



No stone left unturned

Mini golf in Minnetrista 'kind of like State Fair'

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"Don't mind the garlic," says Bruce Stillman as he pushes open the door to his workshop. Sure enough, the scent blooms before the nostrils can take a full inhalation. Stacks of the bulbous herb lie on the floor.

Stillman is a lifelong sculptor and founder of the non-profit Big Stone Advancing Arts and Big Stone Mini Golf in Minnetrista.

He's the sort of man easily amused, easily inspired and, at 61 years, still commands a youthful mind capable of experiment.

He's also the sort whose artist's materials, shipments of as yet un-sculpted stone, nose their way into the landscape as a miniature Stonehenge, which, incidentally, is a downright modern backdrop for the woolly mammoth that stands a few feet away.

Though, really, that mammoth is modern, too – it's the most recent sculpture in his garden, having been installed just one week ago.

Big Stone is Stillman's house.

And his workshop. And a mini golf course, a sculpture garden, a petting zoo, a vegetable garden, a cozy hangout with firepit and hot tub.

"It's kind of like the State Fair," Stillman jokes, as the goats come into view.

Big Stone is also reflective of an imagination driven by what already exists. The changing room for his hot tub is a truncated corn silo left over from the farmstead. The decorative stone table bases in the garden once made up the façade of the old Metropolitan Building. The goats, more plentiful now, are also carry-over, and Stillman continues to grow and sell vegetables, something diners at Mound's Dakota Junction may know from the Big Stone BLT on the menu – those are Stillman tomatoes in the sandwich.

Big Stone has been open to the public for 16 years and has grown to admit about 30,000 people to its 17 acres of putting green, sculpture and vegetable gardens. But Stillman, who grew up in St. Louis Park, has been sculpting long before Big Stone.

He created his first pieces, copper wire sporting figures, when he was 15 and started selling them a year later.

Stillman purchased the property off County Road 110 in 1992, having decided by then that he wanted a more organic feel than what his downtown Minneapolis workshop could give him.

"When I bought this land I was doing a lot of metal sculptures, just grinding metal in my studio and getting dusty, polishing, boxing them up, sending them out to galleries, and I'd just make another sculpture, and then I wanted to get earthy, so I started working with rocks and then I wanted to do landscape sculptures so I bought this farm," Stillman recounts while he sets in motion the kinetic sculptures that are his trademark. The smooth, free-form shapes move silently, patterning shadows on the wall, their movements governed by the mesmeric physics of oscillation.

"I like math and physics and art, and you can kind of see how they fell together," Stillman says.

There's humor in his work, too. "I call it the Mona Lisa

Painting Machine," Stillman said of a piece he made and sold to galleries during the 1970s. Stillman's sculpture includes a rough rendition of the Mona Lisa, which sits on an easel as two mechanical arms, set in motion, tease at painting her from buckets of paint.

At ease strolling between the 14 holes of his golf course on a sunny Wednesday afternoon, Stillman is candid in both his love of art and his loathing of the Walker Arts Center, against which he filed a lawsuit last September for alleged abuse of monopoly power over the arts in Minnesota.

On the grounds, a capsized boat, Holey Ship, stands at the eighth hole. Its colorful porthole windows, winking in the sunlight like a cathedral's stained glass, are made from melted down eye-glass frames.

It might be better to ask what isn't here than to ask what is here: A replica Frank Gehry wiggle chair Stillman reclaimed from a scrap pile at the manufacturer's stands next to Sasquatch, a Dale Lewis creation. Two kids play a life-size game of

chess under this same Sasquatch's gaze, and just a few yards away is an abandoned boat Stillman picked up on the side of the road. "I wasn't looking for a boat, but oh! I liked that boat and I always loved Gilligan's Island!"

He's very much one to act in the moment if the opportunity is good.

Big Stone now has works by a dozen mostly local artists, including a pair of horses that Minnetrista's Christen Piersa constructed from horseshoes. Fifty sculptures dot the landscape, and Stillman says he spent about \$195,000 this year alone in buying up local art, the woolly mammoth among them.

He's also invested in Big Stone this year from an operational standpoint. Workmen erected two artful outhouses earlier this month. Classic in their rectangular, slope-roofed shape but injected with colored stone and other whimsy, they make a case for the personality behind Big Stone: It's form meets function and, like the pizza Stillman cooked on his Baked Bean sculpture, a little humor served alongside the artistry.

FROM LEFT: 'The Mona Lisa Painting Machine,' 'Sasquatch' by Dale Lewis, a Stillman kinetic sculpture, 'The Baked Bean' - on which Stillman has cooked exactly one pizza. (Elizabeth Hustad/Laker Pioneer)

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