

Denis Curtiss' Sculptures Move But Don't

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KENT — At first glance the large sculptures of animals appear angular. Closer inspection reveals what look like sharp angles are really curves, and shadows are streaks of rust.

"My sculptures are basically optical illusions," said Denis Curtiss. "It's called 'triaxial construction' — each piece has three sides so it can interact with another three-sided piece. The rust makes them polychromatic, adds to the movement."

The pieces, clearly visible on the Curtisses' property off Route 7 just south of Kent Falls, are substantial, and there are a lot of them. You could call it a "metal menagerie" and not get run out of town for gratuitous hyperbole.

"That's a hippo," said Curtiss, gesturing to a large piece of steel hanging from a hook set in the ceiling of his studio. "When it's done it will be about 10 feet across, about 450 to 500 pounds."

The pieces of steel for the large works are cut with a water jet by W.J. Layman and Sons in Warren. "They take my design and they digitize it. They can make whatever size I specify."

He's worked with the company a long time. "They're my guiding light. Whenever I get stuck one of them knows how to help me out."

The smaller figures he fashions himself, using a plasma cutter.

From Cornwall to the South Sea Islands

Curtiss and his wife, Barbara, are a rare combination of footloose world travelers and longtime locals. They are West Cornwall natives and were childhood sweethearts.

"We've been married 36 years, I think. We were in the same class at Cornwall Consolidated School." He laughed. "They had us give the commencement address a few years ago. Same class, married all that time — they'd never heard of such a thing."

In 1976, the Curtisses decided to enter the Peace Corps. They soon found themselves in the Fiji Islands, where they stayed for two years.

"We seem to assimilate into new cultures easily," Curtiss said. "I think it's because we didn't do what tourists and other visitors do, what we're doing in Iraq right now: try and change things to make a little America."

Their island was 38 miles by 3 miles and 3,500 feet high. "No electricity, and everything came out of the river. Everything. Drinking water, cooking, bathing, washing clothes. The first night, we were in our split-bamboo hut, and a rat fell on Barbara's chest. 'What was that?' 'A rat just fell on me. I'm going home now.'

"She didn't."

From Woodworker to 'Dentist'

Curtiss' face lights up when he thinks of his time spent as the fix-it man at a Fijian orphanage. "The school there had a little house for us, but we got robbed every night."

There was an orphanage nearby, and the sisters needed help with maintenance. "So we moved in, continued working at the school and helped out."

The children were Indian kids, unwanted by their parents. "The dentist used to come around once a year and pull teeth. Because I could fix things, I became known as 'Mr. Dentist.' I taught the 2- and 3-year-olds how to clean themselves. After a while they demanded to live where the older kids were, on the grounds that they smelled better.

"One of my finest accomplishments," he added with a grin.

The chief of the island community took an immediate liking to the Curtisses and invited Denis to join the evening ritual of drinking a local root, called yangone.

"It's supposed to be a relaxant," he said. "You had to chug it from a coconut shell while everybody clapped — not like Westerners, with hands flat, but with the hands cupped, to make a hollow sound."

The yangone sessions were a crucial part of village life. "There was no TV or anything; it was an oral culture. I can't imagine what it would be like going into the Peace Corps now, with the new communications, e-mail and so forth. We had only written contact with home, and it was about a two-week turnaround for a letter."

The experience left Curtiss with, among other things, an appreciation for simplicity that is apparent in his sculptures.

The Curtisses returned to the Northwest Corner in 1979, but the travel and teaching itch hadn't subsided. Within a couple of weeks they were off again, this time to the American School outside Athens, Greece. Denis continued teaching his "practical technology." ("If you're going to build a functional item, it should be made as aesthetically perfect as possible.") Barbara became the principal of the middle school.

Then an opportunity came to teach in Saudi Arabia.

"We went in 1983 for one year and stayed 10. The first place, Yanbu, had dirt roads at the time but a lot of plans for refineries. After five years we moved to a different school, this time in the mountains. It was 250 miles to any sort of civilization."

The Saudis were establishing what would be the largest military hospital in the Middle East, and the Curtisses worked with the nascent physicians. "We had full Saudi military clearance — including Barbara. It was very rare for a woman to be granted that kind of status."

Fashioning a Life Back Home

In 1993 they came home for good. "We had no idea what we were going to do, but we bought this property from my parents and I started making wooden figures of dancers. Dancers are still my bread and butter."

Curtiss wanted to do something that could stand outside, however. "Barbara said, 'Why don't you do an Airedale?' So I did." Curtiss pointed to a metal Airedale atop a storage cabinet. "That's Gypsy — the one that started it all."

Barbara Curtiss runs her own business, The Dog Show, specializing in art and antiques with a canine theme.

"Barbara handles my finances; I help her with fixing things and some of the paperwork," said Curtiss. "These are 'we' businesses."