

MICHIGAN AVENUE

Q&A: Chicago Sculptor Jeffrey Breslow

The local artist presents his pieces at the One of a Kind Show next week.

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Jeffrey Breslow and his studio.

Local artist Jeffrey Breslow has been sculpting almost his entire life, but didn't make a career out of it until recently. After studying industrial and product design in college, he went on to become a toy designer—a job he enjoyed for more than 40 years. Then, four years ago, he bought a studio on Fulton Market and took up sculpting full time.

He uses natural materials—felled trees from his property in Vermont, boulders from an East Coast quarry, and more—and creates enormous, organic artwork. His pieces are currently installed in an outdoor exhibit in Lincoln Park, permanently at the East Bank Club, and elsewhere nationwide.

Next week (December 6-9), he brings new sculptures to the 12th Annual One of a Kind Show at Merchandise Mart.

How does being a post-career artist change the game?

JEFFREY BRESLOW: I am lucky in that I'm not a starving artist. I can afford the luxury of not worrying about that—I had one career for 41 years. [Now] most of my contemporaries are playing golf; maybe I'll take that up later. I still get up at 5 AM to work, seven days a week. [Sculpting] doesn't feel like work for me.

You listen to music while sculpting. What is your go-to artist or genre?

JB: I listen to contemporary or light jazz. I love all kinds of music—country, pop—but when I'm working it's better to not listen to lyrics, or songs that I know. Instead it is background [music], and it focuses me. I use the title of the tune as the title of the piece. I have a whole collection of music, so I look to see what title [makes sense for the piece].

Besides music, what inspires each piece?

JB: The pieces are inspired most by a fantastic stone or piece of wood that I start with. I go 'hang out' with the stones and look at them, and it just kind of happens. All of a sudden you start to imagine an idea; that doesn't happen by just sitting alone. Also, a lot of creativity is fueled by pressure: a show coming up, or a date for installation. Anyone in the creative world—authors, musicians—functions under pressure.

What is your studio like?

JB: It has a curtained front [area] with a gallery. I can look outside, and light comes in. It's a machine shop; I've set it up like a hardware store, with nuts, bolts, and [other tools], so I can pretty much build anything I want to build here. I have another studio on the South Side that is a garage space in my friend's steel studio. It has a forklift, sandblaster—it's my messy space.

Did you create new work for the One of a Kind Show?

JB: I'll be showing three or four brand-new pieces, but they weren't done [just] for the show. That's how I get better at what I do, by not creating for a specific customer, commission, or show. Though I did have to go and measure ceiling heights [for my space at the Merchandise Mart]!

—Elle Eichinger