

## Instructor creating art with metal balloons

By Ray Westbrook



William Cannings displays a metal sculpture that he produced by inflating hot metal. It resembles plastic and also gives the touch sensation of plastic.

The metal balloons created by artist William Cannings have the wrinkles and tactile sensation of plastic.

Some look like plush cushions, others are heart-shaped, and some look like brightly colored versions of the World War II-era inner tubes that helped bear the weight of military vehicles.

Cannings, who was born in Manchester, England, then moved with his parents to Cheshire, now teaches three-dimensional art at Texas Tech. He has a creative heritage that comes from a glass-blower artist, a metal caster and tool- and dye-maker, and a master woodworker. His grandfather, Fred

Cope, helped fashion Rolls Royce engines for the British Spitfire warplanes of the 1940s.

Aside from teaching art students at Texas Tech and displaying his own sculpted art work in galleries in New Orleans, Miami, Houston and Dallas, Cannings is restoring a bench for the Tech Terrace Park.

The bench itself was provided by Laurin Prather. He got it from his grandparents at the Texas town of Athens, and in a project honoring the service of Marjorie Manning, installed the bench at Tech Terrace Park with the help of friends and neighbors who appreciated her 27 years service to the neighborhood. The problem with the bench is that it was made of cast metal, and in a snowstorm last winter, someone drove a truck into it.

Cannings said, “Cast iron, when it’s cold, is very brittle. So, it just went into pieces. My wife and I amazingly found every piece of the bench — it must have numbered about 500 pieces.”

He said, “Charles Adams gave me permission to use a studio, and I volunteered and donated my time to repair it. So, I have just been brazing it back together.”

He thinks he needs another two months to complete the work, but is thinking that with a new year coming, it would represent a new beginning for the bench project to go back into the park in the spring.

A part of the bench will need to be recreated: “The feet that were fastened into concrete stayed there, but they were deemed a safety hazard, so they were ground off. Thankfully, I have one of the four feet still attached to a side of the bench, so when the bench is complete, I need to make a mold of that one existing foot, and then I need to cast three more in silicon bronze.” Prather said about 60 people in the neighborhood had supported the bench project to honor Manning.

“This was not a neighborhood association project, it was her friends and neighbors who did it.”

He said, “Cannings told me that he could get this back together. If he does put it back together, it will be a miracle.”

Cannings acknowledges it’s a lot of work. “But it’s also good for my students to see me work, because it shows them the types of skills that we’re learning and how they can be applied. And just because something’s broken doesn’t mean it can’t be fixed as well.”

Cannings may get some of his tenacity from his grandfather, the engine builder.

“He worked in a white-coat foundry. It was a very clean environment, and he helped develop the casting technique for the pistons in the Rolls Royce engine, which ended up in the Spitfire,” he said.

Cannings has a small ash tray with an image of Winston Churchill on the upper portion of it. His grandfather was commissioned to make 50 of them for Churchill.

“Because of his experience, he would make a lot of the trinkets, trophies and prizes for all of the big wigs in the British Railways.”

He doesn’t know if his grandfather met Churchill. “I just know that he was commissioned to make 50 of these, and he was given one. When he heard I was working in the foundry in my art school at Syracuse University, he passed this and some other castings along to me.

“This is aluminum from the old pistons that they melted down,” he said. If it came from the engine of a British Spitfire, it is a World War II relic as well.