

A tale of two trees

By Molly Glentzer

July 4, 2014 | Updated: July 7, 2014 12:58pm

SANTA FE, N.M. - Sometimes synergy takes root in surprising ways.

Recently, I found part of a tree beautifully molded into a hanging sculpture in one gallery, while in another, stacks of newspapers were being molded, amazingly, into a full tree.

The hanging piece dangles at the center of Wade Wilson Art's large gallery, where sculptor James Surls has set up shop for a month. "Glory in Now" is recognizably Surls' work but looks unlike any of the more familiar flower works that fill much of the gallery. Measuring 108-by-70-by-73-inches, it has a top section of steel that resembles an open flower with seven pointy petals and a richly finished base of gnarly Western cedar in a free-form "U" shape with a bulbous bottom.

"Artists develop this rhyme, rhythm and reason - their lexicon, vocabulary, alphabet or whatever - and it just starts to manifest itself," he said. "I can now look at things and know I can use them."

"Glory in Now" began with a fine specimen of found wood Surls got from another artist who had bought it from a collector in Utah. "I don't know where in Utah it came from, but I'm quite sure it grew on some ridge in a prevailing wind," Surls said. The other artist had kept it three years. "He loved that piece of wood but it so intimidated him, he just couldn't figure out what to do with it. He was scared he was going to 'ruin' it," Surls said. "I looked at it and within three seconds knew exactly what I would do with it."



Colombian sculptor Miler Lagos is creating "The Great Tree" for SITE Santa Fe's 2014 biennial, "Unsettled Landscapes." The work is being made from 4 tons of newspapers.

He didn't want to cut it up; that would have been a sin, he said. "You can't go chopping that thing in half." But some strategic trimming was in order. "Up where the flower comes out of it now, it went way on up," Surls explained. "And there were limbs. It was a tree."

After shaping the trunk to preserve its essence, he attached the steel flower onto one end. The first time he hung the finished piece up, it tilted awkwardly, so he had to tweak it to find the right balance.

Over at SITE Santa Fe, where the SITElines 2014 biennial opens July 19, Colombian artist Miler Lagos was working through a different kind of problem. Wearing a hazmat suit and mask, he stirred up a storm of white dust behind a wall of clear plastic as he used an electric sander to carve into a huge, dense stack of newspapers. He was shaping the base of "The Great Tree," a 14-foot tall sculpture inspired by a Ceibo tree, which according to a sacred myth gave the Amazon River its shape when it was felled.

"It's my favorite tree," Lagos said. "The Mayan world was supported by four Ceibas."

Before he began using local newspapers as material, Lagos - who also makes videos and other types of installations - carved trunk-shaped pieces using stacks made of thousands of copies of a single woodblock print. He liked to use historical imagery by Albrecht Durer or Leonardo da Vinci, he said. One day when he tried to remove white bits, the paper started to burn from the sanding. Reverting in a way to its source, it smelled like wood and turned the color of bark.



James Surls' 2012 sculpture "Glory in Now" is made of steel and a found piece of Western cedar that the sculptor has cut and polished.

"It was a great coincidence because the essence of the wood is still inside the paper. It's like the knowledge inside the tree," he said. Now he likes to use local newspapers wherever he's working, so - even if you can't read it - the sculpture holds a slice of life that belonged to the

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people who are viewing it. He thinks of each layer of paper as a ring in the tree, composed from elements of time.

"I was thinking about the nature of materials and how we use them to create our culture. I wasn't thinking of it from an environmental position, but it became that," he said.

"The Great Tree" itself will not have to be recycled when the biennial is over in January. Each "brick" of newspapers is numbered and held together by a central pole armature so that it can be disassembled, moved and rebuilt.

SITelines 2014

When: 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Wednesdays-Thursdays and Saturdays, 10 a.m.-7 p.m. Fridays, noon-5 p.m. Sundays, July 19-Jan. 11

Where: SITE Santa Fe, 1606 Paseo de Peralta, Santa Fe, N.M.

Tickets: \$5-\$10 (free on Fridays and 10 a.m.-noon Saturdays); 505-989-1199, sitesantafe.org

James Surls

When: 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesdays-Thursdays,

11 a.m.-7 p.m. Fridays-

Saturdays, noon-6 p.m. Sundays, through Aug. 2

Where: Wade Wilson Art Santa Fe, 217 W. Water S., Santa Fe, N.M.

Tickets: Free;

713-505-660-4393, wadewilsonart.com