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LIFE & STYLE



Sculptor's focus is engagement

Eric David Laxman of Valley Cottage does not demand that people like his work.

LIFE & STYLE, 1D

SECTION D

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Views of "A Conversation in Six Parts," a public art commission for the city of Hamilton, Ohio.

Artist builds a 'Conversation'

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Eric David Laxman is not the kind of artist who demands you like his work.

Love it or hate it, what the Valley Cottage resident hopes for his metal sculptures—especially his public works—is that you'll engage them.

"A lot of times, people want people to be happy and agree, to have one point of view," says Laxman, who has had a studio at GAGA Arts Center in Garnerville for almost five years. "It's rare in any kind of public venue to get 100 percent consensus. To me, the purpose of public art is to create a dialogue."

Laxman's latest work, "A Conversation in Six Parts," apparently has done just that.

The abstract piece, newly in-

stalled in downtown Hamilton, Ohio, has got "people out there daily with their hands on their hips, thinking about it," says Susan Samoviski, past president of The City of Sculpture Inc., a not-for-profit organization that commissioned the work.

Consisting of six curved, interlocking sections—three stainless steel, three bronze—and measuring 10 by 25 by 12 feet, "Conversation" sits in The Journal Square, a plaza bordered by a historic bank, an opera house renovated for office and retail space, and the headquarters of The Hamilton Journal News.

The sculpture, which will be dedicated in October, represents the first large public commission for Laxman—known for his custom metalwork, including furniture. (He's also done an outdoor piece for

Summit Medical Group in Berkeley Heights, N.J.)

"When I was notified, I was really thrilled," Laxman says of the \$50,000 City of Sculpture commission.

It was about a year ago that the sculptor saw a listing in an arts publication for an international competition to create a work for The Journal Square. The call to artists was issued by The City of Sculpture, which was formed in 2000 to facilitate the purchase and placement of sculpture in Hamilton.

The seat of Butler County, Hamilton—population about 63,000—is a city slightly larger than White Plains. It lies in Ohio's rust belt, 32 miles north of Cincinnati.

"It was a very industrial town in

SEE LAXMAN, 2D

LAXMAN: Build a 'Conversation'

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the mid-20th century, with machine companies and foundries," Samoviski says. "Many manufacturers have left and are being slowly replaced by other businesses. In the 1990s, we made a conscious decision to embrace the arts as a way to invigorate the city."

Hence the competition, for which Laxman submitted a proposal. In November, he learned he was among the four finalists out of more than 40 applicants. He then headed to Hamilton to present his 1/24th scale, 3-D model.

"I had a very positive feeling about my chances," he says, "a positive reception from the committee."

Laxman even stayed with Samoviski—then president of The City of Sculpture—and her family. She was among those taken with his presentation.

"One of the things that stood out about Eric's work—all the entries were abstract in style—is that it was approachable," she says. "We have a diverse community. For some, representational art is their comfort level.

Eric's work ... really invited people to come and sit in that plaza."

The annals of art history are filled with artists who have a reputation for being really talented—and really difficult to be around. Not so Laxman, Samoviski says.

"He has been a joy to work with," she offers without prompting. "Very professional: That stood out from the time he made his presentation. He's done everything he said he would do."

Just as "Conversation" is about the dialogue among the parts of a whole and between the work and its viewers, Laxman recognizes that it has also sparked a relationship between a New Yorker and the Midwestern city he has touched.

"There is something satisfying knowing that this piece is part of the fabric of this community," says the artist, who'll be returning to Hamilton for the dedication with his family.

Adds Samoviski: "He's said he has come to think of Hamilton as a second home. So the conversation continues."

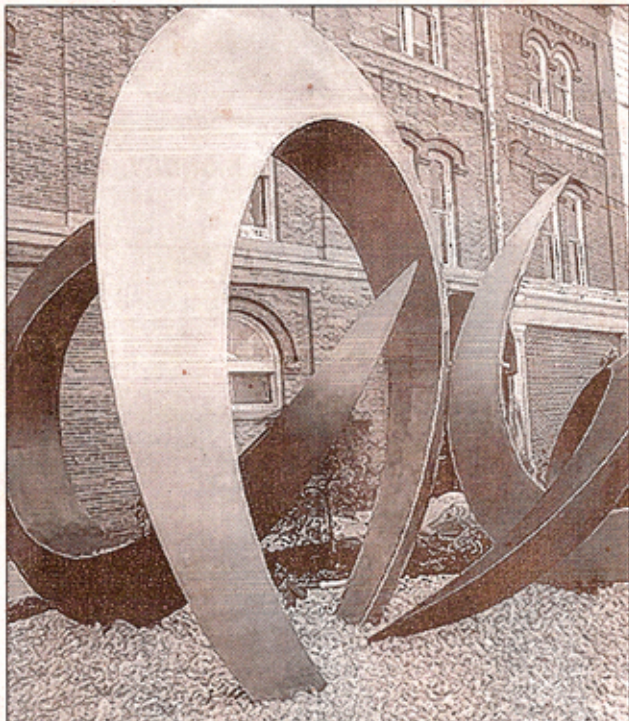


Photo by Eric David Laxman

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