

5/12/21

Amherst Public Art Commission

Press Release:

The Amherst Public Art Commission Announces the Inaugural Exhibition at Portal Gallery on Boltwood Plaza

The Amherst Public Art Commission is pleased to announce the launch of a pilot program to exhibit art on Boltwood Plaza. The Commission has selected Amherst resident Benjamin Cowden as the first artist to display work in the space that previously housed the Poem Windows. The Commission has renamed the site Portal Gallery on Boltwood Plaza.

The Portal Gallery consists of five small, south-facing windows on the headhouse above Boltwood Garage. Cowden will install work inside the building, which viewers will access by looking through the windows. The Amherst Center Cultural District is supporting Cowden's exhibition with a \$2000 recovery and rebuilding grant, allocated by the Massachusetts Cultural Council.

Cowden's exhibition will transform the windows into miniature worlds that combine natural and mechanical elements. In Cowden's proposal (see attached), abstract representations of spinning caves, blooming flowers, and dancing rock beds respond to environmental cues. Changing light, temperature, and the presence of viewers will all affect the objects in each window. As Cowden describes, "People will be able to play with my sculptures through the glass." Viewers can clap or shine light from their cell phones to activate the sculptures in each window.

Cowden began his career as a sculptor when, as an undergraduate anthropology student in Cameroon, he learned from local Baka people how to turn worn machetes into utility knives. Over the years he has produced a variety of objects, from hand tools to large sculptural installations. He is a voracious student of craft technique and enjoys creating with almost any material, whether it is sewing clothes, building furniture, or constructing Arduino-based robotic cocktail-mixing machines.

William Kaizen, Chair of the Amherst Public Art Commission, says, "The Poem Windows only worked for a few months since the project opened twenty years ago. The Commission has long wanted to do something productive with that space. We hope that after this inaugural exhibition, we can secure on-going funding to make The Portal Gallery a permanent feature of Amherst's cultural life. Our hope is to present rotating exhibitions, featuring two or three artists a year. This would allow for changing exhibitions downtown and relieve the town from the on-going need to maintain these works in perpetuity. An outdoor gallery is an ideal exhibition venue during COVID and in its wake."

Cowden's exhibition is slated to open this summer and run through the fall. For more information, contact publicart@amherstma.gov.

Benjamin Cowden

Boltwood Plaza Portal Gallery Installation Proposal

Overview

The Portal Gallery on Boltwood plaza provides a wonderful and unique opportunity for public art in the center of Amherst. With small windows that open up to a larger internal volume, the displays are perfectly suited to narrative work that tells a story of another world, another time, or a secret to be discovered by the viewer. In addition, being somewhat protected from the elements and from viewers means that electronics, mechanical components, and other relatively fragile materials may be used in a public art context.

My proposal is to create a series of dioramas, using simple sensors and microcontrollers to produce interactive vignettes with low-powered LED lights and small motors. These dioramas will glow, pulse, and move as the viewer approaches and “plays” with them through the protective glass. Using a combination of light and motion will mean that the stories will be visible during the day and night, and can even transform in meaningful ways depending on context such as ambient light, noise volume, temperature, or humidity.

Individual Diorama Descriptions

The overall goal will be to use mechanical movement to evoke, but not imitate, the flora, fauna, and structures that make up our natural environment, using sensors to allow interaction between viewers and the dioramas. Following is a brief description of each proposed diorama, for reference:

1. **Waving Grass** - A wall filled with many small wires referencing grass blades sways gently from side to side. Light sensors at the corners of the window allow viewers to activate new patterns and movements using light and shadow (for example, by shining a cell phone, or covering a sensor with a hand).
2. **Spinning Cave** - Discs of translucent acrylic create a sort of multicolored cave into which the viewer peers. Sections of the cave rotate back and forth using ambient temperature to control the speed and the color of LED strips that illuminate the interior.
3. **Ocean and Clouds** - Similar to the Cave above, but here plates of acrylic will be driven by an eccentric cam shaft in a pattern recalling the rolling of ocean waves. This diorama will respond to ambient volume, with the ocean getting more tumultuous, and light patterns more turbulent, with louder noises. Viewers may interact by clapping or singing near the enclosure.
4. **Blooming Flowers** - A garden of mechanical flowers bloom and fade in slow motion. Viewers can shine lights or cover the sensors in the corners of the window to activate different patterns, change the speed and direction of the blossoming flowers, and alter the color or intensity of the overhead lights.

5. Rolling Pebbles - A layer of beach-worn pebbles covers the bottom of the box, under which a series of discs and levers move slowly, causing the pebbles to jostle and shift against each other. Reacting to ambient volume in the same way as the Ocean and Clouds diorama, the speed of the motion will shift and the lights along the top of the box will change color and brightness.

About Benjamin Cowden

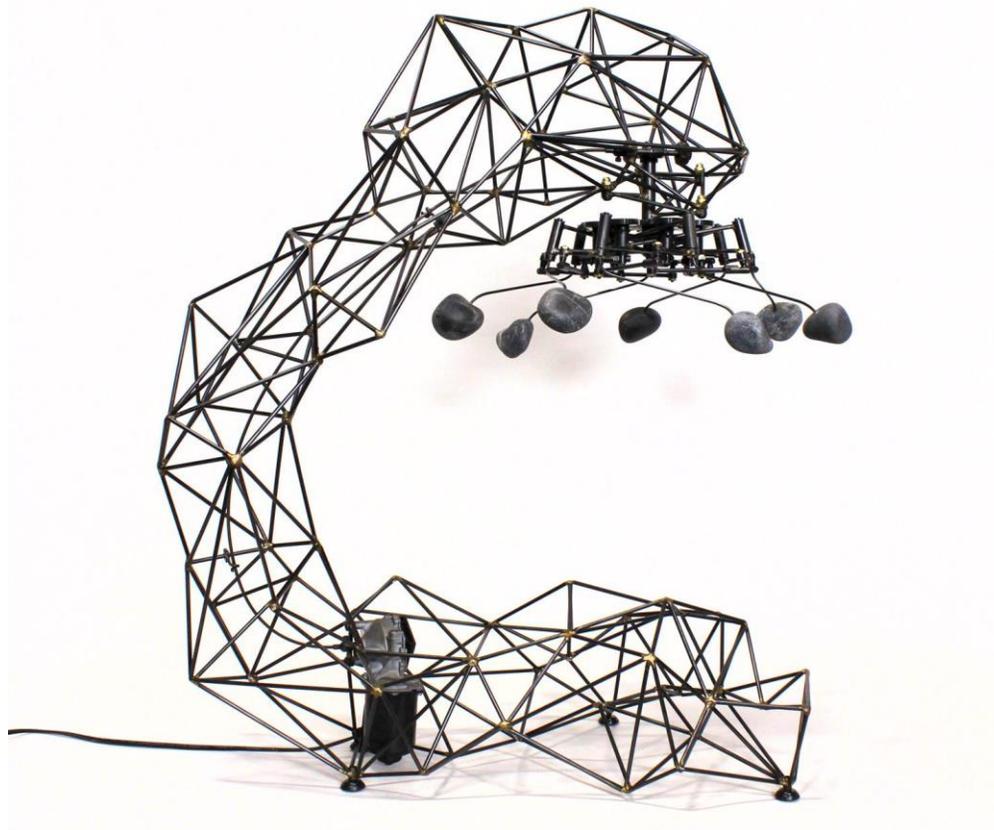
Cowden began his career as a sculptor when, as an undergraduate anthropology student in Cameroon, he learned from local Baka people how to turn worn machetes into utility knives. Over the years he has produced a variety of objects, from utilitarian hand tools to large sculptural installations. He is a voracious student of craft technique and enjoys working with almost any material he can get his hands on, whether it is sewing clothes, building furniture, or building arduino-based robotic cocktail-mixing machines.



More Information

<https://www.involutestudio.com/sculpture>; publicart@amherstma.gov

Chaotic Progression
2015





Gathering 2011



*A Pleated Horizon
Detail, 2012*