

NEWS > LOCAL

A sculptor at the MacDowell Colony turns his artistic attention to tense national borders

Print Page

Says divisions show commonality

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PETERBOROUGH — In a cabin in the middle of the dark New Hampshire wilderness, a New York-based artist is building borders, miniaturized landscape sculptures of politically and emotionally-charged dividing lines.

From the tumultuous spaces between Korea and South Korea to Pakistan and Afghanistan and the U.S. and Mexico, Blane De St. Croix's recreations are so intricate and realistic that it's not unusual for people to cry or become angry when they're confronted by the sculptures, he said.

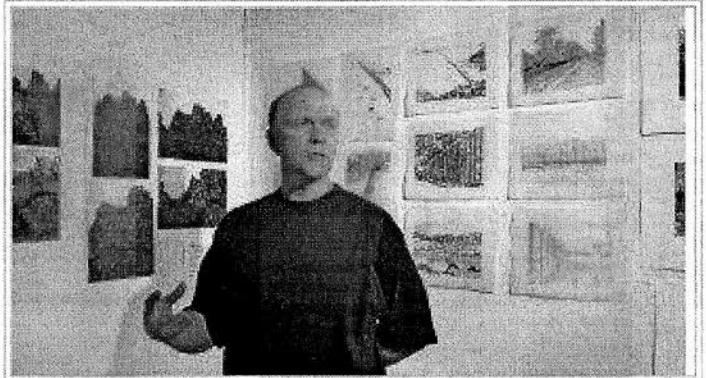
"It's a dialogue about how we alter the land by imposing things that become iconic symbols," said St. Croix, who has been living for the past two weeks among other artists from across the country at the MacDowell Colony in Peterborough. "People sometimes get upset with me when they see this work. It's very powerful because a lot of these things are very painful."

On Sunday afternoon, the artists' cabins were opened to the public for this year's Medal Day honoring renowned California-based architect Thom Mayne. (See related story on this page).

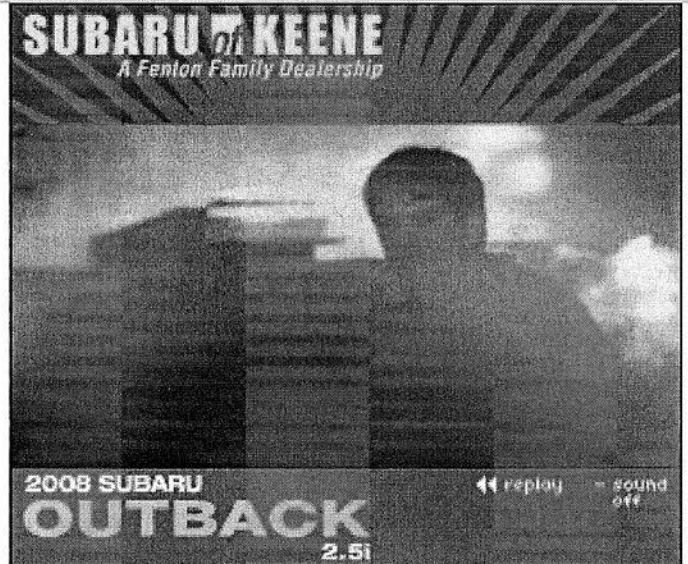
The colony was founded in 1907 by Marian and Edward MacDowell, a composer, and features 32 studios spread over 450 acres of woodland that become home to more than 250 artists of all disciplines from across the world every year.

De St. Croix began working on his new series of sculptures in October after researching for a grant to travel to South Korea and visit its border with North Korea. He became intrigued with the border because it's a violent place, where reports of sniper fire are common, but also a beautiful area because it has been left untouched for decades.

"No human has stepped foot in there since 1953 or 1954," he said. "It's become a pristine wildlife sanctuary, which I felt was very twisted."



CONVERSATION PIECES — MacDowell colonist Blane De St. Croix, of Brooklyn, N.Y., talks about his artwork during Medal Day on Sunday.



A Boston native, De St. Croix divides his time between his homes in Brooklyn, N.Y., and Florida, where he works as an associate professor at Florida Atlantic University in Boca Raton. Aside from sculpture, he also works in installation and drawing.

His miniature borders and crossings sculptures — all are presented from an aerial perspective — are painstakingly crafted from dirt, plastic, rocks, paints, dried weeds, rubber and dozens of other components, both natural and artificial.

"I try to echo the landscape. I try to put as much detail as possible into the fences and trees and mountains and hills," De St. Croix said. "You try to make it as real as possible. But you also try to push the color and create very seductive landscapes."

De St. Croix's sculptures dramatically plunge beyond the surface of the borders and stand about 5 feet tall.

"I don't want to make pedestal art," he said. "These (sculptures) are meant to appear to be sliced out of the earth."

De St. Croix said he hopes to build a 100-foot-long section of the fence that runs between Arizona and Mexico. He said the real fence, which is only 12-feet tall in some places, was built from corrugated metal used during the Vietnam war.

"That becomes another kind of unintentional symbol with the fence," he said.

By building borders, De St. Croix said he aims to make people throughout the world realize that they're not alone in the issues they face.

"We look at our southern border and think we own a problem, but it's a shared global problem," he said. "Immigration problems are everywhere."

De St. Croix's border sculptures have ignited many lively discussions and debates in various art galleries where they've been displayed, he said.

"It's just the fact that they can produce these emotions. When I put them out at shows, the conversations are endless, and I find that fascinating and exciting that there's such a need to have these conversations," he said. "I'm not trying to make people angry or to make people cry. And I don't know if I want to be known as the border guy. I just want to create a conversational about unintentional intent."

One visitor to De St. Croix's cabin asked if he believed the spaces in between the borders, such as the fences or walls, were more important to his artwork than the landscape on either side of the boundary.

"I think it's the project that I'm looking at," he said, "because each one has a different intent."

De St. Croix said he sometimes spends 13 hours a day working on his sculptures, and that his time at the Colony — he has been awarded two fellowships — and away from the perpetual commotion of city life is a cleansing and enriching experience.

"You have a chance to slice yourself away from the cell phone and the daily chores of life," he said.

"That's not to say that I won't be happy to go back to Brooklyn, but I like it here. It's an idyllic situation out here."