

Madison

Will this be State Street's next fountain?

By SAMARA KALK DERBY
The Capital Times

Sculptor Tom Askman watches people look at public art. What he often observes is that they walk right by it.

Airports often have a lot of public art, commissioned at high prices, and maybe one person out of 500 notices the artwork, he said.

"There is nothing engaging enough in the art to pull them off their conceptual trap," said Askman, who in all likelihood will design and install Madison's next major piece of public art, a high-profile water feature at Frances Plaza, which is part of the State Street Design Project.

He's determined to create an interactive piece of art that surprises the viewer.

Askman, 66, of Spokane, Wash., emerged from a field of five finalists vying to put a water sculpture on an unadorned area at State and Frances streets best known as a favorite location for local street musician Art Paul Schlosser. It's just across from Urban Outfitters and in between University Inn and State Street Brats.

The finalists were selected by the public art subcommittee of the Madison Arts Commission — formerly CitiARTS — in February from a pool of 44 applicants. They were in town June 5 to present their projects to the public and to the Frances Plaza Public Art Selection Committee, which selected Askman at its meeting that night.

The selection still needs to be approved by the State Street Design Project Oversight Committee and the Madison City Council. Askman hasn't been officially notified yet.

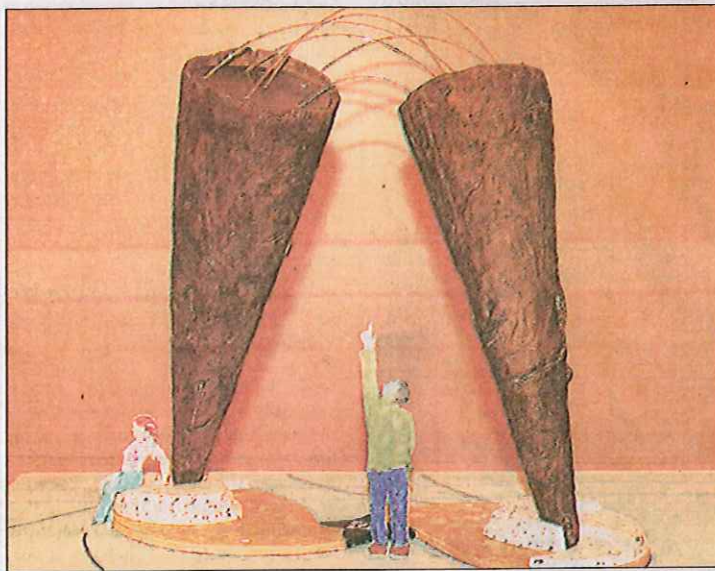
Scott Thornton, chairman of the of the selection committee, said that after half-hour presentations by all five semifinalists, conversation and public comment, the committee took four votes and finally reached a unanimous compromise.

The committee's first choice was Askman. Its second choice was a piece by Andrea Myklebust and Stanton Sears of Minneapolis. Models of the works and notes from the artists can be found at: www.cityofmadison.com/MAC/public/francesplaza.cfm.

Even though the committee is recommending Askman, his printed material and model were the roughest of the five finalists, Thornton said. "But what really sold us on it was his presentation and explanation and the approachability and interactivity of the piece."

Thornton said Askman's proposal wasn't his first choice, but he praised many of its attributes.

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of sound, vision and touch in the piece," Thornton said.

"It fits the space. It incorporates the plaza without requiring a major redesign," he added, noting that one artist wanted trees removed and another suggested redoing the pavement.

The sculpture is of two bronze cones leaning toward each other with six waterspouts crisscrossing from cone to cone. There will be multicolored LED lights in the middle that will shine up and illuminate the water overhead. Members of the committee were particularly enthusiastic about an ear hole for passersby, most likely children, to use to listen to the water.

"The bronze will have a relief to it. It's not going to be just a smooth piece. The water feature will have an audible effect once you're close up to it," said Thornton, who served on the Madison Arts Commission for 11 years, including five years as its chairman.

There were many guidelines for the installation, including the need for emergency vehicles to continue to be able to gain access to the plaza, but the main criteria for the sculpture was to "affirm the character of Madison and celebrate Madison's famed State Street."

The artist's budget is \$230,000 for design and installation. The whole project comes

in at \$300,000 to allow for contingencies, according to Madison public arts administrator Karin Wolf.

Selection committee member Celia Klehr, who also sits on the arts commission, called Askman's proposal an interesting piece. "I think it appeals on several levels. One, it is interactive visually and physically. There are several little hidden elements to it that you won't find until you are up on it. He worked very hard with all the constrictions on space that were assigned to him," she said.

She was also intrigued by locally significant items Askman will be incorporating into the bronze, as well as the ear hole.

"There is an appeal from a distance and there is an appeal up close," Klehr said. "The commission felt that it appealed to different ages."

Selection committee member Patty Elson, also a member of the arts commission, admits Askman's proposal wasn't her first choice.

"Several of them came closer to what I considered a good choice for that location considering the guidelines that were laid out and what I thought would be a long-lasting, iconic image for the city and a fun and playful and interesting piece of public art," she said.

Her top choice was "The Fountain of You"

from Gail Simpson and Aristotle Georgiades of Actual Size Artworks in Stoughton.

"Not only was it a beautiful conception, it was so whimsical and yet ironic," Elson said.

It had classical elements: a classical arch with two classical heads tipped up, yelling into megaphones, whimsically throwing water back and forth. Then there was the symbolism of the university meeting the state Capitol, the Wisconsin Idea blending both sides of State Street, she said. "I thought it was absolutely adorable and I loved the title."

During the selection process, many people referred to the controversial 2005 public art sculpture that is in front of Camp Randall Stadium, Donald Lipski's 48-foot-tall "Nail's Tales" that celebrates the football.

Elson said she wasn't aware of the public process at the time that sculpture was being put into place.

"I would've liked to have heard some of the discussion about why that particular piece was chosen. There are so many people who don't like it. I have actually never run into anybody who does like it," she said. "Because everybody looks at something and has a different way of seeing it, a different expectation for what the space cries out for and what the piece means to them and what it means to the city. That particular one is a total mystery to me."

Askman, a longtime art professor at Eastern Washington University, said he visited Madison before he started designing his model. He walked around and said he got a really strong, positive vibe from the energy of students on State Street and from all of the shops.

It took him back to his art school days in Oakland near the University of California-Berkeley campus, a "hotbed of all this great, positive, radical kind of energy for change."

And as he walked around Madison he said he got a strong sense of place, a sense of the city "being a very exciting and edgy environment. I just felt it. I really felt it," he said by phone Monday night.

Even in the model, Askman said he spent a lot of time putting in all kinds of variations in surfaces and little surprises in to invite interaction.

Askman said he is interested in creating surfaces that are surprising and rich and varied just like the students and the feeling in the downtown area. "The feeling of variations, of sensibilities, personalities, intellectual pursuits, people and a multitude of different wavelengths," he said.

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