

BRIDGETTE MAYER GALLERY

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Grounds for ambition: Sculptor unveils outdoor exhibit in 7-acre meadow in Hamilton

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Dangling from a 50-foot-tall crane, a pipe — thick as a telephone pole, and curved like a scythe — swings gracefully into a contractor's hands.

The contractor cajoles the several hundred pounds of steel to fit into another pipe that lies in the tall grass, securing nuts and bolts by hand with a wrench.

"It's like playing Tetris with real live pieces," yells Bruce Worrall, the head of a Trenton-based rigging company, over the whirr of equipment.



When the gigantic pieces come together, Steve Tobin's piece "Aerial Roots" — with 35 objects, some as heavy as 9 tons — will be the largest-scale outdoor sculpture exhibit for a single artist on view at least in the region and possibly in the United States.

Opening Sept. 17 at Grounds for Sculpture in Hamilton, and on view for 10 months, Tobin's work inaugurates a new display venue for the museum — a wildflower meadow about the size of seven football fields.

Preparing the land and mounting the show — estimated to cost about \$200,000 — marks a milestone for the sculpture park, which opened in 1992 under the aegis of J. Steward Johnson, a well-known sculptor and heir to the Johnson & Johnson fortune.

"Aerial Roots" took six years to complete, with each piece requiring between 300 and 4,500 hours of work from Tobin and a 15-person team.

Tobin, 54, is best known for his "Trinity Root" near Ground Zero, a replica of a sycamore tree that guarded St. Paul's Church on 9/11. He studied theoretical mathematics at Tulane University and later learned glassblowing — he made the Guinness World Records for the largest blown bottle. His work has been shown all over the world.

When he works on a large scale, as with the 30- to 50-foot pieces dominating the Grounds for Sculpture exhibition, the skyscraping, sinuous sculptures uniquely draw attention to trees, hills and clouds.

"You look up at the sky and it's divided up into different quadrants," Tobin says. "You need to have a large scale to interface with nature."

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There are hundreds of sculpture parks in the United States and a few dozen on the East Coast. At 42 acres, Grounds for Sculpture is fairly large, but not compared with Storm King Art Center in the Hudson Valley, which has 500 acres and a collection of more than 100 pieces.

Still, a spokesperson for the American Association of Museums said "Aerial Roots" is likely unprecedented in its magnitude.

"Adding a unique feature such as this continues to advance our efforts to make this a national destination," says executive director David Miller. "We hope that it's going to attract thousands more people."

Last year, Grounds for Sculpture attracted 148,000 visitors, up from 106,000 the previous year. In addition to its exhibitions, the nonprofit venue hosts concerts and has an on-site restaurant. With its new dedicated space for large-scale sculptures, it hopes to attract even more world-class artists.

Tobin draws inspiration from diverse sources, such as the regular motion of arpeggios in music, Gothic cathedrals and Chinese and Japanese calligraphy.

Six years ago, Tobin took over a foundry in Bucks County, Pa., giving a change of pace to its employees, who used to spend their days making beams for bridges and boilers.

Dressed in a T-shirt and loose-fitting pants, his hair in a low ponytail, Tobin almost blends in with the installation crew — and he always aids in putting up his work.

"Installing the work helps contextualize and activate it," he says.

The artist recycles old pipes in his sculptures for environmental value and because he appreciates their less-than-pristine condition. Workers bend the pipes with machinery that weighs 200 tons and leaves scars on the material.

"You can see kinks and tears in the steel, which give it a history and a pathos," Tobin says.

Standing under a sculpture arch, he says, "These are like the root gods and you see all the struggles they have been through to obtain this stature."

The struggles are under way today at Grounds for Sculpture, six weeks before the exhibit's opening, where installation of the pieces has been ongoing all week. Trucks with flatbeds 15 to 18 feet long hauled the pieces across state lines. An escort car sometimes trailed behind to make sure that protruding sculpture limbs are protected from other drivers — if not their curiosity.

"What the hell you got in there?" fellow truckers shout on the New Jersey Turnpike, sometimes sparking 30-minute radio conversations. On occasion, passers-by document its travel on cell phone cameras, says driver John Bruno.

As beeping cranes lift pieces from the trucks to the park, The Meadow, as the new space will be called, is covered in wood chips and mounds of soil that have yet to be planted. One sculpture looks like a pile of dinosaur bones strewn on the ground waiting to be put together.

Bruce Worrall brushes grass off a pipe floating overhead and looks for a way to meld it with another. Far from over when Tobin takes his hands off the steel, the artistic process continues.

"It takes a bit of improvisation," Worrall says.