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PUBLIC ART ON THE CAMPUS OF MANKATO STATE UNIVERSITY

Preface

The following illucidations pertain to the two sculptures currently on display on the campus of Mankato State University, formerly named Mankato State College, which I made during my tenure as Artist-in-Residence, 1968-1980.

#1. CHTHONIC

Medium: polyurethane foam over a metal inner structure on a concrete base. It was decided to make the sculpture of polyurethane after I discovered that the lowest bid for bronze was from a foundry in England which quoted $40.000, and no funds for that amount were available.

Year: Approximately 1972
Overall depth: 5'3"
Overall width: 9'0"
Overall height: 11'2"

Historical information: While I was a graduate student in Art Education at the George Williams University in Montreal, Canada, in 1968, I received an invitation to become Artist-in-Residence at Mankato State College. I was invited by the then President of the College, Dr. James Nickerson, and Dr. Kent Alm, Vice-President for Academic Affairs. After a visit to the College and informed about the conditions of my employment, I accepted the invitation and moved with my family to Mankato shortly after my graduation in 1968.

The administration of the College asked upon my arrival whether I would be willing to make a monumental sculpture for the campus. I agreed and made a fibreglass and resin model for the Cthonic sculpture. Upon completion of the model I was asked what would be the proper place on the campus to display the finished sculpture. I suggested between the Library and the Student Union. Neither Phase II of the Student Union or the fountain did exist at the time. The areas in front of Armstrong Hall and Morris Hall was just a closed-off street called Ellis Avenue.

I was informed that at that spot a fountain was to be constructed, but if my overall proposal was superior they would go along with my design. I then proceeded to make a model of the area between the two buildings. I designed a small hill with a hyper-
bola on either side and parallel with the two buildings. The hyperbolas would have cement benches and provisions would be made to install temporary sound reflecting screens for outdoor performances. On top of the low hill my sculpture would be installed and a tunnel would be dug through the hill so students and faculty could reach either one of the buildings in inclement weather. In addition, I designed a series of wooden pergolas with plants growing against them and back to back benches for students and faculty to sit on and interact.

Despite support by the MSC's administration, the idea was rejected by the then state architect whose name, I believe, was Hansen, and who considered the whole thing an infringement upon his superior wisdom and a rejection of his idea which was a fountain in the center of some small square cement steps and nothing else. The only concession they did eventually to my design was to expand and widen the steps to the present design and made them oval instead of rectangular.

In addition to the above there was another issue to consider. In 1965 a World Fair was held in New York, without the permission and sanction of the International Committee of World Fairs, located in Paris. The New York Fair failed miserable, despite a concerted effort to make it more attractive. Among several entertainers hired to boost attendance was Elvis Presley, but to no avail. The American pavilion consisted of a gigantic globe made of steel ribs and representing the world, with the various continents cut from large sheets of steel. The whole structure was supported by a large, vertical steel pole. Underneath the globe was a fountain consisting of steel pipes of various lengths from which the water squirted upward and which were arranged in a spiral fashion, with upward tapering water columns, the highest one near the central pole. The administration of the College, including the Director of the Physical Plant Department, had bought already the fountain part of the structure prior to my employment. I pointed out to the administration that: 1. fountains are designed with a certain place in mind and not bought at a scrap yard 2. A much better place would be the middle of Ellis Avenue, so the fountain could be seen from a distance and not squeezed between two buildings, 3. The spiral effect, if at all noticeable, would make little sense without the globe "floating" above it, and 4. the pipe structure would be vulnerable to pranks and vandalism. It should be realized that the pump at the time was not located in the center of the structure but on the side of the basin, on ground level, near the Student Union.

In a year or so, my prediction was realized. Someone stuffed some sweatshirts into the pump and it was damaged beyond repair. I was informed that another pump at the same spot would cost too much and it was decided to place a new and cheaper pump in the center of the fountain. To protect the new pump a blue painted garbage can was placed on an angle on top of the pump. That monstrosity disgraced the campus for many years.
The then sculptor instructor of the Art Department, Roger Johnson, upon someone's request, designed the sculpture currently in place in the fountain. The model for the sculpture was initially rejected by a committee of "aesthetic experts" from various MSC departments (sic!), and I was again approached to create another model for a sculpture. I did and my design was accepted by the committee.

Over a year passed by and nothing had happened. The blue plastic garbage can continued to grace the fountain! When I inquired about any progress in the matter I was informed that, after all, they would go ahead with Roger Johnson's design. No further explanations were given. The fountain sculpture was constructed and put in place in 1975.

We then decided to place CTHONIC where it is located now. A cement slab was poured, and protruding from it a steel pipe structure in the shape of a reversed "U" constructed. A three-sided box with a "lid" on top, and constructed of 3/4" plywood, was placed around the structure and the space was foamed in with 2 lbs. polyurethane foam. I then proceeded to carve out the sculpture with large knives and rasps. When I was finished with the carving part, the whole sculpture was covered with a layer of 22 lbs. polyurethane foam which has about the hardness of an oak plank. The sculpture was finished with several layers of a special paint. Over the years the sculpture has been repainted several times.

CTHONIC: the design.

The design of the sculpture symbolizes an institution of higher learning. At any time there is the institution itself (the largest segment) with its faculty, library, support services, buildings, etc. At the same time there is the student body (represented by the smaller segment) which brings along the ideas of a new generation. The dynamism (sometimes the tension) between the two bodies is what maintains the viability of a College or University. The two entities support each other. One cannot do without the other. The title "chthonic" is derived from the ancient Greeks and refers to the primeval shapes I employed in the sculpture.

#2 WAVES

Year: 1969

Overall depth: 4'3"

Overall width: 11'9"

Overall height: 9'4"

Medium: Painted steel

Historical Information: The sculpture was built in commemoration
of Jerry Berger, a graduate student in English who was killed in an industrial accident in 1969. He was one of the many students who visited my studio in the Student Union almost daily. I considered him a friend. He had a part-time job hauling corn to the Twin City with a dumptruck. One day the hydraulic cylinder lift which lifts the dump box malfunctioned while the dump box was in the upright position. Jerry volunteered to loosen the lift and the dump box came down on him. He screamed for three hours and then died. He left a wife and two infant daughters behind.

Shortly after that, Jerry’s family from New York came for a visit. They spoke at length to me about Jerry and suggested that they would pay for a flowerbed to commemorate him. I pointed out to them that, although their suggestion was a fine one, problems may arise when in the future perhaps another building would have to be erected at that spot or one of the existing buildings needed to be extended. I then asked them if they would be willing to pay for the construction of a sculpture I had designed for the campus. My design would be free. They agreed and the sculpture was made in Mankato at Jones Sheet Metal. Its original location was where currently the Administration Building is located. The sculpture was moved in 1979 and moved again recently to its current location.

WAVES: the design.

The sculpture symbolizes a segment of an ocean, or sea. I was born a few miles from the North Sea in Amsterdam, The Netherlands. Philosophically, oceans combine the static and the dynamic. At any time there is a "Pacific", or "Atlantic" ocean, arguably the static part, although it is more an abstract concept than a clearly defined entity. At no two moments in history, however, is the ocean the same. The waves form infinite patterns throughout history, forever changing, the dynamic part. I consider this to be also true of any institution of higher learning. At any time in its existence, a College or University has a static part: faculty, buildings, library, academic progress to that point, grounds, etc. At the same time there is a dynamic part: new ideas, concepts, research, changes of any kind, etc. Again, it is the dynamism between these two factors which maintains the viability of the institution.