

SCULPTURE

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Everything about the steel sculpture's exuberant colors and sub-tropic imagery, as well as its placement at the base of two identical high-rise condominium towers, forever ties it to the time and place in which it was conceived, says the artist.

The name of the piece, "Naiad," refers to water spirits in Greek and Roman mythology, Mr. Paley says, in part to signify the transformation and development of downtown's River District.

"I come from an almost arctic wasteland up here," says Mr. Paley, talking on the phone from his studio in Rochester, N.Y. In contrast, he adds, he finds Florida's lush vegetation very dramatic, and he wanted his sculpture to engage with that sensibility.

"The (high-rise towers) by their nature are geometric, logical. But the actual environment really determines what Florida is about — a kind of exuberance of form.

"In addition, because of the starkness of the sun you have there, a lot of the prominence of the forms is accentuated by their silhouette. I wanted to have the piece be sympathetic to that, so it's a great emphasis on the silhouette form: the way it plays out against the sky, the same way the vegetation plays out against the sky."

Mr. Paley's sculpture was installed on April 20, but was conceived before the housing bust, raising the question: if "Naiad" is forever attached to the context of time and place, in front of those towers, is it also inextricably linked to the excesses and optimism of a bygone era?

Maybe. But for most, it seems, the sculpture holds images and meanings that are more personal.

"We're just happy it went up, because it's progress," says a resident of the St. Tropez tower who has lived there since it opened in 2005. "I see swords in it, but you know it's very abstract. I hear someone else tell me they see flowers."

Bill Love, another resident at St. Tropez, loves the work. "I think the buildings (towers) are also contemporary and this adds to it."

Mr. Love's wife, Mary Ellen, says it reminds her of Indian sculpture she likes. "I see feathers in it," she says.

Barbara Hill, president of Hill Fine Art Consulting, helped the City of Fort Myers Public Art Committee approve Mr. Paley's commissioned work in 2007. She believes it will stand the test of time. "The beauty for me in any sculpture or art in general, is that the work can be perceived in so many different ways," Ms. Hill says. "This is no different.

"Certainly if there are issues about the economy in the forefront of their mind, people will respond to this work differ-



Paley sculpture

EVAN WILLIAMS / FLORIDA WEEKLY

ently than if the economy were great. I think, on a deeper level, successful works of art will stand on their own throughout cycles of the economy and individual perception."

Naiad's origins

Before Mr. Paley designed the sculpture, the city had begun rapidly approving high-rise tower projects, some of which now sit nearly empty. Officials saw the opportunity to beautify public spaces by asking developers to either contribute to a public art fund or to commission works worth 1.5 percent of their development, not to exceed \$150,000.

In 2006, Robert Kohn, president of

Homes for America Holdings Inc., fulfilled the city's obligation by commissioning Mr. Paley to create a piece of public art to go at the entrance to two of his towers near downtown on the Caloosahatchee River, the St. Tropez and Beau Rivage.

"The site was already chosen," Mr. Paley says. "The main reason for that was to create a presence of place and a sense of identity to the complex... The buildings are quite large, so the sculpture was seen as part of the entrance into the complex... It's a point of passage. Coming and going, you have that reference."

Mr. Kohn secured the commission with the help of his friend Richard Herrmann, owner of Ironwood Galleries in Connecti-

cut. (Mr. Kohn could not be reached for comment). Mr. Herrmann is also a longtime friend of Mr. Paley, and says that because of his relationship with the two men, he was able to secure the commission for the city's cap of \$150,000, to be paid by Mr. Kohn.

It was an unusual deal, Mr. Herrmann says, because the sculpture is probably worth more than twice that on the open market — more than most of the units in Mr. Kohn's buildings are now worth. In another sign of the times, 75 of the units, about half in one of the towers, will be auctioned off to the highest bidder on May 16. Mr. Paley's work has shown no such decline in value.

"Arguably, (Albert Paley) is one of the finest living American sculptors around," Mr. Herrmann says. "It's not to say that Albert discounted his price because it's us, but he gave Robert Kohn the best possible value. Meaning if I were to turn around and sell, I'd ask \$350,000 for it."



Albert Paley

COURTESY PHOTO

But if the sculpture did sell, where would anyone possibly put it? For better or worse, maybe for all time, its identity belongs in Fort Myers, as a passage to those towers, as Mr. Paley intended.

"There's no way to compete with the massiveness of the buildings," the artist says. "What I was trying to do, the gestural quality of the sculpture — it's projecting itself into space, as if it were rays of the sun or whatever, to give it a sense of expansion. If it were a sphere-like shape, it would be very condensed. It actually gestures up toward the buildings as well, which makes up the skyline of that area. That was a direct response to the site." ■

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