

HOUSTON★CHRONICLE

ARTS & THEATER

Randy Twaddle projects mark centennial events

By Molly Glentzer

November 7, 2014



Marie D. De Jesus/Staff

The Federal Reserve will mark the 100-year anniversary of the signing of the Federal Reserve Act. The bank's Houston branch commissioned Randy Twaddle for a piece of art commemorating the centennial.

Randy Twaddle, perhaps best known for expressing the graphic possibilities of Houston's power lines in paintings, prints and textiles, has been treading on more solid ground lately. With two new commissions - both for centennial projects, as it happens - the 57-year-old artist has explored the material possibilities of laser-cut stone and wood.

"Seed, Trees, People" sits atop the mount at Hermann Park's new Centennial Gardens, which should be open by year's end. "Centennial Ghost Bill," completed a few weeks ago, hangs in a hallway near an oft-used meeting space at the Federal Reserve Bank on Allen Parkway.

Both projects involved designs Twaddle has tinkered with for years on paper.

"I like the notion of collaborating with people in processes; you have to translate it," he said.

Twaddle calls "Seed, Trees, People" an "intervention" to the 20-foot diameter space atop the park's mount; visitors will likely just see the trio of curved limestone structures as elegant benches.



Etched into each is one-third of a quotation from Confucius: "If you think of a year, plant a seed. If in terms of ten years, plant trees. If in terms of one hundred years, teach the people."

"I wanted this idea of sequential reading through space; you can't read it all at one time, but as you're moving, the quote reveals itself to you," he said.

The relationship between the text and the three pieces was really just good fortune, he added. "I don't remember which came first, the text or the three pieces; but when things are working, that happens."

Made in graduated sizes - 40, 66 and 106 inches long - they're loosely based on a Fibonacci spiral, a form from classical geometry, subtly mimicking the mount's nautiluslike shape. They're also cut on the ends to look as if they might have been broken from one long piece. The smooth edges are meant to suggest worn courthouse steps.

"I wanted it to have this organic aspect," Twaddle said.

Although he's been moving in that direction with two-dimensional cast works, "Seed, Trees, People" is his first three-dimensional sculpture.

"The revelation for me was that I could take what I was already doing and make it appropriate for this," he said.

The multidisciplinary design firm Metalab Studio converted Twaddle's drawings into Rhino, a 3-D modeling software. Escobedo Construction, a company of expert stone workers in Buda, put the file into an enormous, robotic router to carve the pieces from solid blocks of limestone.

Twaddle's "Centennial Ghost Bill," a purposefully empty white frieze, utilizes a similar process, using a scan of a clay relief. Carved from a solid block of wood, it's 8 feet long, nearly 3 feet high and 1 inch deep.

A minimalist take a 1928 \$100 bill, it looks like a template, capturing only the floral border.

"From a design perspective, the \$100 bill is a train wreck," Twaddle said. "I'm an editor at heart. My hope is that when a viewer sees it, there's an uncertainty; you recognize it, but it's a hybrid of familiarity and oddity."

During the Federal Reserve System's 100-year anniversary, the bank is trying to deepen people's awareness of the Fed and what it does, vice president Daron D. Peschel said.

He's thrilled with Twaddle's art. "It resonates with us on multiple dimensions," he said. "If you distill a federal reserve note to its basic elements like Randy does, it begs the question of what makes our financial system tick?"

Until it's printed and circulated, Twaddle said, a federal reserve note is like art. "That piece of paper isn't worth \$100." He wanted to provide "some physical heft" to that idea. (He's also done that literally; "Centennial Ghost Bill" weighs about 57 pounds, not counting the paint.)

Twaddle wishes his father, who died in 1987, could see it.

"He was a banker who delivered mail in the afternoon in the small town of Elmo, Missouri. He had no reference for me as an artist," Twaddle said. "If he could have seen this, he would have thought I'd finally 'made it.'"