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Sculptures honor wounded warriors



Walla Walla 43°

Foundry workers in protective gear remove a casting from the kiln and position it for a bronze pour at Walla Walla Foundry, which has grown from 80 employees to more than 110 since last spring as it has attracted more work from sculptors. Seattle Times Mike Siegel

Brian Cantwell of The Seattle Times

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Larry Kirkland hunches shoulders inside his orange fleece pullover, maybe against the early-March chill in the old warehouse on the edge of Walla Walla, or maybe as a gesture of contemplation as his artist's eye studies a wax panel leaning against a wall before him.

Eight feet by six feet, the dark red slab itself isn't the attention-getter. Rather, it's the shape cut out of the wax: a larger-than-life silhouette of a uniformed soldier leaning on canes. One of the GI's legs is missing below the knee.

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Seattle Times Mike Siegel

Framed by a bronze silhouette of a helmeted soldier, Walla Walla Foundry worker Jesus Mendoza welds sections of a sculpture destined for the national memorial to America's disabled vets.

Walla Walla Foundry Special Projects Director Dylan Farnum, a bearded George Clooney look-alike, stands with hands clasped next to Kirkland as they inspect the initial casting — like a novelist's first draft — of a multi-piece sculpture that millions will one day view with critical eyes.

"This one I'm going to throw away because it has some flaws," Farnum says.

Kirkland, a Washington, D.C., artist with Northwest roots, isn't so sure.

"I don't want a clean thing — I want it to be metaphorically disabled, battle-worn," Kirkland says as he gingerly touches rough edges in the wax. Such a panel would eventually be used to create the shape in bronze.

Whatever the desired effect, perfection or deliberate flaws, the world-renowned Walla Walla Foundry is the place to get it done in metal. That's why Kirkland, whose public art can be found around the globe, came to this corner of the United States for fabrication of his latest project: bronze sculptures that will be part of the American Veterans Disabled for Life Memorial, to be dedicated in 2014 just off the National Mall in the nation's capital.

Creation of the memorial is a complicated tale of world-class artists and world-class bureaucrats, all emotionally wound up in issues of injury and healing, honor and aesthetics, in an era of politicized D.C. "monument wars" when getting anything built is a battle.

Though the memorial will be in the other Washington, much of it is being created in nondescript warehouses like this, in an Eastern Washington wine town, and another on a back street of Portland.

It will be a national memorial, but heavily imprinted with "Made in the Pacific Northwest."

In 2000, President Clinton signed legislation authorizing this privately funded memorial to America's war-injured — before the latest wars in Iraq or Afghanistan were even a gleam in a defense contractor's eye, before Improvised Explosive Devices and PTSD were part of the national lexicon, and before Larry Kirkland had any inkling the memorial would consume much of his life a dozen years later.

Kirkland has lived in D.C. since the early 1990s. He went there as a life-changing move after happy years in Portland and a stint as an art professor at Oregon State University, where he earned a bachelor's degree in the 1970s.

He took a backdoor route to the memorial project. A team led by Alexandria, Va., landscape architect Michael Vergason won the nod in

2003 to design the memorial, and Vergason brought in Kirkland — a friend of a friend — to help refine his concepts.

Kirkland, who grew up in a true-blue Navy family, took the lead on the sculptural elements.

Monumental art is not a new world for Kirkland, 62. About 150 of his large-scale, multidimensional artworks can be found across America and overseas, even on cruise ships. Among them are works at the American Red Cross headquarters in D.C.; Putra World Trade Center in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia; in train stations from Hong Kong to New York (see www.larrykirkland.com).

Around Puget Sound, look for his works outside the Bellevue Regional Library and at Seattle-Tacoma International Airport ("Journey Home," a suspended wood and glass canoe, on Concourse D).

But while the public arena wasn't new, this was something different.

"I was terrified," Kirkland recalls. "This is right next to the Capitol!"

The site is a triangular two acres adjoining the U.S. Botanic Garden. Getting the memorial there has been like

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Seattle Times BENJAMIN BENNCHNEIDER

In Portland, artist Larry Kirkland (right) and Savoy Studios General Manager Keir Legree inspect the "thousand-yard stare" image etched in glass for the disabled-veterans memorial.

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sowing an acorn and waiting for an oak.

“Lots of politics, lots, because it’s the federal city,” Kirkland says. “There are a lot of influential people and entities who will say the federal city is done, it’s intact, it doesn’t need any more memorials at all. But anytime there’s a hero, a war, anything — they want something as close to the (National Mall) as possible.”

In that highly charged arena, the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts, seven arts experts appointed by the president, has a firm thumb on the design of national memorials.

“They’re really a tough group of people,” Kirkland says.

In the planned memorial, trees surround a star-shaped pool with a gas flame erupting from its center to signify a campfire where injured veterans might tell their harrowing tales. Bordered by granite walls, large panels of imprinted glass backed by four of Kirkland’s bronze silhouettes will interpret the story of soldiers who will never quite be whole again.

The stone and glass are to suggest the interplay of strength and vulnerability, like muscle and bone, flesh and spirit.

It didn’t all come together in a seamless battle plan. For Kirkland’s sculptures, the CFA preferred a more-abstract earlier proposal.

“I had begun to think about the issues of the disabled and came up with the idea of a figure being in negative,” the artist says. Sculpted pieces would be like pressing your arm into clay.

“But it got back to the (Disabled American Veterans organization) and they didn’t understand it,” he says. And visions of “bronze body parts strewn around the lot” worried the National Park Service, which maintains memorials.

“That the disabled vets didn’t understand it told me I hadn’t done my research.”

So he attended the DAV’s national conference to get more insights.

“It’s pretty tough to be in a room where you’re the only person with all their limbs, and a lot were in wheelchairs. They’re all used to it — it’s their life — but I wasn’t.”

Out of that, he got a one-on-one interview with then-acting Secretary of Veterans Affairs Gordon Mansfield, himself a vet in a wheelchair.

“I got to ask him lots of personal questions,” Kirkland says, pausing in the memory. “It really transformed my thinking.”

Becoming intense and carefully choosing words, he summarizes what he calls the “mission” for disabled veterans in creating this memorial.

“Their mission was, ‘We want to see the Capitol, and we want the Capitol to see us.’”

Ticking off points on his fingers, he continues, “‘We want to see the Capitol because we want to be reminded of why we served in the first place: the love of country.’”

Pausing to ruminate, Kirkland reverts to his own voice. “And they wanted the Capitol to see them because for generations disabled veterans were not very well taken care of.”

His revised design was simpler. The bronze silhouettes included the amputee, along with a healthy soldier in dress uniform, a soldier rescuing a wounded comrade, and an outline of an infantryman in full pack dashing through the flashes and bangs of a battlefield.

“It lets us tell the story to visitors of different stages of being a disabled veteran,” Kirkland says.

The CFA balked.

“They weren’t very pleased with it. They liked the more abstract. This was more didactic.”

But Kirkland, who believes an emotionally invested community should have input into public artwork (“It’s not about me,” he insists), remembers that many veterans were unhappy with Maya Lin’s abstract design for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial when it was built. It was decried as a “black gash of shame” — prompting supporters such as Texas billionaire H. Ross Perot to withdraw backing. (Perot has given \$3 million-plus for this memorial.)

The silhouette bronzes, to be placed behind the glass panels, are intended to complement and perhaps frame images in the glass, such as a scene of Arlington National Cemetery’s endless domino-lines of tombstones, or a gut-wrenching photo of a battle-weary warrior, eyes glazed in the fabled “thousand-yard stare” as if there might be no tomorrow, after a yesterday that shouldn’t have been.

Inspirational quotes, for which historians combed documents back to the French and Indian War, will fill out the glass panels. (Kirkland recalls long nights with collaborators around his D.C. dining table debating which quotes best told the injured’s story.)

Overall it won’t look like anything the capital has seen before, the artist believes.

“This is not a memorial to a man, or to a war, but to everyone who has been or will be disabled, so it has to be different. It can’t just be a guy on a horse.”

As with battlefields, there will be ghosts. With the silhouettes behind translucent glass, “you’ll see not an object so much as an apparition,” varying hour to hour based on how much sun is shining through the cutouts, says Kirkland, who tested the idea with mock-ups at the site.

As part of the “monument wars” back story, the CFA’s final design decision came around the same time ground was being broken for D.C.’s new Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial, with its subsequent eruption of controversy over paraphrasing a King quote. (Poet and author Maya Angelou said the paraphrase made the civil-rights leader sound like “an arrogant twit.”)

As a result, Secretary of Interior Ken Salazar early last year announced a makeover of the memorial.

In the end, Kirkland says, commission Chairman Earl A. Powell III, a Vietnam-era veteran and director of the National Gallery of Art (“not a man who says much”), rallied around his new concept. Gordon Mansfield also spoke up (“a hard man to say no to”). The CFA gave its blessing.

Why make the bronzes in Walla Walla?

Since Whitman College art grad Mark Anderson started it in the 1980s, his Walla Walla Foundry (www.wallawallafoundry.com) has gained a reputation for quality and collaboration that has attracted metal sculptors from around the world.

The foundry’s art business has accelerated through the recession thanks in part to Dylan Farnum’s aggressive recruiting of sculptors.

In a stroll with Kirkland around the foundry, Farnum points out works in progress by Maya Lin — a silver casting of the Hudson River Valley — and by Los Angeles sculptor Paul McCarthy, who seems to specialize in the art of the disturbing.

Just completed in a backroom is one of McCarthy’s sooty bronze dwarves with a tree-trunk-sized phallic nose, like a creepy underworld apparition. New York art lovers can’t buy them fast enough.

As they walk, Kirkland shares news about D.C.’s planned Eisenhower Memorial, being designed by famed architect Frank Gehry, who did Seattle’s EMP Museum. The memorial, proposed to feature a barefoot boy and scenes of Eisenhower’s Kansas boyhood, has become a lightning rod for critics.

“The family hates it,” Kirkland confides. “It has nothing about his military service or being president.” (In response to criticism, Gehry added more statues of Eisenhower.)

Farnum and Kirkland inspect the foundry’s computer-guided router used to cut the soldier shapes, then climb stairs to an office where two Washington State University architecture grads labor over computer design terminals. On a wall is tacked a watercolor doodle of a face, with an artist’s signature: Matisse.

To Kirkland’s questioning glance, Farnum, a Columbia University grad, explains, “I know Henri Matisse’s grandson.”

With blueprints spread on a desk, Kirkland nods over design modifications for how the bronzes will be supported and speaks of challenges that have slowed the project.

“We’re putting a pool of water on top of traffic tunnels that have been there since the 1940s, and they leak!”

Kirkland returned to Walla Walla in April and June, each time inspecting progress on castings. His frequent-flier miles grow, and he becomes well-acquainted with the highway between the Portland airport and Eastern Washington.

On trips through Portland, he stops to check progress on the memorial’s glass panels, more work that he steered to Northwest artisans.

When a New York glass laminator earlier dropped out of the project, Kirkland suggested Savoy Studios of Portland (www.savoystudios.com), an art-glass firm with which he has worked.

Savoy’s contribution literally outweighs Walla Walla’s: 48 panels, each about 4 feet wide by 9 feet high, consisting of five laminated ¾-inch layers of glass. They tip the scales at 1,800 pounds apiece.

“We had to build a special iron-truss table to hold them because nothing we had would support that weight,” says Savoy general manager Keir Legree during one of Kirkland’s visits as the pair walks through Savoy’s plant, in an area of light industry a few minutes from the Lloyd Center mall.

Flaws aren’t wanted in the glass. To cut it to a satin-smooth edge, Savoy uses a computer-controlled water jet that slices with a garnet tip and water that is rocketed at 65,000 pounds per square inch.

“It’s literally coming out of that tip at Mach II,” Legree says.

Trivia to store away: Images such as the “thousand-yard stare” are being sandblasted into the glass by a subcontractor who does artwork on Tri-Met bus stops all over Portland.

In October, Kirkland made one of his final visits to the Walla Walla Foundry to oversee a crucial last phase:

patina work on the bronze. Along for the first day are two bosses from back East, Memorial Foundation executive Rick Fenstermacher and project executive Barry Owenby.

Everything passes muster.

Most pieces of the memorial will be finished by spring, but other gears grind slowly. A \$6 million federal grant will pay for extensive street work around the site. When that's complete, installation will proceed, with dedication targeted for October 2014.

Kirkland looks forward to the day when disabled veterans will visit the memorial and, as he's seen happen at the nation's World War II Memorial, "they become the living memorial, you see people go up and thank them for their service.

"We expect that here. Their living presence will make the memorial real."

Brian Cantwell is a Seattle Times editor and writer. Mike Siegel is a Times staff photographer.

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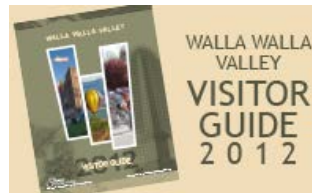
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