

Forging a career in sculpture



CHRIS ROSSI/THE GAZETTE

Sculptor Barton Rubenstein cuts and welds metal in his Chevy Chase studio. A former scientist, Rubenstein says he turned to art in 1994 because he “missed making stuff with my hands.” Although he sees the public arts sector as “booming,” he is cutting costs by buying more of his supplies online.

Public art sector is ‘booming,’ ex-scientist says

BY CHRIS HUNTEMANN
STAFF WRITER

Leaving a career in science to become a full-time artist was easier than it may sound, says Barton Rubenstein.

The Chevy Chase man did just that in 1994 when he put his career as a brain researcher for the Weizmann Institute of Science in Israel on “indefinite hold” to create stainless steel and bronze sculptures. His background in science and engineering, plus knowledge of plumbing and electrical work, has helped him create pieces that incorporate flowing water.

“I missed making stuff with my hands,” Rubenstein said of his career change.

Art played a big role in his boyhood, he said, as his mother was a curator at the Smithsonian Institution.

Today, Rubenstein has more than 40 public art projects on display across the country, including in Ohio, Florida and Missouri. His art can also be found locally, including at Brookside Gardens in Wheaton and The Mansion at Strathmore Hall in North Bethesda, where his pieces “Familia” and “Tower” are on display in its sculpture garden.

President and CEO Eliot Pfanstiehl said he and other Strathmore officials wanted sculptures “that have kinetic movement,” and he described Rubenstein’s pieces as “very contemporary.”

“We like the movement of the water,” Pfanstiehl said of Rubenstein’s work. “It’s not your parents’ iconic, outdoor sculpture.”

Rubenstein said the public art sector is “booming,” as most states have programs to ensure money is allocated for art at projects, such as university expansions.

However, privately commissioned work has “fallen off dramatically,” Rubenstein said, although he had dry spells even before the recent recession.

A commercial art project in Cincinnati that he was preparing to work on was halted because of the recession. Other artists have been similarly hit, he said.

“There are not a lot of people like myself who are doing this full-time,” he said.

The down economy has prompted his family to adopt a more “frugal” lifestyle in the past year, he said.

He’s also taken that cost-cutting mindset to his profession, where his expenses can run into “tens of thousands” of dollars; he charges



WATCH THE VIDEO

Chevy Chase artist Barton Rubenstein does wonders with stainless steel and bronze. www.gazette.net/video

from \$30,000 for smaller, private pieces to upward of \$500,000 for major public works.

The Internet has made bidding for supplies “much more competitive,” he said. He used to purchase stainless steel exclusively from one provider, but he now combs the Web daily to find the best prices.

“I can type in ‘bronze rod’ and get five different manufacturers,” Rubenstein said. “I’ve saved hundreds or thousands of dollars.”