

Grandfather storyteller will dwell in a sacred place

Local artist won monumental commission through his smaller works

BY MANDY MARKSTEINER

Mesa Verde, located in the southern corner of Colorado between Durango and Cortez, contains 600 Ancestral Pueblo cliff dwellings that were inhabited by 30,000 to 40,000 people in 1100 A.D. The 105-year-old park is a UNESCO World Heritage Cultural Site and the largest archaeological preserve in North America.

In the spring of 2012, Placitas sculptor Joe Cajero Jr.'s 54-foot bronze piece, "In the Moment," will be installed in the rotunda of the visitor and research center at Mesa Verde National Park.

Cajero's submission was a perfect fit for the contemplative space in the rotunda.

"We wanted something that would reflect the oral tradition in Pueblo Culture," said Park Superintendent Bill Mulligan.

The artist himself sees the more personal, familial connection as strong and universal.

"In the Moment' is a piece that people can relate to no matter what part of the world they're from," said Cajero, originally from Jemez Pueblo. "A grandfather is a symbol of foundation, strength, wisdom and calm. This piece reflects the essence of all that."

The piece was intended to be a 16-foot original sculpture made from Jemez Pueblo clay. Just as Cajero was about to fire it, Ed Riley talked him into making it into a limited edition bronze sculpture.

Riley, the owner of Bronzesmith Fine Art Foundry and Gallery in Prescott Valley, AZ, explained that Cajero would lose the original but get an edition. He agreed, and his decision led to the commission from the Mesa Verde Foundation.

The process of refining "In the Moment" to be just the way it should look in bronze took about 2 1/2 months to complete. Cajero and his assistants put in between 150-200 hours.

"The reason it takes so long is that after you work on it, you have to take a break and look at something else. It's what I call 'not being able to see it anymore,'" he said.

Cajero has won numerous awards within and outside of New Mexico, and his recent commissions include

the monumental sculptures "Go-jii-ya Foot Race" for the Jicarilla Apache Tribe and "Two Horses for the Sky" for Ute Casino of the Southern Ute Tribe.

"All of my monumental projects have come to me, which has been great," said Cajero. "I didn't know about the Mesa Verde call for artists. One of the Mesa Verde Foundation committee members is from the Jemez Pueblo. He suggested my name and I was contacted."

The decision of the 20-person committee was unanimous in favor of Cajero's sculpture and two other pieces to be installed thanks to a grant from the Mesa Verde Foundation.

The sculptor has another project underway for the Santa Fe Indian School. It's a 6-foot statue of one of the runners who carried the message of the Pueblo Revolt.

"When I was younger I thought I would take on any monumental project that I got offered," said Cajero. "But I don't think I'll do monumental projects when I'm older because they're hard on the body. You have to have a good business sense, because there are negotiations on all levels, and you have to make sure that the sculpture and concept fits, and that the numbers make sense."

For now, Cajero is anticipating the springtime ceremony.

"I'm looking forward to seeing how people interact with the piece. How people approach the piece, whether kids will look at it and see if they will want to touch it," said Cajero. "People have come to the gallery and said, 'This feels like my own grandfather.' Which is an amazing compliment. I think this translated to the large scale as well."


"It's a magical feeling. I feel humbled with the idea that my piece will sit in such a sacred place. The blessings that will come from this will last forever."

This piece and others by Cajero and his wife Althea, a jeweler, can be viewed at cajerosculpture.com. Both will exhibit at Santa Fe Indian Market Aug. 21-21. His small sculptures and jewelry are represented by Wright's Indian Art in Albuquerque.

—Mandy Marksteiner is a Los Alamos freelance writer.

SCULPTOR JOE CAJERO WITH "IN THE MOMENT," READY TO BRONZE. Photo courtesy of the artist.





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