

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS _ KIRK SEESE (Labyrinth Gateway Artist)

1-Did your interest in sculpture have roots in your childhood fascination? In other words, were you a budding sculptor at an early age?

As long as I can remember I have been interested in the visual arts. The story goes, according to my mother, as she was painting friendly animals on the walls of our basement playroom, (which I do remember), while she went upstairs to use the restroom, I took a brush, dipped it in black paint and painted some plump, fluffy clouds over top each vignette. Later my mom confessed that she regretted scolding me for that and was afraid she had squashed my creative spirit.

A few years later, my friend Alex and I would take gray clay from the stream bank beside his house and make things, baking them in the hot sun on his driveway next to a fence covered in grape vines.

I also remember winning a Crayola Art contest when I was 8 years old, which came with a prize of \$1,000 in art supplies. The box was so big I had to share with my neighborhood friends! I still remember the excitement of opening that box after school.

2-You do both 3D and 4D, or kinetic, sculptures. Is there an additional aspect to the 4D sculptures beyond movement?

As a new sculptor, all aspects of this discipline are new and exciting to me, but the thought of interactivity and kinetic movement is absolutely irresistible. I want the viewer to actively engage in the artwork, as opposed to simply looking at it. Making a sculpture move in a safe and structurally sustainable way is a challenge I look forward to in the future, and maybe one day, even perfecting, like so many other incredible artists I see on Instagram.

3-Of these 3 elements--color, shape and movement--which do you think attracts the majority of people most powerfully?

That is a tough question, but I would say out of color, shape and movement, movement draws the eye the most in an environment where, usually, the only things moving are the occasional animal, people and cars. Streets, buildings, trees, etc. are mostly static entities, but when you see something swirling and twisting in the wind, you cannot help but look, and sometimes be mesmerized.

4-Obviously permanent installations must take more thought and time to consider durability of materials, perhaps more manpower to install, and the like--which do you prefer to do permanent or temporary sculptures?

I prefer permanent installations. Over the past two years, I've noticed that with each sculpture I install, comes a personal connection with that town. As the artist, you visit, spend a day or two there for the expressed intention of leaving some art there. Maybe have the chance to experience some local traditions or site see. The longer you stay, the more involved the installation, the bigger the project, the more the connection to that particular town grows.

For instance, I spent 3 weeks in Renton, WA, working with my sub-contractors and my contact with the City of Renton Capitol Projects, to install a large 18' high series of sculptures for a local park. You end up making friends and really getting to know the area, finding your favorite restaurants and parks, etc. I can't wait to go back there in May on my way to Canada for another installation, just to say "Hi" to the artwork, and the town.

In addition, in my life long quest to have public sculpture installed in each of the 50 states, a permanent piece means I can "check off" that state permanently. Anything installed beyond that, in that particular state, is a bonus.

5-When you do "functional sculptures" for child play, and so forth, you must prioritize safety.

How do you size up safety features for the sculpture, and, indeed, what safety measures must you consider for yourself?

Some of the work I've designed was specifically created for people to climb. We chose the strongest materials we could find and "over-engineered" the work so that it would withstand even the worst abuse. Following the guidelines of my engineer, Simpson, Gumpertz & Heger helps as well. I've learned that engineers tend to air on the side of caution and over engineer as a result.

With one of my latest pieces, the Pat Miller Neighborhood Square Art Marker for the City of Alexandria, VA, the expressed goal was to deter people from climbing it, for legal reasons. The design followed function in that case, or lack of function, by setting the active artwork on top of a 6' tall x 2' wide, smooth steel tube that could not be easily scaled.

Safety dictates much of the design and is paramount in installation considerations. It has to hold up to the weather and the public!

6- To do the work you do, it requires multiple competencies--artistic talent, geometric design, math and computer skills, knowledge of materials, business acumen, communication skills...on and on. Do you have a network or team who lend expertise or assistance, as needed? It seems an almost overwhelming task for one person!

Owning your own business is definitely a challenge. One that millions of people manage on any given day. As a primarily right brained, visual artist, I do struggle with some aspects of that process, the paperwork mainly. Like registering my llc in other states, applying for my General Contractors license, taxes, reading engineers reports and blueprints. But I'm learning and improving with every project, and doing things "by the book" is getting to be second nature.

I do not have the luxury right now to hire a staff or crew to assist me, other than outsourcing the engineering, the metal plasma cutting, and the welding, although I just finished my Fundamentals of Welding classes so I will be welding myself soon. I think being multi-faceted comes with the territory.

7-Additionally, you work with heavy, large materials, which certainly must require space to assemble and test out. Plus, you, and your sculpture, have to be portable. I understand you have placed sculptures in 20 states, which is remarkable. Installations may require a crane, or tractor, welding, cement work, or a number of other things. This appears to require precise coordination. Do you find that things go relatively smoothly usually, or are these nail-biting scenarios?

The sculpture installations have been pretty smooth so far, and I do them myself for the most part. Of course, I am a complete mess until it's over, and there's so much that could go wrong, so much to worry about. Right now, I've been working out of my basement and in my driveway, because I live in Historic Lutherville, MD, where there are hardly any garages, just horse carriage overhangs and sheds. We are actually building a 10' x 10' shed in our back yard next week to accommodate my growing need for space to work, and the necessary tools and equipment that goes with it.

I've also applied for a 2-month Artist-In-Residency program at Merriweather in Columbia, MD, 20 minutes from my house, that, if selected, will afford me ample space to work, especially weld, and to really be productive during that time. I find out if I am one of the four artists selected this year, by April 1st. Wish me luck!

For the Underwater Museum of Art, I was tasked with building a 6'H x 6'W x 9'L giant rebar and concrete fish for their underwater sculpture exhibit. For that particular sculpture, I knew it would be too heavy to move once I started, so I purchased a 6' x 10' trailer to build the sculpture directly onto so that once complete, I could simply take off to Florida for delivery. It was a long, two-day, white knuckle drive to the pan handle of FL, driving under 60 mph otherwise the trailer would sway and fishtail back and forth under the weight distribution of the 4,000 pound fish!

8-As a freelance solo artist, does your work find you, or do you have to seek out your work? Do you use a tool like "Art Station" as a search engine? Do you rely on Requests for Proposals? (RFP)?

The system I have developed over the past two years to make this all work as a financially viable and stable career option, to provide for my family, is one of daily, constant searching. It involves scouring the internet through a number of websites like www.callforentires.org, www.publicartist.org, www.americansforthearts.org, and many more, reading through these Request for Proposals and Request for Qualifications (minding my RFP's & Q's I call it), printing the ones I am eligible for, and keeping them in plastic sleeves in a giant, 3" binder, in chronological order. These listings can range from weeks to months ahead of their due date.

I then use a more mobile clipboard to put the most recent opportunities there, ready to respond to by their due date, usually a week at a time. I re-read the requirements, using a highlighter to mark the most relevant bits of information and decide if I should indeed apply, marked with a STAR, or reconsider, marked with a MAYBE. Many times, I'll write notes to myself on the title page. It's a highly organized process that I enjoy, and has worked so far.

What I have found in the two years I've been doing this, is that I might land 10% of the commissions that I attempt. Last year I applied to over 275 public art opportunities. At the very least, creating proposals is a fantastic, creative exercise. It forces the artist to think beyond, and offers a set of factors and guidelines to work through and create around. It's an important part of the process of being an artist. With an 85-90% rejection rate, this process also keeps you humble, thick skinned, and thirsty for more!

9- How much of your work is facilitated/supported, in part, through local, state or federal grants, or non-profit organizations?

So far, I have received two grants from the Maryland State Arts Council. One was an Emergency Artist Grant due to the COVID pandemic, the other, a \$2,000 Professional Development grant to attend the Fundamentals of Welding classes at Earlbeck Welding Supplies & Training Center in March of this year.

9-When you collaborate on an idea with a person, a group or municipality, would you say the input, and the resultant output is 50/50?

The nature of the design process really depends on the group, organization or municipality. I've had some of the easiest projects, where whatever I present, the organization agrees with, on the other hand, I've also had projects that take literally one full year of back and forth designing and redesigning, tweaking and consulting, all to get the desired result. Feels like childbirth!

This I am used to after spending almost two decades as a professional mural artist working with residential, commercial and municipal clients of all types. It takes patience. You have to lay your ego aside and learn to listen.

10-Do you try to learn about and correlate the culture of the area with the art you produce?

If possible, I study the demographics and history of the area to better suit the artwork with the people who will be seeing it. A natural blending and harmony between the art and its surroundings is important.

11- Most people are in awe of what you accomplish and see the beauty in it. Unfortunately, there are a few destructive sorts out there too. Have you ever had to repair or restore a sculpture because of vandalism?

I've had a mural defaced in Baltimore back in 1999 at a local community center due to racism. And more recently I've had someone scratch up an artistic bench/bus shelter in a DC suburb. But these acts are rare. Most people enjoy public art of all types, as long as it's not offensive.

12- Our community is so excited about the enhancement your gateway design will add to our labyrinth. Keep doing the great work you do, as it adds so much to our enjoyment and community identity. I found a wonderful quote--is it yours? It goes like this:

"The best way to predict the future is to create it"

Thank you!

No, I can't take credit for that quote, but I like it to.

Thanks Diane!