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What started out as an attempt to fill a dent in this Harley Davidson motorcycle tank ended up as rideable art work by Hugoton art teacher Robert Terrill, who is displaying the bike at Baker Arts Center during the Art From The Heartland exhibit opening Saturday.

Hugoton teacher brings rideable sculpture to Baker Arts

By RACHEL COLEMAN

• Leader & Times

Most of the art that finds its way into the gallery at Baker Arts Center arrives in crates. The sculpture that arrived Monday evening came on two wheels — and it required a ramp.

“I’ve seen too many videos on YouTube of people trying to move their bikes up those skinny little ramps,” said artist and motorcycle owner Robert Terrill of Hugoton. “It’s not a good idea.”



Terrill was collaborating with Baker Arts art director Diane Marsh and her husband, Liberal High School art teacher Gary, to wrangle his 2008 Harley Davidson Fat Bob into the center. Terrill had turned his favorite mode of transportation into a display-worthy art piece after he took a spill on the bike.

“I dented the gas tank,” he recalled. In the process of making repairs, “I discovered a new and emerging field of motorcycle customization going on with three-dimensional sculpture. I also discovered that there is no kit, no one to show you how to do it, no workshops, no how-to publications.”

For two years, Terrill worked with materials to figure out what to do on his own, “trial and error,” he said. He wanted the final work to be art, but he was unwilling to give up the qualities that make a Harley Davidson desirable.

“I love to ride daily, I wanted it to be durable enough to be ridden at any time and to be able to handle the elements and rigors of the road,” he said. The repaired, sculptured Harley has logged 8,000 miles since Terrill completed the project.

When the bike is parked, bystanders can view Terrill's sculpture. Faces — moulded in glittery black epoxy and polyurethane resin — appear almost molten. They grimace and scream from the gas tank and the area behind the seat. The effect echoes that of medieval stonework, gargoyles in particular. Or it could be that the effects of speed and wind have “warped” the faces.

Monday afternoon, Terrill's face mirrored his sculptures in intensity as he and Gary Marsh arranged a temporary ramp of brick, concrete block and plywood at the art center's back entrance. As the two discussed how much weight the sheets of wood could bear, they got out the drill and added reinforcements.

In the end, Terrill wheeled his Fat Bob out of the Baker Arts storage and kiln shed, gunned the engine, and drove it up the ramp. Then it was on to the center's southeast gallery, where the Harley came to a stop on the polished wood floor. The smell of gasoline permeated the mostly-empty space.

“You have a kickstand?” asked Diane Marsh as she contemplated the overall effect of the motorcycle art.

Terrill, an art teacher, has worked in the Hugoton school district for 13 years. He teaches grades four through eight, working with about 140 students each day.



“I enjoy working with the children of Hugoton, and teaching art to these young people,” he stated. “Where I am, I get a lot of the same students each year. I get to work with them and watch them grow and become more skilled and talented each year, and see them go on to be responsible adults.”

One take-away lesson the students might glean from Terrill is the practicality of art. A native of Burr Oak (near the Kansas-Nebraska border), Terrill expressed interest in art from early childhood onward.

After graduation from White Rock High School in 1991, he attended Fort Hays State University, where he earned bachelors and masters degrees in printmaking.

Since his arrival in Hugoton, Terrill said, he has worked in many different media — printmaking, drawing, painting and sculpture. His most recent work has been in photorealistic pencil drawing, and three-dimensional design for motorcycles.

“For many years, I have worked on my visions with drawing and printing and a little bit of ceramics now and then,” he said. “It is a great thing that never gets dull or old.”

Terrill’s motorcycle is on display at Baker as part of the “Art from the Heartland” exhibit, featuring work by five Hugoton artists: Robert Veatch, Judy Sittingdown Clark, Jan Black and Roger Lynch. Works include paintings, drawings, sculpture, woodwork and lithographs.

An opening reception of the exhibit “Art from the Heartland,” will be from 2 to 5 p.m. Saturday at Baker Arts, 624 N. Pershing in Liberal. The exhibit will run from through Feb. 22. Gallery hours are 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday through Friday, Saturdays by appointment and closed on Sunday and Monday.

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