



Derek and Lynn Werhner work as a team in the foundry on a country road in Metamora.

Completely suited in asbestos, the Werhners pour molten bronze into logs embedded in the sand filled buckets.

(Staff photos by Corinne Abatt)

Sculptor molds satisfying lifestyle in country

By CORINNE ABATT

Driving down a gravel two-lane country road in the Metamora area, you expect a red barn, barely visible from the car, to house horses.

Or maybe other farm animals, or just hay. But, a sculptor's foundry?

Well, hardly. But, it does. It belongs to Derek Werhner, who completed his masters at Cranbrook Academy of Art in the late '60s.

With the barn, which has a display area and a woodworking shop on the upper level, is a pleasant farmhouse. It is home for Werhner, his two children and wife, Lynn.

It's a good life—the family can be out fishing or canoeing on any number of nearby lakes in a matter of minutes. But, mostly, it is a ideal setting for a sculptor who does all of his own foundry work.

"I think I was the only one in my class at Cranbrook that didn't want a job. I wanted to be a sculptor," Werhner said.

By this he meant, a 40-hour-a-week salaried job, for his career as a full

time sculptor makes demands far beyond those usually expected in the traditional work.

FORTUNATELY, FOR WERHNER, his wife is not only capable, but willing to assist him in the foundry aspect of the creative process.

"We're a team. I couldn't work without her," he said as she put on her hat, face protector and asbestos gloves to check the progress of the bronze being heated in the furnace for pouring.

In what looked like a sandbox just outside the foundry door were three buckets of sand with logs embedded vertically inside.

When the metal reached the desired temperature, the crucible would be lifted, set on a pulley and taken out over the sandbox and the molten bronze poured in over the logs.

It would seep in the crevices and hollow areas of the logs to form an organic-looking bronze casting. Once it set, Werhner would put the logs with bronze into the fire to burn away the remaining pieces of wood.

The castings with their fossillike

appearance will eventually be the center section of a rectangular sculpture with half spheres of polished bronze at each end.

THE COMBINATION of the perfection of spheres and half spheres and the somewhat random cast forms has always intrigued the sculptor. Werhner professes a love of spheres and hemispheres. The big sphere in front of the Hilton in Northfield is Werhner's, and some of his smaller pieces are on display at Robert L. Kidd and Associates Galleries in Birmingham.

One of his most dramatic, a bronze keyhole, five feet in diameter and

eight inches at its thickest point, is in the backyard of his home.

Werhner said the 750 pounds of molten bronze "looked like the sun when the crucible came out of the furnace."

When preparing for this sculpture, he said he challenged himself with the question, "What is the greatest mass I can balance on the smallest point and not make it look like a bull's eye?"

While he does some portrait heads, he refers to these as "stock items" because they can be completed in a day. A large abstract may run three months from conception to finished piece.

But, it is these which provide both

the challenges and the excitement he welcomes.

As he walked around the upper level of the barn where some of his earlier pieces are displayed, he said, "I believe in doing art that creates a feeling."

Later, he continued this aspect of his conversation, saying that a piece of his sculpture doesn't have to always have to be in the foreground of a setting or the owner's consciousness.

"WHY CAN'T it come at you slowly so you will come back again and again to see the color and shadows?"

Werhner's sculpture, or at least the bulk of it, is far from realism. But it has its conceptual roots in nature where rough and gleamingly smooth, organic and inorganic and geometric and random forms are found.

In addition to the considerations of size, color, design and texture, Werhner said a sculpture isn't pleasing unless "you feel it is balanced and harmonious."

He added, "When something's right, it really sings."

As if to further explain his work, he said, "I float equally between freedom and tight control."

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