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Artist disdains wasteful ways

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Eco-artist Sean Ward inside his installation "A Pre-Conscious Space" in the Bemis Center's Okada building.

As a boy growing up on Long Island, N.Y., sculptor Sean Ward spent years watching developers tear up the landscape.

They cut down forests to make room for country clubs. They built mansions for rock stars such as Billy Joel and ocean-side retreats for the likes of Bernie Madoff. The land, over time, lost much of its primeval luster. An impressionable working-class kid, Ward took serious offense.

Ward's lifelong abhorrence of what he sees as environmental destruction became the motivation for "A Pre-Conscious Space," a new sculptural installation, bar and music venue that opened this weekend at the Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts' Okada sculpture facility.

The installation is intended, above all, to be environmentally friendly.

It's made entirely of natural, recycled and salvaged materials. And it's designed to look like a cave, suggesting a place that is beautiful and unspoiled.

"It's time for artists to take a stand against waste, pollution and forest offense," Ward said of his installation.

In fact, many artists are taking action as part of a growing movement known as eco-art. These works have certain defining characteristics. The pieces often are sculptural installations — like Ward's cave — that are created to look like part of an outdoor environment. They often are made of natural and even biodegradable materials, so they're not necessarily permanent and may transform or even disappear.

And they often are made as part of a collaborative process, since many eco-artists work with architects, engineers, biologists, community groups and volunteers to create a finished piece.

The pieces are intended to get people thinking and talking about the environment. But another goal is to change the perception of what art is, said Sam Bower, a California-based eco-artist and expert in the field.

"Eco-artists believe that the age of the lone artist creating masterpieces in isolation is over," Bower said. "Eco-artists see art not as a thing, but as a service, as a job to do."

Bemis, a boundary-stretching gallery, sees art in a similar way. One Bemis artist recently attempted to call every name in the Omaha phone book as part of a telemarketing installation. Another held a bizarre-foods dinner. The Bemis has even sponsored a prior environmental installation — in 2005, artist John Osorio-Buck built and temporarily lived in a house made of hay.

All of these projects beg the obvious question — what makes any of it art?

Mark Masuoka, the Bemis' executive director, concedes that people who believe art must be a traditional painting, sculpture or photograph likely will not see his center's projects as art.

All the same, many contemporary artists don't accept the old restrictions. They see art as a hybrid, Masuoka said. Ward's cave, for instance, is sculpture, installation and performance all wrapped in one work.

"Contemporary art is not a one-way dialogue, with a viewer staring passively at a painting," Masuoka said. "In an installation like Sean Ward's cave, a viewer enters the work and really becomes a part of the art."

Ward, 34, who lives in Oregon, has been leading a large group of volunteers in constructing the cave for several months. He has proved to be a natural foreman.

That's perhaps no surprise, since he comes from a working-class background — his mother was a maid and her family members were construction workers. Clearly, Ward seems to revel in striking a blue-collar pose.

Unkempt and unshaven, he looks more like a construction worker who's had a long day than an artist-scholar. Ward also speaks with a pronounced New York accent and peppers his speech with just enough profanity to fool you into thinking he's a Manhattan cabdriver.

Beneath the rough veneer, though, Ward has a serious intellectual bent. Certainly, that comes across in his writings about "A Pre-Conscious Space," which seems to owe a huge debt to 18th-century French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau's theory of natural man.

In a nutshell, Ward believes humanity took a wrong turn when people began developing a sense of individual self — or ego. This early mistake led to societies that were divided by class and that were dedicated to collecting frivolous things.

He contends that they wrecked the environment in the process.

Ward's "A Pre-Conscious Space" is intended as a visual reminder of a time before humans developed their sense of corrupting individuality, before they destroyed the environment.

Whether Rousseau was correct in assuming that these cavemen lived idyllic lives — or whether 17th-century English philosopher Thomas Hobbes got it right in saying those lives were nasty, brutish and short — remains an open question.

But there's no question that Ward's cave is the place an environmentalist such as Al Gore would go for a beer.

The 1,000-square-foot space is a textbook example of eco-art. Everything is natural or recycled.

Its walls are made of wood, clay and about 40,000 pounds of recycled glass. The seating consists of fallen tree trunks from 2008's violent wind storm. Lighting comes from shimmering soy-based candles. And only live yeast, cask-conditioned ale is on tap. Nothing is wasted.

Like most eco-artworks, Ward's cave will serve multiple functions, said Hesse McGraw, curator at the Bemis.

It is, of course, an aesthetically pleasing sculpture. But as a bar, alternative music venue and lecture hall, it also serves a social purpose.

"It gets people out of their houses and creates an artistic and communal hub," McGraw said.

Two other artists creating eco-art in the Omaha area are David Hansen and Jamie Burmeister.

Hansen, a wood sculptor with a studio at Hot Shops Arts Center, got his start creating eco-art sculptures that doubled as homeless shelters.

Some of these installations were little more than lean-tos. Others were small huts with decorative wood shingles. All were made primarily of discarded material and junk.

"I figured that was the kind of material that would be available to a homeless person," Hansen said. "I built them because I wanted to shine a spotlight on the homeless problem."

Hansen's shelters were temporary displays at sites such as the Gene Leahy Mall, where the homeless often gather during the day.

He also has created more permanent sculptures, such as his "Forest Canopy" at Bellevue's Fontenelle Nature Association. That piece, a cone-shaped dome built over a boardwalk, was made entirely from trees that had fallen in the area. So there was no deforestation in the construction of the piece.

Still, Hansen admits that his work, like most other environmental pieces, does leave the occasional carbon footprint.

"I use a chain saw to create my sculptures," Hansen said. "It uses gas."

Burmeister, a Metropolitan Community College art teacher, increased his legwork to minimize the carbon footprints in one of his works.

In 2007, he built an electric bicycle charged with solar power. He used the bike to transport materials from his studio in Gretna to Fontenelle Forest, where he created a sculpture called "Sun Tower."

The pyramid-shaped tower, made from fallen trees and branches, was topped with solar panels. Solar energy charged Burmeister's bicycle, which he then used to make five 50-mile round trips between his studio and the forest to complete the project.

The sculpture was intended to explore the relations between energy, transportation and the wilderness, Burmeister said. It was also meant to be a performance.

"The bicycle pulled a trailer with a big American flag on it, so the transportation itself became performance art," he said.

Ward's cave likewise offers theater, but it's more subtle.

The place is in the Okada sculpture facility, a former low-rent apartment complex just east of the Bemis Center. The building looks abandoned, and there are no signs or other indications that a hip bar is inside.

"The exterior creates a sense of mystery, as if you were entering a speakeasy," Ward said.

But the old building — and all the recycled materials inside — has a serious purpose.

"As a society we must stop tearing things down to build new sprawl," Ward said. "This cave symbolizes our need to need to stop wasting and start renovating."

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