

Science and art blend in his sculpture

By Manon Melgaard
special writer

Anyone who has been familiar with sculptor Ronald Leax' work over the past few years will have no doubt as to his interest in, and his knowledge of science.

Constantly absorbed in sculptural techniques that combine with scientific themes, he said, "I am particularly interested in organizing information, whether it's visual or metaphorical."

Leax, who received a master of fine arts degree from Cranbrook Academy in 1980, earlier executed a series of collages based on the format of a butterfly collection.

He later incorporated living materials in his structures, such as weeds, cacti, fish, frogs and lizards.

In his most recent work Leax depicts the immensities of nature vs. the resourcefulness of man in allegorical, symbolic assemblages that are concerned with the many ways man

interacts with nature.

Leax's one-man exhibition at the Hill Gallery, Birmingham includes seven chalk and crayon drawings. For these, he uses an architect's grid of horizontal and vertical lines, on which he places drawings and text.

Typically, one drawing portrays a sphere representing the earth with its molten core, shooting a string of magma toward an erupting volcano; a motif that doubles as two neurons connected by a nerve. The text of the drawings reminds us of the forces of nature, such as earthquakes, storms and oceans, and the network of man's inventions to deal with them, including biology, geology, philosophy and zoology.

Also included is the large, approximately 15-by-15-by-10-foot sculpture/installation "Marquette/Detroit," which was assembled for the "Duet" Buckham Fine Arts Project, curated by Michael Hall. To fulfill the requirements of this project, two artists were sent to two diverse

areas in Michigan, Presque Isle in Marquette and Zug Island in Detroit and asked to create a work relative to their personal responses.

"I was struck by the similarities, not the differences," said Leax, whose installation depicts the present-day reality of the two sites — a juxtaposition between the natural element and man's effect on the environment.

"Iron ore docks and electrical generating plants (Marquette) manifested the same effect as railroad yards (Detroit)."

In Leax's assemblage a black rubber dividing line of simulated books represents the 45th parallel. This is traversed by a red line of neon lighting, and separates two lighted tanks of water — the polluted water of the Detroit River and the purer water of Lake Superior.

Two blackboard slates provide illustrations of the organic basins and river mouths, accompanied by a

text of the climatic changes in the biological geological histories. Samples of rocks, stones and glass are from the actual sites.

This is a striking example of Michigan memorabilia, which should by definition grace the foyer of any large Michigan corporate building.

Leax likes to use textbooks as informational elements. In a 3-by-2-foot sculpture entitled "Deposits," pages of old books are encased in rusty, salt-encrusted steel.

In another small sculpture, "Coring," a cylinder cored out of books is inserted into a block of salt — once

review

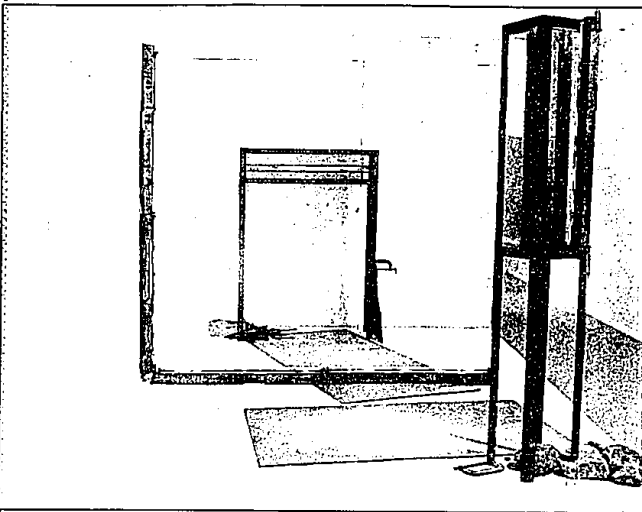
again juxtaposing nature and the actions of man.

As Leax seems to point out — man's wealth of knowledge and activity is a dangerous thing when it even unconsciously or unthinkingly may destroy that from which it derives so much.

While Leax's work is undeniably demanding, it is far from didactic.

He stresses an emphasis on learning and growth as an essential in the process of survival, but presents this in an art frame that is both fresh and visually appealing.

Ronald Leax, sculpture/drawing, continues through July 26 in the Hill Gallery, 163 Townsend, Birmingham. Hours are 11:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday.



DAN DEAN/staff photographer

The sculpture "Marquette/Detroit" is part of Leax's one-man show in Hill Gallery, Birmingham.

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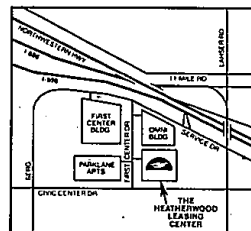
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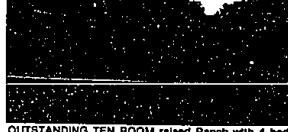
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