

middle of the hill

What Makes Possible the Big Bang of Sculpture Key West?



"My Mordant" by Susan Hodges, steel, plexiglass, series of three



"Fiducium" by Mimi Blessing, ABS plastic, life-sized heads, series of 20



"The End of the World" by Monika Goetz, steel

by Joel Blau

Five miles from the Czech Republic, knocked on Karel Kloupeš's apartment door in the middle of December 2005, saying in effect, "Jim here, where do I stay; where do I get my stone or wood to make my sculpture?" This chance had been concocted at the airport. After the initial shock, Kloupeš soon introduced Emilie to the Czech community in Key West, negotiated with the Indigenous Park staff for the generous donation of two large, ancient pieces of mahogany, and suddenly beamed that Emilie was helping in the park's work during the eight months from the end of one Sculpture Key West exhibit to the next is not usually so dramatic and upsetting as that of Emilie's arrival. But it is just as

busy and unpredictable.

It all started 13 years ago with sculptor Jim Boehm's dream of a sculpture exhibit in Fort Zachary Taylor, where his day job was that of a park employee. After those few years, Jean Carper, the current president of the board of directors, can say: "Take all adolescents, we are going through growth throes. We have had difficulties. But I think we can be a major force on the international art scene."

As valid and exciting as that vision is, it depends on eight months of dedicated nitty-gritty work. As soon as the last artist has taken down the last sculpture in April, several processes begin in more or less the same order: the board of directors is updated, and the event is announced in the

Sculpture Journal. Most artists outside the United States learn about the exhibit through the Web. At the same time, grant proposals are written. While there is a generous membership in the organization, much of the budget is dependent on grants from foundations and individuals. A large part of that money supports the artists, who are responsible for the construction of their work and its transportation to and from Key West.

While Kloupeš, the director of exhibitions, is the most ubiquitous presence throughout this period and during the exhibit itself, the board of directors is active both in planning, soliciting grants, and carrying the direction of the exhibit. The board also oversees the work of the artists and chairs, first Jim Boehm, until a member of the board as founder, then Hal Brown and Vera Vesek, Carol Schneid, Jeffrey Harwell and now

Jean Carper. And a tribute should be given here to the late Bob Crane who was an early and generous supporter. He made a gift to the organization, which is managed through the Community Foundation, and endowed three prizes for artists. For the past four years, the selection of an outside juror with a strong professional background has been a significant early decision. Board member Klaus Weitzen was instrumental in recruiting Mary Ceruti, executive director of the Sculpture Center in Long Island City, as juror for this year. The juror officially visits Key West three times, gives a public lecture, and writes the introduction to the catalogue of the exhibit. The board also oversees the work of the artists and chairs, first Jim Boehm, until a member of the board as founder, then Hal Brown and Vera Vesek, Carol Schneid, Jeffrey Harwell and now

deliberately weighted so that the local community has the dominant role in selection of the art that makes up the exhibit. This year more than a third of the works are by artists working in South Florida, four are by international artists, and the others work in the United States. After the selection, the upcoming event is advertised locally and nationally.

Lynn Smith, a new board member, has organized an art tour to Argentina for April 2008, which is open to the community. Details are available from the Sculpture Key West office at 256-8800.

Change is difficult for any organization. The limiting of available space in Fort Taylor forced a change in the location of the exhibit. Although through a long period of Fort Taylor is still available, the addition of the West Meridian Tower with its lush and beautiful gardens has been a blessing.

Pieces have a context and focus that had often been difficult to achieve before. The loss of the moat at the fort forced the rethinking of where sculpture for water might be placed. This year one piece will be in the lake at the Community College; a mystery sculpture will be in the water at the corner of White and Eisenhower streets. Problems have been transformed into opportunities.

Such creative thinking can be expected from this dedicated staff and board. Sculpture Key West has joined several other cultural organizations — such as the Literary Seminar, the Customs House, the Key West Symphony and Pops, the Red Barn and the West End Community Center — that make our city an important cultural center, bringing us substantial contemporary sculpture, as the logo says, "By Land, by Sea, and Sky." □