Written by Jodie Shagrin Kavensky
Tuesday, 10 February 2004 18:00

From the ethereal to the surreal aptly describes the art exhibits by Gene Anderson and David Hast currently on display at Midcoast Fine Arts Gallery at the Mississippi Valley Welcome Center in LeClaire, Iowa. The ethereal comes from Gene Anderson's large, modernistic sculptures that mimic the smoothing effect eons of time have on boulders and stones. In contrast, David Hast's works exemplify a surreal interpretation of, and connection to, the modern world as found in his goth-like pen-and-ink drawings, vividly realistic oil paintings, and colorfully playful sculptures.

Hast is a versatile artist who, I was surprised to learn, has no formal art education. As a self-taught artist, he displays an immense amount of control over his artistic venues. He has an uncanny ability to build relationships where none appear to exist, and his pen-and-ink drawings are so highly detailed that we can identify with his talent in his tattoo-like, almost grotesque images.

Feeling stifled by the four-sidedness dictated by rectangular images, Hast frees himself from the "creative traps," and his unique drawings seem to remove these conventional boundaries (despite the fact that simple wood frames surround them).

Cutouts of easily recognizable shapes – a bottle, a signpost, a purse, a pitcher – are one of Hast's trademarks, and it is within these shapes that his art takes on a new dimension, inviting us to take a "glimpse" inside. Sometimes the shape inspires the image he draws underneath, and the result is an identifiable theme. These are adventurous and fun and not unlike the once-popular games of "Where's Waldo?" and "I Spy."

Although many of his drawings contain objects bordering on the macabre (syringes, guns, chains, and snakes), Hast's artistic strength lies in his ability to twist and turn the faces, designs, and objects within the drawing so that they appear to morph back and forth into each other, eventually disappearing off the page and wandering into infinity.

Hast's other works on display, many which are more sculptural in form, use bright colors and a variety of different mediums; he uses oils, acrylics, spray paint, metal, canvas, and wood where the brilliance of colors meld together to create a pleasing visage that serves as a springboard to a number of interpretations. I was especially smitten by his oil painting of a window in which a woman is floating, and she unravels into a scene representative of the haves and have-nots of society.

All in all, Hast's imagination takes him (and us) on a creative journey where we feel compelled to share in his joyful celebration of life. His artwork is playful and sometimes filled with contradictions, and the images he creates are often a commentary on the modern world and his relationship with it.

On the other end of the artistic spectrum are the simply stunning sculptures by Gene Anderson, who has been creating art for the better half of the 20th Century. His college degree in architecture (and some graduate work in sculpting) led him into a career designing and building the University of Iowa Hospitals. It is only since his retirement that he has been able to actively pursue his passion for sculpture. And in the past few years, his work has taken on a

new direction, the results of which are the pieces included in this exhibit.

The sensual, nonthreatening forms Anderson creates impart a feeling of serenity and lightness that almost seems diabolical to the very nature of sculpture. Many of the pieces stand upwards of six feet tall but don't seem overwhelming because the rounded shapes play gently off each other and the resulting forms are assembled in such a fashion that they achieve a balance and equilibrium – true hallmarks of an accomplished aesthete.

Anderson's use of mixed media creates a structural softness that, even though they appear to have been cast from stone, makes the pieces incredibly lightweight and moveable. So lightweight, in fact, that a Kuwaiti princess who was visiting her son (a student at the university) became enamored with one of Anderson's sculptures and arranged to transport it back to her homeland.

The painted cloth covering the sculptural elements adds a fibrous texture and seductive depth to an otherwise white starkness. The resulting forms remind us of the remains from prehistoric Mediterranean temples that were lost for generations and have finally re-surfaced, bearing the fine smoothness that only time can create.

Anderson also showcases several mobiles, which he more appropriately calls "kinetic sculptures," because movement is inherent to their existence. Through the use of high tensile wires, the "sprays" are transformed by any nearby movements, sending them into a dynamic dance that delights the eye. One particular sculpture *Bang! (as in Big)*, is true to its name, and we get the impression that space rocks have exploded and are being moved in every direction.

There isn't a lot of diversity in Anderson's work, but that might be a good thing, because the few pieces he does have on display achieve his goal of evoking a quiet, secure comfort that reaches beyond technology and relates a message of aesthetic experience.

What really makes the exhibit interesting, though, is where Anderson has placed the larger pieces; one stands prominently on the loft demanding attention from Welcome Center visitors as they enter the building. Two others are placed in the second-floor windows overlooking the Mississippi River, serving as beacons of tranquility and peace and communicating to the world that there is a tremendous amount of talent in the heartland.

A reception for the artists will be held Friday, February 13, from 7 to 9 p.m. The exhibit will remain at the Welcome Center through March.