

art

# Art FROM THE Earth

Creating large, handmade brick sculptures seemed natural for artist Michael Morgan

STORY AND PHOTOS  
BY ANNE PAGEL

Michael Morgan knew in undergraduate school that ceramics was for him – not little wheel-thrown bowls and pinched cups, but big, handmade brick sculptures. In a way, the commitment was predictable.

Morgan had spent the 11 years before college gardening for the Parks Department in his hometown of Portsmouth, England (a sideline he pursues today). The idea of art coming from the earth seemed natural to him.

Once at The Polytechnic Wolverhampton, he began to

see clay in yet another way. The university community that had once been at the forefront of the industrial revolution had become host to a number of disintegrating, vacant plants.

“I was fascinated by brick factory hulks that were returning to a natural state,” Morgan says. “When brick is seen crumbling back into the earth, a concrete connection is made between the two substances.”

That connection continues to drive his work today.

After graduating with honors from Wolverhampton in 1988, Morgan was selected for a residency at The Clay Studio in Philadelphia. That year, his work was chosen for an exhibition at the Everson Museum of Art in Syracuse, N.Y.

UNL art professor Gail Kendall had been asked to participate in the same show.

Morgan was looking for a graduate program, and when Kendall saw his work, she knew he would be a good fit for UNL. She recruited him, and the match was good. In fact, upon his graduation in 1993, Morgan received the Vreeland Award, a faculty-nominated-and-selected recognition for exceptional creative ability and meritorious, original work.

Lincoln seemed like an ideal community for Morgan’s family. Although Chris, 28, now teaches English in Taiwan and Phil, 26, is an accountant in Tokyo, Morgan is confident the decision to settle in Nebraska was the right choice.

“Besides, the clay in southeast Nebraska is superior to the rest of America,” he says. “I always thought it interesting that, with that kind of resource, there are loads of wooden houses. And this is a state with few trees.”

Nebraska is also a good location for an artist who works nationally. Morgan is constantly on the lookout for competitive commissions and public art opportunities. He has been



Michael Morgan created a bench, walkway and fence for David and Jorja Witters’ garden.



Morgan created “Human Landscape” for Bob and Vicki Northrup’s garden in 2008.

aided by Larry Roots, owner of Modern Arts Midwest. The effort has paid off. Morgan has completed commissions for the Biddle Estate in Andalusia, Pa.; The Philadelphia Flower Show; Community Redevelopment Agency, New Smyrna Beach, Fla.; Dallas Area Rapid Transit; Dakota State University, Madison, S.D.; and Haverstraw Bay Park, Haverstraw, N.Y.

Projects of this sort are highly competitive. Morgan says that while he doesn’t like losing out, he recognizes occasional disappointments are an inevitable part of the process.

He chortles about getting the Haverstraw Bay Park project, just a stone’s throw from sculptor James Tyler’s home in Nyack, N.Y., while Tyler won the commission for Union Plaza in Lincoln’s Antelope Valley.

“It’s ironic,” says Morgan. “Both of us applied for both projects.”

Still, Lincoln has been receptive to Morgan, and gardens across the city feature his sculptures.

One of his first major projects was a garden bench, walkways and a fence for David and Kara Lynn Klamer, who lived in a historic home in south Lincoln.

When the artist noticed the city was developing a small park nearby on A Street, he was interested. The Klamers introduced him to members of the Near South Neighborhood

Association, and Morgan proposed to the group that he create a carved brick wall and benches in the park for the same price they would pay for a regular wall and bench. They liked the idea.

"I probably lost money on it," says Morgan, "but I had to get my foot in the door. They did have me back to do the outside fence."

Meanwhile, Morgan was building important relationships in Lincoln's art community. He shared a studio on 7th Street with painter Larry Roots until the latter opened Modern Arts Midwest at 9th and P streets. The two artists have remained friends and have shaped a productive working relationship.

"I've always admired Michael," says Roots. "I've continued to champion his work. We do concepts for him nationwide. We present proposals for his work."

Morgan's local commissions include a sculpture for Bob and Vicki Northrup's garden.

"We saw a silo Michael had done in Omaha and it knocked our socks off," says Bob Northrup. "We fell in love with his skills and vision, and decided we wanted him to do a piece on our property. It's near my office, so I can see it while I work."

The work intersects a stone retaining wall, which gives each side a completely different appearance. It is a study in contrasts, with Morgan's hand-carved bricks packed into a well of smooth, traditionally mortared bricks. The jagged pieces seem to have

erupted from the earth. Although the artist calls it "Human Landscape," Northrup sees a cityscape, carefully balanced but bordering on chaos.

During the last two years, the art market – like other segments of the economy – has been under stress. There have been far fewer public art projects and more artists compete for any that arise.

For that reason, Morgan feels fortunate to have worked on a single commission for the last year.

The project began five years ago, when he and Roots collaborated on a 30-foot-tall silo (the structure that so impressed the Northrups) for William and Lisa Roskens in Nashville, Neb.

The Roskens have since had a home designed and built on the property. Morgan and Roots were commissioned to design and create a fireplace that rises 18 feet, a wall fountain and a kitchen island. Morgan has also clad the home's rounded entry facade with handmade brick.

"I've been at it about a year," says Morgan. "It's been great, really."

The design concepts for the entire project were established with the silo. It has a spiral staircase and a bridge that connects it to a "party barn" about 10 feet away. The exterior features brick work that Morgan has shaped, cut, fired and installed in a pattern that seems at once haphazard and like a slow-moving lava flow. Like all of the artist's work, it is compellingly earthy.

Roots, who has served as project coordi-

nator for both phases, says the process has been arduous.

"It has taken a tremendous amount of organization," he says. "We have had to meet the clients' standards, coordinate with the architect and contractor, comply with building codes, work within a budget and have it done on time."

Morgan says he made about 7,000 bricks for the project and used another 4,000 regular bricks. For color variegation, he made dark blue salt-glazed brick and embedded shards of glass.

"To make the bricks, I'd wet down the clay for a couple of days," he says. "Then, I'd lay fabric on it and kick it, punch it and jump on it. That would shape it. With movement, I was creating an instant fossil."

After another few days, he would carve it with a spackling knife and cut it into bricks that he would take for firing.

Morgan says that although the project has required a huge amount of careful planning, there has been a surprising amount of room for spontaneity.

"At the end of each day, I'd stand back and look. That would tell me what to do the next day," he says. "It goes so slowly, there's plenty of time to make decisions."

Roots says the thing that distinguishes Morgan's work is that he merges ideas of brick as a building material and as a sculptural medium.

"I think of brick as clay," says Morgan, "as an organic substance that comes from the ground. I always try to emphasize that." **L**



Morgan collaborated with Larry Roots on a silo for Bill and Lisa Roskens in Nashville, Neb.  
PHOTO BY LARRY ROOTS