

# Texas artist shows his exceptional work

By Manon Melgaard  
special writer

Suspended from the ceiling of one of the Cranbrook Museum of Art galleries are two gigantic, approximately 15 foot high surrealistic, fantasy figures. They express a sense of gestural movement and grace with their elongated bodies, arm-like protrusions and paddle-shaped feet or hooves. These sculptures, mainly of wood, are breathtaking.

One, the curvilinear "Woods Angel" in pine and rattan, has whimsical, near-human facial features and

a coronet of wooden "paddles" representing tufts of hair. The more anthropomorphic head of "Man Doing War," done in oak, is pierced by an axe blade and has Cubist, Picasso-like eyes.

This is the work of sculptor James Surls, Texas native son and one of Cranbrook's most illustrious (and colorful) alumni. He received his master of fine art's degree from the academy in 1969 while studying bronze casting under Julius Schmidt.

LOOKING AS THOUGH he might be more comfortable in a buckskin

jacket and a 10-gallon hat rather than a suit and tie, the highly articulate and witty artist sported an Emiliano Zapata mustache and a single earring and wore his black hair in a pinned-up pony tail.

"It was an honor for me to study here," he said, and added with a grin. "As a naive individual from the wilds of Texas suddenly confronted with the formal gardens of Cranbrook, I thought I'd come to Versailles."

Not all of Surls' sculptures are monumental; the exhibit also includes medium-size and smaller floor, wall and pedestal pieces.

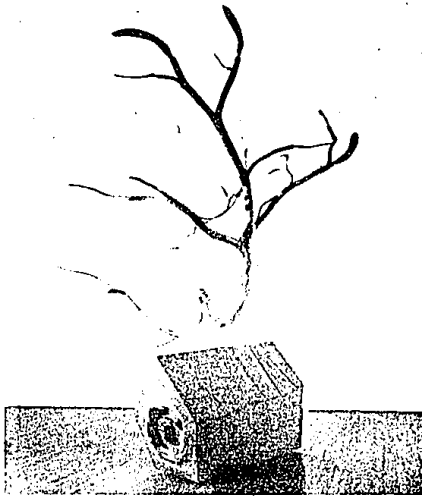
"On Being in the Wind" for example, is a 148 by 132 by 100 inch floor construction of cypress, pine, oak and steel with a solid block base in the form of a woodman's hut, or even a dog kennel. The billowing, wind-swept branch springing from this has the often-occurring Surls' paddle (or petal) burnished shapes at the top and at the tips of the off-shoot branches.

This somewhat signature paddle-petal effect is present in many of his sculptures — in pieces such as "Look and Listen," a whirligig in pine with a steel center; in "Long Distance," redwood and steel, which has an American-Indian motif; and in another stunning piece that resembles the form and pattern of a Mexican candelabra.

Apart from using a blow-torch for burnishing, Surls is not concerned with surface finish. He prefers to derive his forms from the natural configurations of the trunks, limbs, branches and roots of trees he often fells himself.

"But this is not always necessary," he said, "because many of the trees on my property were felled by a recent tornado. Nature eats trees."

The exhibition was organized by Roy Slade, academy president, and Michele Rowe-Shields, administrator of the art museum. It will continue through Jan. 24. Hours are 1-5 p.m. Tuesday-Sunday, 500 Lone Pine, Bloomfield Hills.



"On Being in the Wind," 1984, a sculpture by James Surls, is cypress, pine, oak and steel. It is 148-by-132-by-100 inches.

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Lorelei Christy (left), Kiraal Conley and Kirk Hanley are in the cast of "Alone Together," to be presented by the Farmington Players from Friday, Dec. 4, through Saturday, Dec. 19, at the players barn in Farmington Hills.

The comedy by Laurence Roman is about a middle-age couple whose grown children return home. For ticket information, call 626-5061.

## Ensemble focuses on love

Meadow Brook Estate, the show ensemble of the Oakland University commercial music program, will present a program, "Love in Any Language," for its annual holiday concert. Performances are at 8 p.m. Thursday, Friday and Saturday and at 3 p.m. and 8 p.m. Sunday in Varner Recital Hall on the Oakland University campus.

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