

Ka-BOOM!

Evelyn Rosenberg blasts her way into State Capitol

By Theresa Wulf

Kaboom!

In the middle of the desert, beneath the burst of a 20-foot fireball at the New Mexico Institute of Mining and Technology, another artwork has begun.

Most artists don't start the creative process by blowing up their works. Fewer still teach at and serve as a consultant to a mining school.

But Evelyn Rosenberg does. And this spring, Nebraskans who visit the State Capitol in Lincoln will get to see the final product of this woman's amazing sculpture process.

The Art Selection Committee of the Nebraska Legislative Council has chosen Rosenberg to create two bas relief sculptures to enhance two newly remodeled hearing rooms in the Nebraska Capitol.

The works are expected to be hung in April, according to Suzanne Wise, the Nebraska Arts Council's visual arts coordinator.

Rosenberg's commission resulted from Nebraska's "1% for Art" law, administered by the NAC. According to this law, 1 percent of the total budget for a public remodeling project over \$250,000 or of a public construction project over \$500,000 must be set aside for the purchase of public art.

The Legislative Council, working with the NAC, selected seven legislators and art experts to serve on the selection panel. They included state senators Ernie Chambers of Omaha, LaVon Crosby of Lincoln and former senator Sandra Scofield of Chadron; Jon Nelson, curator of the art collection at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln's Center for Great Plains Studies; Catherine Ferguson, Omaha artist and NAC member; and John McKirahan, director of the Museum of Nebraska Art in Kearney.

Robert C. Ripley, manager of Capitol restoration and promotion, was elected to chair the committee. The Legislative Council is chaired by Sen. Bernice Labeledz of Omaha.

"The Art Selection Committee arrived at their decision after long and thoughtful discussion in which they decided that the most important factor in making their choice was, 'Which work best fits the spirit of the Capitol?' " said Wise.

Most of Rosenberg's work in the past five years has involved site-specific bas relief sculpture for public buildings.

Her latest artwork is a large hanging piece for the atrium in the biochemistry building at Texas A&M University, she said.

While creating commissioned artworks may be common for some artists, Rosenberg's method of creating her sculptures is not. Rosenberg works in "detonographics," and literally blows up her works before finishing them.

The process of detonographics starts at the Center for Explosive Technology Research, which is part of the New Mexico Institute of Mining and Technology. Rosenberg, who lives in Albuquerque, is a teacher and consultant at the Center.

This is how she creates her works:

"First, I make a drawing on tracing paper. I transfer this to the clay, wax or metal template from which I make a plaster of Paris



In her Albuquerque studio, Evelyn Rosenberg shows works in varying stages, from planning to polishing. Rosenberg's detailed bas relief sculptures, as show in the detail below, created through a process she calls "detonographics," will hang in two hearing rooms in the Nebraska Capitol.

mold about 2 inches thick. I take this mold to the blast site, where it is covered by a metal sheet.

"The metal is covered with a rubber buffer sheet, and then plastic explosive is put on top. The explosive is detonated and the mold is destroyed in micro-seconds. But in that short time, the explosive acts as a giant stamping press, driving the metal into the mold to reproduce the design down to the last detail."

After the blast, Rosenberg takes the plates back to her studio. There, she refines the surfaces by hammering out the rough edges, filling in the holes, polishing the surfaces with electric tools and, finally, waxing them.

For the Capitol, Rosenberg will create two panels – one for the North Hearing Room that will be 4 feet high and 12 feet long, and one for the South Hearing Room that will be 6 feet high and 8 feet long.

The piece to hang in the North Hearing Room will have legs across the top showing the modern, Native American, pioneer and prehistoric inhabitants of Nebraska, Rosenberg said. Below their feet will be examples of objects from each of their respective cultures – computer chips, farm implements, moccasins, etc.

The top of the piece for the South Hearing Room will feature

rows of various Nebraska plants found in nature and important to Nebraska's agriculture, she said. Below this will be "layers of occupation by the natural world, almost as if an archaeologist had just discovered it."

Rosenberg said in an interview in late December that she had four molds finished for the first piece, and planned to blast it the first week in January.

She collected the above-ground pieces near her home, she said.

"I went and got some pioneer implements, such as a washboard. I found a horse bridle that says 'U.S. Cavalry' on it. I also found an old saw and some farm tools."

About the pioneer footsteps, "I'm now collecting the appropriate shoes for this," Rosenberg said. "I've found someone's great-great-grandmother's lace up shoes."

For the below-ground artwork, Rosenberg is creating copies of the Indian and prehistoric artifacts she wants to use, she said.

"I made the Indian items. The originals are very valuable, and I didn't want to make molds off them. The prehistoric items, such as mammoth tusks, I drew. That will be sort of a combination of all kinds of things."

Rosenberg had been a printmaker for 20 years when she began developing her detonographic process in January 1985. Through trial-and-error research, with steel, copper, brass and bronze sheet metal, she perfected the process.

"It took more than 80 experiments to get to the point where I could make a large piece in relief without it being full of holes or blown halfway down the mountain," she said.

Her process has drawn attention from writers around the nation, and she's been featured in *The New York Times*, *Scientific American* magazine, *The Smithsonian*, and *International Sculpture* magazine.

Even though Rosenberg's unusual process has attracted a lot of attention, it still takes the heart and eye of an artist to make detonographics work.

"My method has always been to talk to the people who are using the building and try to get a feeling for who they are and what they are thinking about," Rosenberg said in her proposal to the Art Selection Committee.

"In the case of Texas A&M," she said, "I spent several days talking to the people in the department about the meaning of biochemistry and looking at their experiments, before coming up with a plan which reflected what I had learned from them. I also like to incorporate the plants and animals of the area in my designs."



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