



Nerves Of Steel

For Eustis sculptor Doug Hays, his large-scale works are perfect examples of public art. And after making the hard decision over a decade ago to fulfill a lifelong dream of becoming a professional artist, he wouldn't have it any other way.

By Mary Ann DeSantis • Photos By Kent Weakley

Doug Hays' art in downtown Eustis is hard to miss. Whether it is the eye-catching sculpture of a 10-foot anhinga near the post office or the forged steel arch hanging over McCulloch's Alley, Doug's metal sculptures blend the worlds of art and architecture in this small Central Florida community. His influence became even more noticeable with the September

opening of the Heim/Hays Gallery on North Bay Street, next door to the Bay Street Players Theatre.

Doug is understandably proud of the sleek, open space that showcases his work along with the paintings of large-canvas artist Brenda Heim, with whom he has collaborated for more than 10 years.

"This is a place where we can meet with clients, talk, and brainstorm ideas,"



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he says. "It's also a space where we can promote corporate and civic art projects to the public."

Indeed, bringing art to the public's eye is one of his goals. Doug, who has been described as an art activist, donates much of his time and talent to the Public Arts and Music Committee (PAM) in Eustis. He is presently working on a 14-foot elegant metal sculpture of a Florida heron for the historical Ferran Park near Lake Eustis. PAM is raising money to enhance the fountain in the park's center with a permanent art sculpture that the public can enjoy.

"We would not be where we are without Doug," says PAM committee member Kace Montgomery, who owns the historic Iron Block Building that houses the Heim/Hays Gallery. "He helps perpetuate our goals for a vibrant artistic community and is always behind the scenes, whether serving on committees or just helping to move a piano."

Becoming a mover-and-shaker in the arts community was not in Doug's original career path. Armed with a bachelor's degree in elementary education from the University of Central Florida in 1992, the Paisley, Fla., native worked as a substitute teacher while he learned the craft of blacksmithing.

"I forged and welded little things," he reveals. "The very core of metal sculpturing began in the blacksmithing tradition."

By the end of 1992, Doug had a portfolio to show to designers, architects, and galleries. The self-

taught artist is now represented in more than 400 galleries in the United States as well as in England, the Bahamas, and the Virgin Islands. His elaborate forged steel stair railings grace exclusive homes, including one on the island of Martinique, and his elegant metal sculptures can be seen in upscale neighborhoods like Heathrow near Orlando.

The sculptures and large canvases in the Heim/Hays Gallery are arranged to complement each other. The environment is a relaxing mixture of one-, two-, and three-dimensional visual elements that make visitors relax and take time to think about what they are seeing.

"I purposely do not title the pieces because everyone sees something differently," Doug says. "The idea is to evoke an emotion."

Many of his sculptures have distressed finishes or are covered with a rust patina. Doug starts with brand-new sheets of steel or aluminum and molds them into shapes that often begin as doodles or sketches.

"I spent many years studying how to age and make different patinas and finishes," Doug says. He points to a tar-covered metal sculpture of a horse's head and explains, "This has a lot more texture and character than if I'd just used black paint."

Although many of Doug's pieces in the gallery are abstract sculptures, he is gaining a reputation in the corporate and residential arenas for his commissioned design pieces, including lighting and interior details like stair railings. The Westin Hotel in Palm Beach recently commissioned him to design and install a two-dimensional wall hanging of a large fish. The maquette (meaning "small model") sits on a table near a copy of the original piece.

"I completed the piece in two weeks from concept to finish," he reveals, "but that's rare. It can be months before I finish a piece."

Doug displays and sells the maquettes for \$350 to \$800, while his larger pieces can fetch \$3,500 or more.

While the Heim/Hays gallery offers a peaceful, Zen-like space, Doug describes his working studio in Paisley as "convenient and



industrial." He also enjoys living near the studio.

"When the creative bolt hits," he says with a smile, "you have to be ready to catch it."

After he comes up with a concept and a design, Doug uses both modern technology and traditional blacksmithing to make the piece into a work of art. Computer-aided tools cut the metal sheets of aluminum or steel. When raw bars are needed for the piece, he cuts and heats them to a glowing white before he hammers, twists, and bends them into a final shape.

He then makes a scaled maquette to study the form and structure of the piece. Balance, weight, and wind-load issues



are resolved before he sculpts the larger piece. Once the sculpture is created at its full-size, the piece is polished and small adjustments are made. He then transports the sculpture himself and completes the installation.

Doug admits that being a working artist is living a dream, but it's not always been easy.

"I paid a lot of dues and gained a lot of experience, which all seems to be coming together now," he offers. "That's good, though. You don't want success to come too early because you don't have the strength and stability to carry it through." ●●●

Want To Know More?

For more information about Doug Hays and his art, go to doughaysart.com or visit the Heim/Hays Gallery at 113 North Bay Street in Eustis.

On Exhibit

PAM, a Eustis-based volunteer group, brings art to the public.

Eustis is the only city in Lake County to have public art displayed on its streets, thanks to efforts by the all-volunteer Public Arts and Music Committee (PAM), a non-profit organization formed in September 2000.

"The main purpose of the organization is to make art accessible to the public," explains committee member Kace Montgomery. The group promotes the arts through fundraising programs, public and private donations, and events. PAM is under the umbrella of Eustis Main Street, which is part of the national Main Street Program, and it works closely with the City of Eustis to place distinctive artworks around town.

Thanks to PAM, a stroll through downtown Eustis is an opportunity to see museum-quality public art. The McCulloch Arch designed by Doug Hays changed a once-unsightly alleyway into a delightful walkway reminiscent of Europe. On Magnolia Street, a playful lava-rock sculpture of a mother bear and her cub by Norman Tank reminds wanderers of Lake County's familiar black bears. In September, custom-made banners by local artists flew at almost every street corner before being auctioned off at the 9th Annual Folk Festival in October.

PAM is currently raising funds to enhance the fountain area of historic Ferran Park, which skirts Lake Eustis. Metal sculptor Hays has designed a 14-foot Florida heron to be the focal point of the fountain.

For more information about the Public Arts and Music Committee or the Ferran Park project, visit publicartsandmusic.com or call 352-589-8313.

