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## How to make a big 'bear'

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### UCSD's Stuart Collection lands a dramatic, huge work from a 'singular voice' – Tim Hawkinson

By Robert L. Pincus  
UNION-TRIBUNE ART CRITIC

June 12, 2005

The tonnage of Tim Hawkinson's "Bear" is likely to make your jaw drop: It exceeds 300. One boulder alone, that of the bear's body, weighs 100 tons, give or take a few pounds. The height of the sculpture is something to behold: about 23 feet.

The just-completed "Bear" looks like nothing else in the marvelous assemblage of art known as the Stuart Collection. But then no work looks like any other among the previous 15, which are distributed throughout the University of California San Diego campus. Each has been a true experiment.

The monumental creature in stone, which sits in the new

▪ ['Bear' is just the latest to join superb collection](#)



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Artist Tim Hawkinson had to leave the heavy lifting to others for his 300-ton "Bear," but he was clearly excited that his addition to the Stuart Collection was reaching fruition after three years of planning.

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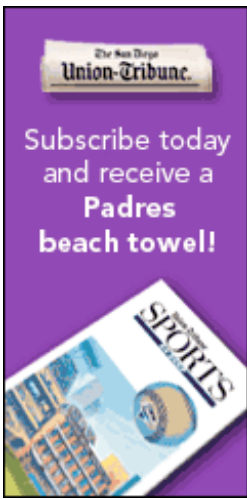
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courtyard of the Jacobs School of Engineering, has been in the works for three years, from conception to completion. But Mary Beebe, the director of the collection since it began in 1981, couldn't have picked a better time for Hawkinson's bear to take shape. Hawkinson is having a midcareer retrospective, which closed days ago at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York and will open at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art on June 26.

The 44-year-old Hawkinson is one of the most visible artists of his generation. He seems to find any material rife with possibilities: His ground fingernail clippings are molded into an egg shell; his hair becomes a feather.

## How to make a big 'Bear'

- View a [photo gallery](#) of 'Bear' being constructed — from start to finish

He is a kind of inventor, too, creating such things as a machine that signs his own name (the punning title is "Signature Piece"), a large photograph of his face with an attached device that moves his features ("Emoter") and a large-scale assemblage of 12 figures connected to "sonotubes" that create their own continuous percussion concert ("Pentecost"). And, by the way, he draws exceedingly well, too, when a project calls for it, as in "Wall Chart of World History From Earliest Times to the Present."

For all of its complexities, his art exudes a youthful sense of curiosity. Its many shifts seem determined less by any stylistic issues than by a kind of enduring excitement about the limits of a medium or an idea. The same strain of curiosity that drove him to create an arresting self-portrait in rubber – formed to fit his body, then turned inside out and inflated – applies as surely in his "Bear."

"I'm interested in large jumps in scale and everything in between," Hawkinson says, sitting a few feet from the sculpture, then in progress. "Each piece I make has a singular voice. I try to develop that."

The soft-spoken artist, who lives in Altadena with his wife, painter Patty Wickman, and their 20-month-old daughter, Claire, has a lean frame and a boyish face that fit the playful nature of his work.

Even at the site of the big "Bear," small things catch his attention. In midsentence, he snatches a lens from a broken pair of glasses half hidden in a patch of dirt. He stares at it for a moment, holds it up to his forehead and muses, "Perhaps it would make a good third eye." He hangs on to his find.

Hawkinson admits that "Bear" was smaller in his mind's eye.

"I didn't know, at first, we could do something that large. I was thinking 12 to 15 feet."

There is just the hint of a smile on his face and a wry tone in his voice as he declares: "Now, it's truly monumental."

"This is such a simple idea," he adds. "But once we decided to realize it on this scale, it became complex, presenting an



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engineering problem."

The source of inspiration was simple, too – an everyday sort of experience.

"When you're driving in the desert, sometimes you see rock piles that suggest animals," he observes. "Different forms are suggested by seeing beautiful boulders, too, or piling rocks in the backyard."



CRISSY PASCUAL / Union-Tribune

It was the broad idea that appealed to him; the bear came later.

"I wanted to do an animal in weathered boulders and it just turned into a bear. I didn't look for specific rocks that look like a bear's head. It's more about what you perceive in it."

The animal consists of eight stones. The head is slightly cocked – Hawkinson angled the head more dramatically on the last day or two – as if it were curious about those who stand before it. The 100-ton body far outdistances the limbs in size. The legs are square and the arms are longer, while the faceless head sports proportionally small ears.

Construction began in earnest on May 10, after excavation of the site took place in late April and early May. A 300-ton crane put the big rock in place on May 11, and between May 12 and May 20 most of the other stones were arranged with a 70-ton crane. The head came last, on May 27, and "Bear" was christened by the artist with a bottle of champagne later that day.

Regarding the complexity of getting "Bear" built, Hawkinson had a wealth of expertise to draw upon. Artist Matthieu Gregoire has overseen all of the collection's 16 works, from Niki de Saint Phalle's "Sun God" in 1983 to John Baldessari's "Read/ Write/Think/Dream" in 2001. In between, there have been such demanding projects as Bruce Nauman's "Vices and Virtues" (1988), with its seven-foot neon words encircling the top of the Charles Lee Powell Structure Systems Laboratory, and Alexis Smith's "Snake Path" (1992), dominated by a 560-foot-long serpentine walkway in tile leading to the Geisel Library.

"The 'Bear,'" Gregoire says, "was a particularly simple idea that was particularly difficult to make. The engineering was relatively simple, consisting of pins that hold the rocks together.

"But, we spent more than a year trying to locate a 100-ton rock. We felt that size mattered, that a 10-to 15-foot bear would have been a completely different piece. Then, there was the process of allowing Tim to play with these things."

The solution was to scan the stones selected by Hawkinson from a quarry in Pala on the campus' supercomputer. It created three-dimensional physical models of all the rocks, which were assembled at Camp Elliott, an off-campus site of UCSD, until the courtyard of the school of engineering was ready.

"It allowed Tim to be so hands-on, intimate in the way he could arrange the work," Gregoire explains.

Like every project that preceded it, Gregoire added, Hawkinson's is a "puzzle – demanding, with no reference points. But that's what's fun for me. It becomes a kind of practical poetry.

"Tim was, in his own ways, very hands off. He was trusting, doing only the things that required his hand."

Ultimately, it's Hawkinson's eye and sensibility that pervade this project.

This is quite different than the way he usually functions: His art is generally labor-intensive, but the labor is mostly his.

As Adam Weinberg, director of the Whitney Museum of American Art, comments in a foreword to the companion book for Hawkinson's touring exhibition, "In our high-tech digital age, it is remarkable to find an artist whose output is so devoutly engaged with physicality, both of his materials and that of his own body."

Still, the computer model allowed Hawkinson the ability to manipulate these components in a fashion that gave him control over the process – even if he couldn't operate the multi-ton cranes himself.

Hawkinson enjoys talking about the stages in the bear's progress and the differences between realizing a monument and his other works.

With his emphasis on building things from scratch or adapting existing technology, there is an element of "How-does-he-do-it?" ingenuity in his work. "This method suits me," he says. "It's what I understand. That's my vocabulary."

A sculpture like "Penitent" consists of a human skeleton, made from rawhide dog chews, that whistles sporadically. For "Pentecost," with its many figures creating sound by knocking a body part against a sonotube, he employed a found computer program. (Both works are in his traveling exhibition.)

What Hawkinson doesn't want to offer is a discussion of meaning, symbolism or any other subject related to an interpretation of "Bear."

"I like to leave it open to interpretation," he says. But he admits, it is "unsettling on this scale."

The sculpture can easily be viewed as a rejoinder to the slick steel and glass architecture that surrounds it – a sign of nature and rough visual poetry among a sea of mostly characterless buildings.

However, that wasn't  
Hawkinson's



CRISSY PASCUAL / Union-Tribune  
Students from Blessed Sacrament Parish School came to watch the construction of "Bear" and asked the artist for autographs.



intention. His sculpture was conceived separate from the surrounding edifices, which hadn't been built when the idea took shape.

It is sure to become a destination, for the campus audience and beyond. Like the "Sun God," it is iconic, the sort of art that people embrace in unforeseen ways.



Beebe is positively effusive about the completed project.

"It's all about material and imagination – carrying one thought to a wild extreme. It was an extraordinary engineering challenge that has become an amazing presence among literally cool architecture.

"When an artist has a grand idea, I feel you have to go with it. The art has to have integrity."

And it does.

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