

Irony ingrained in artist's commentary on Whirlpool, NAFTA, imported refrigerators

SculptEVV opens Saturday in city's Arts District

By Roger McBain

Thursday, June 13, 2013

EVANSVILLE

Irony runs through the very grain of the wood encasing Shawn Skabelund's entry in this year's Sculpt EVV public art exhibition.

Skabelund, one of 10 finalists represented in the 10-month exhibition opening Saturday in the Arts District, considered buying wood in Evansville to crate up the Whirlpool refrigerator in his entry, titled: "NAFTA's Gift," but artistic intuition intervened.

"Something kept telling me to buy the wood from my local supplier there in Flagstaff, Ariz.," he said.

It turns out, his intuition led the artist to discover another level of ingrained irony in his three-dimensional commentary on Whirlpool's decision to close its Evansville refrigerator line, shifting jobs from to Mexico under the North American Free Trade Agreement among Canada, the United States and Mexico.

When Skabelund ordered the Ponderosa pine planks for the piece, the millwright at his local lumber outlet had a story for him.

"He told me that the majority of wood being cut in that part of Arizona is Ponderosa pine, and the majority of that wood is mainly being bought up by manufacturing companies in Mexico," Skabelund said.

Those companies build wooden pallets and crates for American manufacturing companies operating south of the border to ship products back to stores and consumers in the United States.

"I thought that was quite an ironic story," said the artist. "It brings us full circle, and it ties Evansville in with where I come from, Flagstaff."

Skabelund intended the irony in the labeling. The crate's address label shows that the refrigerator comes from a Mexican factory and is being shipped to Evansville's former Whirlpool plant. Affixed to the refrigerator itself hang copies of a 2009 letter notifying Whirlpool employees of Evansville line's closing.

Aided by Adrian and Chiara Rose Skabelund, his son and daughter, the artist spent much of Thursday anchoring and assembling the pine pallet and crating for “NAFTA’s Gift” on a 4-foot-square concrete pad poured next to the sidewalk on SE Second St., between Jefferson and Adams avenues.

Around the corner, Scott Westphal of Indianapolis worked with a team of equipment operators and helpers unloading, erecting and securing five curvy, 12-foot-tall steel I-beams in a 14-foot-wide grouping. Westphal’s “Elements” looks like an ensemble of dancing figures, drawing attention not only to his own sculpture, but to those of two other artists with work on Jefferson Avenue.

Just beyond the dancing I-beams, “The Long Toss,” a collection of open spheres, welded from rusted steel scrap by artist John Anderson-Bricker of Dubuque, Iowa, lay scattered across a vacant, grassy lot.

Beyond that, Saul Melman and a team of helpers worked around a slender tree they’d planted the day before. Thursday morning they positioned the Styrofoam and wooden form for the contoured concrete plinth, or pedestal, that would surround “1 Maple,” the Brooklyn, N.Y., artist’s visual reference to a red maple that, like the house that once occupied the site, had been removed.

Over on Adams Avenue, Melissa Johnson already had assembled “What’s On TV,” a quartet of mirror-screened televisions arranged atop a circular wooden picnic table.

Today, several more finalists’s works will go up along Adams, to be ready for Saturday’s Sculpt EVV Music Fest and Art Fair.