
Artistic Precision

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Many readers of this publication regard welding as an art—for the welders at Mt. Vernon Machine & Tool, that is literally true. The precision metalworking firm located in Mt. Vernon, Ohio, provides the essential welding and cutting services needed to realize the artistic vision of sculptor Barry Gunderson, Professor of Art at Kenyon College in Gambier, Ohio.

According to president Gail Stenger, working with Gunderson is a welcome change of pace for his company's five full-time welders. "We rotate the work so that all of the welders have a chance to work on Barry's pieces. He brings a breath of fresh air into our weld shop."

A Collaborative Effort

The relationship began a little more than a decade ago, when Gunderson's sculpture students started to frequent the metalworking shop looking to purchase round bar and pieces of flat steel for their studio projects. "We really got to know Barry through his students," Stenger recalls. To date, Mt. Vernon Machine & Tool has fabricated five of Gunderson's sculptures, four in aluminum and one in stainless steel.

The collaborative effort begins after Gunderson is notified that he is a finalist in the competition for a commission. "At that point," Stenger says, "he contacts me. He brings in a small model of the piece so we can discuss his ideas for it, and talk about how he would like to see it fabricated. I do a cost breakdown so he can submit a budget."

The working relationship is now so well-established that Gunderson has his own key to the Mt. Vernon weld shop. He sometimes spends evenings there, grinding or painting sections of the current project. "As we get closer to the end of a commission, he's pretty much here all the time," Stenger notes, "grinding so he can get exactly the texture he wants." Gunderson also does much of the plasma cutting work on his sculptures.

Understorms

The first piece Stenger's company welded for Gunderson was "Understorms," which represented the sculptor's first commission from the Ohio Arts Council Percent for Art Program, a statewide initiative that places public art in state facilities. This work, like the other aluminum sculptures created at his shop, was welded using "gas metal arc, spool-style, with assist guns on the welders," according to Stenger, who added that GTAW is commonly used on the smaller parts. Mt. Vernon Machine & Tool installed the sculpture, with Gunderson's oversight, at Franklin Park Conservatory in Columbus, Ohio, in 1991.

Spountain

Several years later, Gunderson was a finalist for another Ohio Percent for Art commission. This time, he approached Stenger with a 2 ft. (0.6 m) cardboard model for another piece he proposed fabricating out of aluminum, this one called "Spountain." The 30-ft. (9 m) tall sculpture would be, said Gunderson, "an abstraction of water." Due to the size of the piece and in consideration

of wind shears, Stenger advised that it be constructed not of aluminum, but of stainless steel. The advice duly taken, Mt. Vernon Machine & Tool proceeded to fabricate the piece, using SMAW to create the structure, and GMAW to finish the skin surface.

"Spountain" was too tall to fit inside the Mt. Vernon shop, so a cement pad was built outside to accommodate it during fabrication. The final product, weighing almost 10,000 lbs. (4,500 kg), took 15 months to create, from conception to installation. "Spountain" now resides in front of the George V. Voinovich Livestock and Trade Center on the Ohio State Fairgrounds in Columbus.

Coventry Arch


Gunderson's most recent collaboration with Mt. Vernon Machine & Tool resulted in a work that serves as the symbolic gateway to a neighborhood (see back cover). The Coventry PEACE Public Art Committee, a community group in Cleveland Heights, Ohio, wanted to enhance a newly landscaped park area in front of a local branch of the Cleveland Heights-University Heights Public Library.

Ten regional artists responded to a call for entries; of these, Gunderson was among the three finalists. In his proposal, he explained: "I have been fascinated with the complex invention of turning industrial materials—pipes and structures—into anatomical forms ... My intent here is to use 12 in. (300 mm) diameter aluminum pipe rolled into a 180° arch to form a passage way of greeting—two abstract figurative forms

on either side ... four figures, two on each side, will thus form two arches, one slightly higher than the other ... My hope is that this figurative cluster will serve as a symbol of the community's interactions with each other and with visitors ..."

Describing the Coventry Arch, Stenger reported, "If Barry had a favorite project of the ones we've done together, that was it." He explained that Gunderson conducted art workshops with the children attending nearby Coventry Elementary School, and that the children's involvement and interest added an extra dimension to the project for all concerned.

The collaboration between artist and welding shop is one of mutual commitment and respect. "Barry knows we'll go the extra mile to give him what he needs. We've cut the parts apart and rewelded them when he wanted us to," says Stenger. For his part, Gunderson states, "I feel very fortunate to have such a special relationship with Gail and his workers. It truly helps me see my artistic visions come to life."

Mt. Vernon Machine & Tool, in business since 1924, employs a total of thirty people. Gail Stenger represents the fourth generation of his family in the business. 



◀ "Understorms" ▲



▲ "Spountain" ▶

