

Downtown sculpture

By Sandra Macias
GAZETTE-JOURNAL

He is back to what's left of the Truckee River. John Battenberg stands on Reno's River Walk, taking it all in.

"This is the most important work I've ever done in my life," he says, sincerely. "After all, how many times does an artist get a whole city block to work with?"

Battenberg, a stocky guy with curly hair who doesn't look his 60 years, smiles as he tours his bronze wildlife.

Battenberg was commissioned to do the River Walk sculptures, the first public art works for the downtown redevelopment area. The cost was \$150,000.

The Bay-area sculptor has done several public art works, but none compare in size to this one.

The Reno project includes 33 bronzes. In the lower-level fountain areas are 12 reliefs of native Nevada animals and 19 fish and fowl fountain heads.

On the two bird baths on the upper level are sculptures of flying ravens.

Battenberg's wildlife sculptures don't look anything like those in a western art gallery. Instead of being a solid statue, they have an open metal framework.

To the layman's eye, the sculptures look like Battenberg gathered pieces of scrap metal and welded them together. But, in fact, the sculptures are one-piece bronzes.

"I wanted each animal to be recognizable, but they are not a picture or a reproduction of the animal," said Battenberg.

Beyond that, Battenberg wanted each sculpture to contain the spirit of the animal or bird. And if you look at them carefully, the spirit is there.

Not one is static. You can almost see the hackles bristling on the snarling coyote. You can almost hear the whoosh of the eagle's powerful wings. The brown bear — Battenberg's favorite — lumbers noisily and the ravens brace wings and feet for a skid landing.

Each piece took on a life of its own during its creation, said Battenberg.

"They actually grew and developed — like the rabbit here. When I first did it, it looked like a sweet little bunny. I couldn't stand it."

But the bunny finally matured into what a Nevada desert rabbit should be:

"Now, you've got a jackrabbit who'll bite you," Battenberg said, snapping his teeth, "and that's what I wanted."

The centerpiece of the River Walk is the waterfall. Behind the wall of water are 19 bronze heads — those of an eagle, duck, and trout all spurring water.

The artist had the most problem with the mallard duck head.

"How do you make a duck spitting water not look like Daffy Duck?" said Battenberg.

Somehow, he did. The fountain duck looks like its cousins bobbing in the shallow Truckee River.

Battenberg did extensive research for the River Walk's menagerie. He visited the San Francisco zoo, the Museum of Natural Science, and university libraries. He also used models for the fountain heads.

"I had an eagle's skull given to me by a Native American," he said. "I got a rainbow trout at the fish market and I just happened to have a stuffed duck. Everybody posed for this."

Wildlife hasn't always been his subject. In the mid-60s, when he first gained national recognition, his work

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John Battenberg
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Meet City 2000

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Hey, Truckee Meadows residents, meet City 2000, aka Reno's arts commission.

City 2000 stands for Culture in the Year 2000, and the nine-member committee is working hard to achieve that goal.

Since its first official meeting nine months ago, the committee has been busy.

"Our main objective is to enhance the cultural life of our community through the development of art programs and projects," said chairperson Kathie Bartlett.

The commission is assisting two downtown redevelopment projects that include public art works.

One will be in Wingfield Park park near the new amphitheater. The other will be in the to-be-built city parking garage. Both projects, totaling \$220,000, are financed by redevelopment money.

However, the commission has its own budget which comes from private grants and room tax money earmarked for tourism-related projects.

Future City 2000 projects, emphasizing art in public places, include:

- Nine moveable mural panels to be placed in front of the closed Riverside, Mapes and Onslow hotel-casinos.

- Decorative banners at each of Reno's cultural sites — i.e. Pioneer Center for the Performing Arts, the Nevada Museum of Arts, the Sierra Arts Center, etc.

- A downtown mural done by senior art students from the University of Nevada, Reno. The site hasn't been determined yet.

The commission also is setting up a grants program to provide city funding to area artists and cultural organizations.

Other goals include developing an arts district and a comprehensive arts plan for Reno.

Anyone interested in working with City 2000, call 334-2255.

was based on an aviator theme. These strong pieces included sculptures of bronze aviator clothes and marble pieces based on World War I aviator gear.

In the '80s, he turned to Native American themes — adding his own unique Battenberg interpretation. The pieces included twig burial structures, charging bison and lone prowling wolves. This, in turn, evolved into his recent wildlife work.

All along, his work has addressed social issues of the times. In the '60s and '70s, his work expressed opposition to war and the cultural bondage of women. Now, in the latter 20th century, his work focuses on the environment.

"I'm into the bigger picture now," he said, "and the bigger picture is the



WET HEADS: Spurting water, bronze heads fit in with the Truckee river. At top, artist John Battenberg in front of another of his works along Reno's new art-decorated River Walk.

planet. The wildlife is the heart of the planet and our future."

Battenberg, originally a mid-westerner, has impressive credentials that include exhibitions, commissions and awards.

He's had more than 200 exhibits,

both solo and group, in the United States and Europe. His pieces are in more than 70 collections, ranging from the Oakland Museum of Art to the Royal Air Force Museum in London.

His academic credits include art school at Oxford University and a

master's degree from Michigan State University.

Before he became a full-time artist, Battenberg taught art for 20 years at San Jose State University. During that period, he had a major role in bringing bronze casting to the United States.

David Parker/Gazette-Journal