

SPIRIT CATCHER Artist Continues to Work Quietly

By Marg. Bruineman - Barrie Examiner



It's an unassuming shop floor in a south-end industrial park where workers grind, weld and cut metal to make custom parts for just about anything.

In a loft, overlooking the open working space, one of Stainless Outfitters' latest jobs awaits shipping. It's a 30-foot sculpture created by the same artist behind Barrie's iconic Spirit Catcher more than 20 years ago.

"I'm having a great time right now," Ron Baird said with a perennial smile that his small handlebar moustache can't hide.

"There's nothing I'd rather be doing."

Although Baird flies under the radar — he lives in the heart of small-town Beaverton on the eastern side of Lake Simcoe — he is among the country's most prolific sculptors.

During the past decade, his work has been shipped farther afield, with several pieces bound for Ireland.

Even now, at age 71, Baird figures he spends two or three days at the Barrie shop every week, building his creations. He has a half-dozen pieces on the go, and evidence of his art is scattered throughout the building in various stages of construction.

Seven three-foot-long oval sculptures, a butterfly and a fish lie among the machinery.

Dressed in a checkered work shirt and hiking pants sporting a fresh tear, Baird puts a tiny model of the piece heading for Regina in the palm of his hand. In his kinetic style, which allows parts to flutter in the wind, the piece features several stars that twirl with the slightest gust. The sculpture was built to honour the contribution of African Canadians to Saskatchewan's culture.

More models of other sculptures are scattered throughout Andrew O'Connor-Fenton's front office. And then a flow of images of the pieces created there in the past five years or so pop up on the computer screen.

"We do everything together," said O'Connor-Fenton, who started the company in Barrie with John Bamford about 17 years ago. "Through the whole building process, he's here everyday. We even spend some weekends together.



O'Connor-Fenton figures about 60% of his time is dedicated to helping Baird with his sculptures.

"To me, the most important thing is the interest they have in my projects," said the artist. "I control the design, but certainly how we build it I draw on Andrew's expertise and John's."

The shop, itself, is desirable for its exclusive work in stainless steel, a material Baird likes because it's impervious to weather and has a reflective surface. There are no other metals, no other steels, reducing the risk of cross-contamination and decreasing the lifespan of the work made there, which includes standards like boat ladders and one-of-a-kind pieces such as architectural hand railings in between the Baird creations.

Baird is showing no sign of letting up, even though he's quickly closing in on celebrating his golden anniversary as an artist, having graduated from the Ontario College of Art and Design in 1964.

It was a great time, perfect time, to begin a career as a large sculpture artist, he recalls.

Baird raced out of the gate, creating seven pieces for Expo 67 in Montreal, which became known for cutting-edge creations, from the architecture of the stacked precast Habitat apartment complex to the many sculptures and pieces of art within the fair.

It was also a coming of age, of sorts, for the artist.

"It was the first time I saw false eye lashes," he gushes with a youthful smile.

Baird describes his Expo pieces vividly — a 40-foot-tall kinetic birth control machine, a sardine can filled with children and a war sculpture with a penis, which when pulled, would produce soldiers. Avant-garde, some would say, graphic in their messages.

But no, he laughs, there was no controversy.

"It was the 1960s," he said with glee. "The fact that they would give someone a chance as young as me with so little experience was amazing.

"It was a very lucky time to be starting out."

Fast-forward to Vancouver's Expo 86. Baird was commissioned to create two pieces — one was the Spirit Catcher, the other was a large dragon. Instead of selling these pieces outright to the Expo organization, 20 years of experience since Montreal taught Baird that leasing the sculptures was a better idea.



The Spirit Catcher, which represents many things to many people, now stands majestically along Kempenfelt Bay and has become synonymous with Barrie.

The other piece was purchased by the Sellers family for their vacation property outside Barrie. It has since been moved to another family member's property.

"I don't think he has achieved as wide a reputation as he deserves," said Ed Sellers, a university professor and one of Baird's heartiest supporters. "I think he is one of the foremost large-sculpture artists in Canada."

Baird's artistic flair appears throughout the Sellers' Barrie-area property, from a wrought-iron wall inside the house fitted with stained glass to another, smaller version of the Spirit Catcher, altogether, Baird has built three.

Ed is the second-generation of Sellers to appreciate Baird's work. The family's relationship with the artist began in the 1970s with his parents, who also supported stone carver E.B. Cox.

Now, when the family considers projects for their home, they're likely to give Baird a call.

"He designed this incredible railing," Sellers said. "It's like waving wheat" on top of Carpathian elm.

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Ron Baird has created more than 150 public commissions and private large-scale sculptures:

- A 110-foot sculpture for Environment Canada sitting on its Dufferin Street site is his tallest;
- Blue - donated to the Latcham Gallery in Stouffville;
- Dancing Tree - a 10-metre sculpture for a Barrie-area family;
- Wind Dancer - 16 x 10 metres for the Great Gulf Group in Bradford;
- A laser-pierced and sandblasted stainless steel mural for the Edmonton Research Park;
- Ashoka Pillar with polished aluminum spinnings and electric motor in New Brunswick.

The Spirit Catcher

The 70-foot steel sculpture on a rise at the base of Maple Street overlooking Kempenfelt Bay has become the symbol for the city that adopted it nearly 25 years ago.

"It became iconic, it began to represent Barrie," said William Moore, who was chairman of the Gallery Project which brought the sculpture to Barrie through the Peacock Foundation. "It was Barrie in the same way the Eiffel Tower and the Statue of Liberty is Paris and New York. Poems, photographs and events like weddings under its wings made the Spirit Catcher part of our language."

The Spirit Catcher changed the city's cultural landscape. And it did more than the group who helped find it a permanent home here could ever hope.

The Barrie Gallery Project consisted of a group of people who wanted to develop a gallery here. But instead of the bricks and mortar of a building, they started with the 70-tonne sculpture.

Local resident A.F. MacLaren was so impressed with the arrival of the sculpture that he changed his will, leaving his home, Maple Hill, along with his collection, to the project. It became the first home and the namesake of the MacLaren Art Centre, which now occupies its own gallery and space at Mulcaster and Collier streets.

The project group had the drive, but they needed money. They found a good fit in the Peacock Foundation and local resident Chuck Peacock, who was in search of a way to commemorate his dad, Kenneth Peacock.

"Chuck had a great vision, it was a very bold thing to do," said the Spirit Catcher's creator, Ron Baird.

Peacock saw the sculpture on site in Vancouver and was able to envision it in Barrie.

Its permanent home, on the shore of Kempenfelt Bay, is largely believed to be the location of the start of the Nine Mile Portage, an historic route leading to Georgian Bay which hadn't previously been precisely identified.

The story with the Barrie location is that the Hudson Bay Co. trader assigned to the spot cheated the natives with whom he was assigned to trade. Upset, the native council of elders set a curse upon the trading post. The natives then refused to trade there. The following spring, the Hudson Bay trader was found dead.

His replacement reported back to the company about the curse and the lack of business. The post was abandoned and later burned to the ground.

When the foundation for the Spirit Catcher was laid in 1987, test holes found solid ground, indicating it may well have been the location of the trading post.

During the ceremony later that year, the Rama native council conducted a ceremony to remove the curse and spoke about a vision of a great bird coming from the west.

"Maybe that is why we embrace the Spirit Catcher? We feel the curse lifted. Perhaps it really has freed us?" wonders Moore.