

Bellingham Herald

Estimated printed pages: 3

October 12, 2002

Section: Lifestyles

Page: 1C

Light Wave; Sculptor refines mosaic expression

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THE BELLINGHAM HERALD

Ann Gardner's laugh cuts into the whoooooosh of the espresso machine as she launches into what she calls the "ultimate story" of her start in mosaics.

Back in 1981, the Seattle artist was commissioned to tile the wall of an outdoor stairway in Seattle's Fremont district.

"I made all the tiles and I laid them all down and there just wasn't enough energy for me. So I took a hammer and broke them all."

Then she used those shards and glass beads to create a mosaic.

Which started her on the path that would eventually lead to "Wave," the mosaic sculpture that Bellingham-based Barkley Co. commissioned for its bricked Arch Talbot Building at 2200 Rimland Drive.

It is Friday, just hours before the sculpture, about 11 feet in diameter, is hoisted 13 feet into the air to the spot where it will greet visitors at the building's main entrance.

For now, "Wave" is perched on three sawhorses while its creator is perched on a chair in a coffee shop in another Barkley building across the street discussing the evolution of her art.

"My work is pretty reductive," she explains.

It's based on geometry and simplicity, a continual paring down to the essentials.

"Whenever you simplify something, the more you take away from it, the more it has to work, the more it has to be present in the space."

'QUIET PIECE'

Gardner sits in the coffee shop across from "Endless Cycle," a painting by Northwest great Kenneth Callahan and near a trio of paintings by Victoria Haven and a landscape by Maria Frank Abrams, who also are regional artists.

She doesn't say it but a little farther away, down a hallway, is a sculpture she created in 1990 called "Open Close Open," a pair of wings made from cast glass that rests high on a steel stand. The wings are partially closed in temporary repose but still charged, as if they will soon open to muscle their way through the sky.

It is a marked difference from "Wave," a circle with six pods that make the sculpture look as if it is undulating. Small pieces of hand-cut and hand-set glass cover its entire surface.

As for color, that depends on the way the light hits the glass and the angle of the viewer. Even then, the shift is so subtle and so immediate that defining the color is near impossible. Is it bluish, grayish, tinged with aqua or shades of green?

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"Wave" doesn't claim the circular space of the building's atrium so much as it flows into it. "This piece is a gentle curvy wave of a space," the 54-year-old Gardner says. "The light catches it in such wonderful ways.

"It's very calming and very subtle. We liked the simplicity and the elegance," says Matt Hammatt, vice president of developer Barkley Co.

'REFLECTION AND COLOR'

The internationally known Gardner, who has worked in a wide range of mediums and is also a printmaker, has created numerous commissioned pieces, including for the Washington State Convention and Trade Center, the Port of Seattle and Sato Pharmaceuticals in Tokyo. Her work also is featured in the permanent collections of Saks Fifth Avenue, Seattle Art Museum and the Detroit Institute of Art, among others.

"Wave" reflects an ongoing refinement that has taken Gardner from the early tile-smashing days, when her mosaics "were like anything went - put the kitchen sink in it." Or found objects, figurines, beads, jewels, rocks and shells. They would give way to her current preference for using just glass in her mosaics, which are now almost all sculptural.

"I want it to have some kind of quietness to it and some kind of beauty. Quiet so that if a person encounters it, they come away feeling like they've been settled down a little bit."

For the Seattle-based artist, the appeal of glass is about "reflection and color. Just how it kind of magically catches light. It's these little subtle surprises, they're what sustain me now."

PHILIP A. DWYER HERALD PHOTOS

RISE AND SHINE: Seattle sculptor Ann Gardner watches her helper, Stockhausen, lift "Wave" an 11-foot diameter sculpture into place at the Barkley building in Bellingham.

PIECE WORK: Sculptor Ann Gardner's created "Wave" with hand-cut and hand-set glass pieces.

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