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One Man’s Treasure

Salvaged scrap metal and reclaimed materials surprise as birds and mammals at the hands of New Gloucester sculptor Patrick Plourde.

BY DIANE HUDSON

YOU’LL BE SURPRISED,” promises sculptor Patrick Plourde when we visit him at his studio/home in New Gloucester. And we are.

If he hadn’t mentioned the tall sunflowers out front, we’d have sped right past his huge, hangar-like building, smothered on all sides with what looks like debris. Dozens of rusted shovel heads, placed neatly in pyramid-shaped piles, cluster around the building entrance.

“Pinecones,” Plourde says. “I take these shovel heads and make them into giant pinecone sculptures. I’ve got five Pinecones on order right now from an outdoor sculpture committee in Longview, Texas.” He relaxes into silence. “They go for upwards of $4,000 each.”

Each cone is made of 80 shovel heads. Plourde cuts the tips off the corners and fixes them on a shaft connected to a base, insisting on just the right tilt.

“I used to do my own salvaging. Now I rely on scrap dealers. I’ve got a guy up in Stockton Springs. When I got this Texas order, I gave him a call. He delivered 150 shovels to me in ten minutes!”

As a boy, “I was sure I’d be an archaeologist. I grew up in Brunswick and had unlimited access to the Peary-MacMillan Arctic Museum and the Walker Art Building at Bowdoin College. I spent hours and hours there, thirsty for the origin of things. The materials in my pieces all have a history. Every pinecone is different,” as though it’s whispering its story to him.

“Putting each one together holds an unending fascination for me. Does that make me a hoarder?”

FINDING INSPIRATION

Loving parents sent him to Portland School of Art (now MECA), where he completed his BFA in 1976. John Ventimiglia, professor emeritus, recalls the day he brought Bernard Langlais in to work with his students. “I remember Pat’s eyes lighting up,” says Ventimiglia. “He was very excited to meet Blackie.”

Remember when role models were role models?

“Langlais comes into the classroom with a briefcase. Says nothing. Opens it up. There are a few papers and a big bottle of bourbon.”

“Blackie was so happy, so carefree. Several years
“The pain gets worse once you start killing it. I’m one of the lucky ones.”

Street says. He creates these objects for the space because we need them, but they are essentially art. Like the Boston Bar at Fore Street,” says Street. “For Scales, we wanted to create an environment with a maritime ideal that doesn’t hit you in the face. There’s a subtlety to what he does.”

He points out the driftwood “with an edge” that Plourde has integrated into the booths and the sail cloth neatly fitted into wrought-iron posts bordering the seating by the bar.

Then it hits us like a rush. Plourde is at the heart of the signature ‘look’ of Street’s popular restaurants.

While we Portland diners have been collecting memories at Fore Street, Scales, and Street & Co., we’ve already become collectors of Patrick Plourde.

**HIGHs & LOWs**

Plourde battled the debilitating Lyme disease from 2008 to 2012. “I napped away all of 2008,” he says. “I thought I was depressed. Then, in 2009, vertigo set in, along with unbearable knee pain, anger, rage, fatigue, and depression.” Plourde eventually tested positive at St. Mary’s in Lewiston in 2010. “It stole my life completely. I got standard six-week CDC-approved treatment, but the symptoms persisted.” Later in 2010 he met Dr. Patrick Mulcahey, “a Lyme literate” physician in Kennebunk who introduced him to new treatments. These led to even greater pain, “which he told me is good. I received massive doses of antibiotics. The pain gets worse once you start killing it. It means the infection is leaching out of your body. At one point I couldn’t walk. Finally, by October 2012, I felt okay. I’m one of the lucky ones.”
"I’m using 16-17 scythe blades for my vulture. It seems fitting."

to my Noah’s Ark project. In my mind is a vivid memory, like a colorful kids’ book, of fancy decorative cages with the animals looking through it.”

He shows me the scoop rake he uses to create the penguins. “When they used horses to haul logs out of the woods, they’d attach this to the end of the load to slow it while going downhill. The way it curves—suggesting a little inquisitive head—I can’t see anything else but a penguin. Hold on a second.” He pulls out a sketchbook and draws a canister—a small, jar-like vessel that came off an expansion tank. “An elephant! See, here’s the body and trunk. I have to add legs, ears, and tusks, but it’s an elephant, no doubt about it.”

He then picks up a lopper (an axe handle used for lopping branches off a felled tree). “I turn it upside down. It’s a rhinoceros! How about that blue heron standing on a turtle? “Silage fork; chain link for the neck; a sickle bar point for the head; pitchfork tines; lug wrench legs; vintage steel spikes for the feet.”

Plourde is currently making a huge vulture for his upcoming show at the June LaCombe Sculpture Garden in Pownal. “I’m using 16-17 scythe blades. It seems fitting to me that these blades lend themselves to forming the vulture, as they come from a very sharp and scary implement.

“The parts tell me what they want and have to be!”

As his sculptures keenly watch him, Plourde conducts his daily routine of eating breakfast at the village store, swimming in warmer weather at nearby Rang Pond, and at night, “watching the loons grow.

“You gotta live life. Plant sunflowers. Be with your family, your friends. I love it. I love being here. It’s enough, you know.”

Patrick Plourde will be exhibiting at the 18th Annual Bradbury Mountain Arts Holiday Show and Sale in Pownal on Nov. 19. His Autumn at Hawk Ridge Farm will show throughout the winter at the June Lacombe Sculpture Gallery.