in color or relates to it in what I’m trying to accomplish,” Tobolowsky said. “I can see a piece that doesn’t work before most people can. You have to have the right position, the right angles – that’s the fun of it.”

Made for Vail

Tobolowsky made three of the four sculptures – “Staring at the Green Mountain,” “Mapping the Mountains” and “Outside the Circle” – specifically for Vail, he said. He’s visited the town each year for nearly all 31 years of his married life.

“I’ve watched Vail grow over the years and when I was told I had the bridge, when I was in Vail in early April, I really took a lot of pictures and studied the views from it. I made a few more pieces, hopefully related to the bridge and the view you have from each corner.”

The fourth sculpture, called “Chinese Wall,” was most recently on display at a park in Waco, Texas.

“I thought it matched up nice with the other ones,” he said.

The Art in Public Places board has, for some time, thought International Bridge would make a great site for a cohesive art display, Fordham said. Tobolowsky’s pieces replace Jane Dedecker’s “Elements,” which were popular and there for a year.

“Tobolowsky’s pieces are different,” she said. “They may not be loved because they are not beautiful in the classic sense. They are very much the counterpoint to the Dedecker pieces.”

And while some artwork made from recycled or found objects looks like it might have magically fused together in a large Dumpster, Tobolowsky's pieces are fluid and beautiful. His 2007 exhibit at the Art Museum of Southeast Texas was fittingly titled "Poetry in Steel."

"The welds are like butter, not at all amateur," Fordham said.

Conserving resources is also something Vail values, Fordham said, which was another reason that Tobolowsky's sculptures were attractive.

"It's a way to save a little more of the environment," Tobolowsky said about his use of giant metal scraps. "If I went to bend some of that metal in 'Outside the Circle,' that's already bent, it would take a tremendous amount of energy and power tools to do that. If you can be creative enough, you can take advantage of the energy that's already been spent."