

Maryland sculptor uses remnants of fallen trees to make his signature art

In 1983, Brent Crothers moved full-time into the forest. He had purchased property in a wooded section of Harford County four years earlier and had been busy clearing away the vines and brush that overwhelmed the property. He even had to build a quarter-mile access road.

At the time, Crothers, who is in his mid-fifties, says he was working at “three or four trades” – carpentry and plumbing, among them. But he wasn’t satisfied. He started “making things,” which led him to enroll in a sculpture class at Harford Community College. After he completed one project, he recalls an instructor telling him that it was the best piece created at the school during the past 25 years. His wake-up call had come.

Crothers soon enrolled in more sculpture classes. And, in 1985, he began three years of study at the Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA) in Baltimore. He was thriving. In 1988, he received a scholarship to the Skowhegan School of Painting & Sculpture in Maine, a program well connected with the New York art community.

He began showing his work in 1990 at places like the School 33 Art Center and Maryland Art Place, both in Baltimore. Within a few years, his sculpture was on exhibit in Washington, D.C., and Philadelphia.

As he wrapped up the program at MICA and taught a few classes, he decided to continue his studies on a graduate level. He subsequently earned a master’s degree in 2003 from MICA’s Rinehart School of Sculpture. He also received a monetary award that he used to build a studio. He had been working out of a trailer. “I couldn’t make anything bigger than 7-ft. tall in there,” he says.

His sculpture, meanwhile, was emerging with a definitive style. Early on, he tended to use organic materials, like pieces of trees and vines, along with discarded items that he’d find while cleaning up his property. To make something with pieces of vine, for instance, seemed to be both practical and environmentally smart.

Tapping into inter-connectedness

Sometimes he’d get an idea and look for materials that would convey the concept. Other times, he’d find something of interest – a piece of a tree, for instance – and let that determine where he was going. “Art comes out of personal relationship to things,” he says. “There’s an inter-connectedness with everything.

Whether you're talking spiritual, political, social or environmental – there's a relationship. They all merge together." For Crothers, creating art from random items in the environment is a way to express these relationships.

"My art is non-representational. It's more representative of ideas – it's not literal." At the same time, he adds, anyone – whether they know anything about art or not – can appreciate his art. People can also relate to his work, he says, because of the scale he tends to use for his pieces – "they're 5½-, 6-, 7-, and 8-ft. tall."

To ensure that his artwork gets a response – "positive or negative" – Crothers "takes titles seriously." They should be "open-ended – sometimes playful, sometimes satirical." When he was just starting out, he had a number of pieces that he labeled "Untitled." Perhaps, it was indicative of avoiding commitment, he says. His online galleries show sculpture with such names as "Frustration to Creation," "Why Care?" "Council of Elders" and "No Boundaries."

He will re-work a title if it's not working for him; sometimes it's simply a matter of tweaking. Ideally, a viewer of his artwork, he says, will use the title as a springboard to take another look at a piece and discover new layers of meaning.

Crothers sums up his approach to making sculpture: "It's my response to life situations." He identifies two major influences – Sept. 11 and personal health issues. Sept. 11 occurred two weeks after he began his graduate program and became an ever-present force in his sculpture.

Regarding his health, he says he's just getting past a five- to seven-year period of rough going. "There were times when just walking out to my studio was an effort. Working for a half-hour would be great." To satisfy his creative needs during those periods, he worked on smaller projects – like soldering keys into shapes. Some of them became "sketches" for more elaborate projects. Often, they weren't complete ideas.

Peace signs

On his web site is a gallery of images called "After the 11th." In it are images of his work with these titles: "The Cave," "Who Broke the World," and "The Mound." His sculpture "The Mound" is actually a 5-ft. high by 16-ft. wide pile of peace signs that he created out of tire sidewalls and metal – some with copper piping. The sidewalls frame the metal-shaped lines that form the peace signs.

"I wanted to create one for each victim of Sept. 11, but I burnt out after 700 of them." Placing them all in a single heap

was a powerful message for him. It evoked images of dead body parts from the Holocaust. The remnants of tires related to cars, which, to him, linked to global oil interests. Also, calling the collection a "mound," instead of a "pile," seemed to resonate more, he explains.

Before Sept. 11, Crothers never would have considered using peace signs in his work. The event, he says, prompted him to "merge my thoughts about the environment and the need for peace in the world."

The lines in a peace sign continue to pique his interest – he once heard that the configuration of the lines suggest a fallen cross. In fact, Crothers goes beyond two dimensions in his focus on this design. Well before he started with peace signs, he often found inspiration in toppled trees that littered his property.

Y's of trees

"I work a lot with the Y's or the crotch of a tree," he says, describing how he uses tree pieces that present a physical Y shape. The splits, or Y's, are a yin and yang representation for him. "They are black and white, left and right, right and wrong." And when he inverts them, it's "either for function or another layer of meaning."

All of this led onlookers to label Crothers an environmental artist, especially early in

his career. In 1990, after Crothers had earned his undergraduate degree from MICA, he received an invitation from the school to participate in an Earth Day event. The fact that he was a working artist who used materials he'd find in the environment likely enhanced his appeal as an Earth Day speaker.

While considering the meaning of Earth Day, he started to think that "maybe we haven't progressed as much as we think we have." He recognized tinges of his frustration with the subject and then, as he sometimes does, he began to "wrestle with the materials." It was his way of immersing himself physically while grappling with an idea.

"I took the iron rim of an old wagon wheel – from a 19th-century wagon – and I jammed as many locust logs as I could into (the space within) it," he says. (Locust logs are a hard wood, he says, which made them ideal for old-time fence posts.) "It was like stuffing seven fingers into one ring." After banging the logs in with a sledgehammer, he used a chain saw to round off the ends and create a globe. "I called it 'Earth Day Not Yet.'"

These days, making art is his top priority. On the side, he has a small contracting business in which he works on projects that range from an occasional kitchen renovation to creating interior wood trim to plumbing jobs. It allows him to be

flexible with his time. Some of his clients are also artists, making it easier to explain if he has to shift his attention to an art-related matter.

Off to China

For instance, he recently went to New York to ship four pieces of his sculpture to Beijing. An artist friend now residing in Seoul, Korea, tipped him off to what has emerged as a vibrant arts scene in the Chinese capital. "All the big artists have studios there" – prices for block-long studios are inexpensive – he says, which means a substantial pool of buyers and collectors.

Among the pieces that Crothers shipped was a 6-ft. tall cedar tree that was translated – transformed through a costly kiln-type of process – into bronze. The tree is the handle of a shovel. It's from his "Digging Our Own Grave" series. Bronzed versions are called "Still Digging Our Own Grave."

Crothers received his fourth *Individual Artist Award* from the Maryland State Arts Council this year. He was previously selected in 1991, 1995 and 1997. His work has been shown in 10 states and the District of Columbia. It is in an assortment of public and private collections, including the Delaware Art Museum, Corcoran Museum of Art and the Hechinger Collection in Largo.

He lives in Harford County with his wife Gina Pierleoni and their 14-year-old son, Trane Crothers. Pierleoni is a painter and mixed-media artist, who teaches at Harford Community College. She is a three-time recipient of the Arts Council's *Individual Artist Award*.

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Story by Gerald H. Levin

Maryland State Arts Council