

## Artist Makes the Kaleidoscope a Communal Experience

Written by Jeff Ignatius

Tuesday, 06 March 2001 18:00

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If you make kaleidoscopes and want to make any money doing it, the normal course of action is to come up with a basic design and build lots of them, with slight variations to keep you interested, if that matters.

But Davenport native Tom Chouteau has chosen a different path. “Smaller kaleidoscopes don’t much appeal to me anymore,” he said. “I don’t enjoy doing four to five hundred pieces of the same thing.”

So Chouteau has gone big. Really big. Previous efforts have allowed users to stick their heads in a kaleidoscope or sit down in one. The new one will accommodate a whole line of people attending this weekend’s Symphony in Bloom Lawn, Garden and Flower show. Chouteau’s latest creation is a 15-foot-tall A-frame walk-through building, and it might be the largest kaleidoscope in the world – depending on how it’s measured.

Part of the challenge of making large kaleidoscopes is keeping an audience engaged. “To entertain a lot of people with a kaleidoscope is a hard thing,” Chouteau said. But he is betting this effort will keep people’s attention. “I think people are going to be up for it, fascinated by it,” he said.

The artist claims he doesn’t like smaller kaleidoscopes as much because the experience is individual and can’t be shared. A person can give somebody else a kaleidoscope to look through, but two people can’t use it at the same time. “The community enjoyment ... that’s what I vie for,” he said.

Working in large-scale kaleidoscopes has plenty of benefits. They prevent him from getting bored because he can graduate from one concept to the next, for one thing. But they also create a market for his work; Chouteau is one of the few people working on such massive sculpture/kaleidoscopes. “This is a way to be compensated for my work,” he said. He’s been working on the current project since November, he said. Chouteau and two workers were sanding the frame and laying the floor of the giant kaleidoscope last week at the QCCA Expo Center in Rock Island, in preparation for its debut at Symphony in Bloom, which runs March 9 through 11. (See sidebar.)

If you didn’t know better, you’d think that Chouteau was creating a tiny castle for a children’s play area; the structure would look right at home in an amusement park. (Chouteau calls another of his kaleidoscopes – a cube on its point that a person can sit in – a “cosmic tree house.”)

Last Friday, an observer would have had no sense that a kaleidoscope was being constructed. The building was nothing more than a frame. The mirrors were stacked to the side, the towers were not connected, and the rotating color wheel – which looks like a very large turntable – was flat on the ground. (To get some sense of the do-it-yourself inventiveness of Chouteau’s work, just take a peek at the color wheel: The motor turns an inflated bike tire that turns the color wheel. To adjust the speed – it’s currently at one rotation per minute – the tire can be inflated or deflated.)

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This kaleidoscope isn't quite what its creator had imagined originally. Chouteau had envisioned a hall-of-mirrors kaleidoscope in which people and designs would be repeated forever. That, however, would have required the structure to be wider at one end than the other to create the proper angles. The A-frame design "was so much more architecturally simple," he said.

The 10-foot-by-four-foot mirrors each have seams and are essentially folded into the point at the top of the building.

The effect of any kaleidoscope is to make a small space much larger, and with the scale of the current kaleidoscope, that will be impressive. Instead of feeling like you're in a 15-foot-tall building, the space will seem like a building with a 15-foot radius; in other words, it will seem twice as tall and many times as wide.

Visitors "are going to see something that from the outside is big and from inside that's huge," Chouteau said. Another way to envision what the kaleidoscope does is to consider the building itself as a piece of pie. But from the inside, "you're going to see the whole pie" because of the repetition of images. Looking up, visitors will see themselves seemingly suspended from the ceiling by their feet.

The idea of a walk-through kaleidoscope came from the Family Museum of Arts & Science, but it took some creativity to get enough money to execute the project. Organizers of Symphony in Bloom are paying for the labor for the kaleidoscope, while funds for materials came from a \$28,000 Riverboat Development Authority grant to MidCoast Fine Arts. (The grant also covers costs involved with another MidCoast/Chouteau collaboration called the Art Bus.)

Chouteau also plans to display the kaleidoscope indoors at this summer's ArtStroll event, but he has bigger plans: He wants to tailor it to be a permanent outdoor attraction.

That's an expensive proposition. Chouteau said he had been working with DavenportOne for about a year, looking for a way to get in on the organization's revitalization plans for downtown. When the City of Bettendorf decided not to apply with Davenport for funds from the Vision Iowa tourism-attraction program, he got his in. "They needed to come up with an additional project or two," Chouteau said.

Davenport's Vision Iowa application includes \$250,000 to make Chouteau's A-frame kaleidoscope weatherproof and install it outdoors, but the ultimate vision (presented by MidCoast Fine Arts) is for a permanent outdoor kaleidoscope museum at nine to ten sites in downtown Davenport. "I'm scared to death of it, but I'm all for it," Chouteau said.

That fear comes at least a little from the way Chouteau operates. He does his homework and his designs for his kaleidoscopes, but sometimes crucial details come late. "I'm scared half the time that I can't do it," he said. "Until a week or two ago, I didn't know how I was going to get these [mirrors] up there just right."

But Chouteau did figure it out, and his visions — however wild they've been — have largely

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become reality.

### **Symphony in Bloom Schedule**

Aside from Tom Chouteau's giant kaleidoscope built specially for the event, organizers of the Volunteers for Symphony's annual Lawn, Garden, and Flower Show featuring Symphony in Bloom have planned numerous special events. The show itself will feature noted gardening author Cole Burrell, more than 20 gardens, speakers, and a children's activity area.

The show runs from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. March 9 and 10, and 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. March 11. General admission to the show is \$6 for adults and \$1 for children six to 15. Proceeds benefit the Quad City Symphony Orchestra and conservation projects.

The Preview Night Garden Party opens the show at 6:30 p.m. on Thursday, March 8, featuring a sneak peek at the show and hors d'oeuvres, wine, live music, and a silent auction. Admission is \$50.

Three Breakfast among the Blooms events are also planned at the Quad City Botanical Center: Friday, March 9, at 8:30 and 10:30 a.m., and Saturday, March 10, at 8:30 a.m. Each meal costs \$18 per person and will feature a presentation by *Midwest Living* Editor-in-Chief Dan Kaercher.

The Botanical Center will also host Afternoon Tea in the Garden at 2 p.m. on Saturday, March 10 (\$16), and a Jazz Brunch at 11:30 a.m. on Sunday, March 11 (\$24). To make reservations for any of the above events, call (319)322-0931.

There will also be a special evening of family entertainment from 6 to 8 p.m. on Friday, March 9, in the QCCA Expo Center auditorium. The event is free with paid admission.