Sculpting the Future: New Public Art Incubator Seeks to Enable Regional Artists to Produce Commissioned Public Art Through UNI, Northern Iowa Today, Winter 2013

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University of Northern Iowa art professor Tom Stancliffe’s passion for sculpture started at a young age. “As a kid, I was always doing creative things like drawing pictures, and when I look back, a lot of the time I was making stuff. In some ways, the idea of being a sculptor seemed fairly obvious - that I was going to be making things with my hands.”

Later in life, he was able to channel that passion into public art sculptures, such as his nature-inspired “Harvest” piece at the Cedar County Welcome Center and the swooping “To Wing” sculptures installed at the Eastern Iowa Airport in Cedar Rapids.

Now, Stancliffe is working on sharing his passion with aspiring artists. Stancliffe has been thinking for a long time of the idea of a public art incubator at UNI, and he reasoned that the UNI’s Art Department could offer all the required services.

Many public art projects - a large percentage of which are sculpture - require large-scale space and facilities for fabrication. An artist might use custom fabricators (metal, foundry, stone, glass, mosaic, etc.) for a large-scale work but this route can lead to problems. The artist’s design must be translatable to conventional techniques so that the fabricator can estimate and produce the work based on typical integration of processes and materials.
Stancliffe could also provide the benefit of his own experience in sculpting public artwork. For example, how does one go about transporting a large-scale artwork to its final destination? Over the years, Stancliffe has learned how to design and produce pieces so that they can be broken down. "It helps to be able to anticipate potential problems," he said.

Stancliffe sees the incubator as not only benefitting the external arts community but even more important, engaging UNI students directly as collaborators with professional artists through the production of public art.

"It's not a bad message to convey to students that they can make a living doing art," he said. No other U.S. university, as far as Stancliffe is aware, has such a program. He plans to promote the public art incubator statewide through the Iowa Arts Council, Facebook and a website. "I see this as a win-win situation for everyone involved — artists, students and the university," said Stancliffe. "We all stand to gain."

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