

John "Jack" Kearney – larger than life

John Kearney (1924-2014) is primarily known for his larger than life sculptures that he created as public works of art throughout the Nation, with a particular focus in his home city of Chicago. His subjects are predominately animal life and familiar figures and are characterized by their colossal presentation and high impact, whether they are in the form of a 20-foot tall three ton dinosaur or a 7-inch high anteater. Kearney's bold technique and choice of material, which consists of vintage car bumpers, other metal forms of found art, and fine bronze, create a dynamic in his art that is massive, yet sophisticated. Although his art is imposing, it evokes a light-hearted response that viewers embrace with a spirit of overwhelming awe and delight. His monumental work was often immense, the largest of which consisted of three individual dinosaur sculptures which were classified as Chromosaurs, since Kearney formed them out of welded automobile bumpers. Tyrannosaurus Rex, Stegosaurus, and Triceratops weighed tons and soared high above the ground, but they were not

20TH CENTURY MODERN

BY
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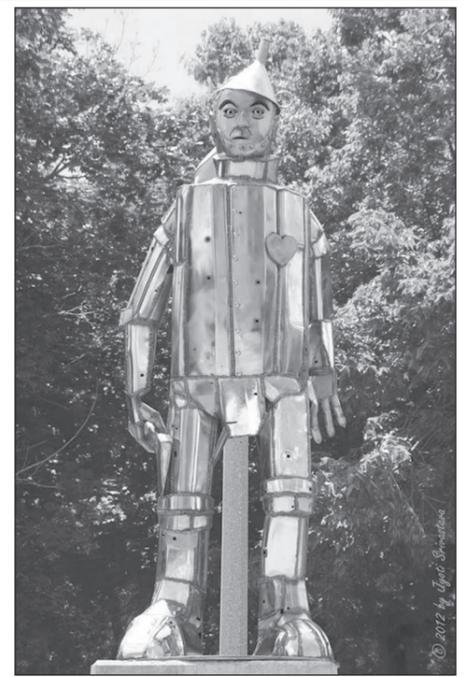
larger than Kearney's joy in creating them. Jack's work was considered a popular neighborhood event, which he gladly shared with all those interested. Upon the completion of his three ton triceratops, he invited a large crowd to his studio where, with great fanfare, he presented the work by climbing a ladder and sitting on the dino's neck, giving a dedication speech while all cheered and toasted with champagne. All three Chromosaurs were exhibited at Dallas Museum of Natural History and eventually were added to the Ripley's Believe it or Not collection.

Kearney, commonly called Jack, was well-loved by all who had the privilege of knowing him. His persona, as well as his art, resonated with joy, but it came to him as a divine restitution of a troubled and unstable childhood. His only respite from a turmoiled home environment was an occasional visit to his grandmother's farm, where he would delight in feeding her goats and learned the healing aspect of interacting with animal life. After

Left: "Nanny Goat," in the foreground, circa 1999, and "Goat," circa 1978, which are part of RAM's Wustum Museum collection, is reminiscent of Jack Kearney's first encounter with animals when he visited his grandmother's goats as a young child. Private Collection of Nina and Milton Zale. Image courtesy of the Racine Art Museum / Photography by Jon Bolton. **Below:** "Giraffe," circa 1979, made of welded steel bumpers, is one of six John Kearney sculptures that are installed on the grounds of RAM's Charles A. Wustum Museum of Fine Arts. Private Collection of Nina and Milton Zale. Image courtesy of the Racine Art Museum / Photography by Jon Bolton



Above Left: This bumper gorilla was commissioned by a neighbor who lived across the street from Lynn and Jack. It was ultimately displayed climbing high on the wall after Jack (shown third from the left) and an enthusiastic group managed to raise it with nothing more than ropes and dogged determination. Image courtesy of Lynn Kearney. **Above Right:** The Tin Man sculpture was commissioned by the Oz Park Advisory Council and paid for with funds donated by the Lincoln Park Chamber of Commerce. Image courtesy of Oz Park, Chicago, Ill.



leaving home at age 17, and never having looked back, Jack joined the Navy and served as a deep sea diver and an underwater welder, repairing ships all over the South Pacific. While he loved the Navy, the horrific war events that occurred during his stay of duty only deepened the trauma in his peacemaker's heart.

After the war, Kearney was accepted by the prestigious Cranbrook Academy of Art in Bloomfield Hills, Mich., on the basis of the excellence of his drawings that he sketched while in the Navy. While at Cranbrook he learned various forms of art, including sculpting. He saw it as his chance to bring glad tidings back into the wounded world through his art. "Jack told me he knew art was his calling since he was three years old," stated Lynn Kearney, his studio director and wife of 63 years. "I became his student at Contemporary Art Workshop in Chicago, which he co-founded in 1949 and where he taught for many years. After two dates we decided to marry and forty days later we were man and wife. We were poor but thought we were the richest people in the world. We had each other and Jack's art. One day he was searching a junkyard in Cape Cod for material and saw a bunch of bumpers that had been dumped and the way they fell formed an image in his eyes and it

Below: A Gorilla, gardening in front of the former Hull House Theater in Uptown, Chicago, is still in place today, although the area is now residential. Image courtesy of Samantha Kearney

was at that moment that his bumper art was conceived in his mind."

Chicago remained Kearney's home base. Much of his work began as neighborhood art, but he also worked out of a studio in Provincetown, Mass. He was not long into his new found career before the world took notice of his artistic genius, and as early as 1951 Jack had numerous One Man exhibitions that were presented by important galleries and museums, from Provincetown, Mass., to New York City, to Dallas, Texas. In 1953 he was awarded the Wallace Truman Prize at the National Academy of Design in New York. After receiving an Italian Government Grant in 1963, through the University per Stranieri, Perugia, Italy, and a Fulbright Award to Italy in 1963-64, he became a visiting artist at the American Academy in Rome in 1985, 1992, 1998, and 2003.

One of Kearney's most recognizable contributions was to Oz Park in Chicago. The 13 acre urban renewal site that in 1976 was named in honor of the author of The Wonderful Wizard of Oz, Lyman Frank Baum (1856-1919), who settled in Chicago in 1891. In 1995 John Kearney was commissioned to create the iconic Tin Man sculpture, which he made out of welded chrome bumpers, true to the MGM film image of the character. Only at the urging of a young child, Jack added the Tin Man's heart. The well-received sculpture was followed by sculptures of The Cowardly

SEE 20TH CENTURY ON PAGE 12



20th Century

FROM PAGE 6

Lion, Scarecrow, and Dorothy & Toto. The Tin Man was the only figure made out of bumpers; the others were sculptured in cast bronze. Oz Park remains a prominent and rewarding Chicago visitor's site.

Another important showcase for John Kearney's work is held by the Racine Art Museum (RAM) and RAM's Charles A. Wustum Museum of Fine Arts in Racine,

Below: Jack Kearney is perched on top of his famous Chromosaurs stegosaurus that stands 15-feet tall, 32-feet long, and weighs 6,620 lbs. It was installed at the Dallas Museum of Natural History. Image courtesy of Lynn Kearney

Wis. RAM holds the largest and most significant contemporary craft collection in North America. Curator of Exhibitions, Lena Vigna, commented, "Kearney's use of recycled automobile steel to make almost life-sized sculptures is not only inventive and compelling, but also speaks to larger interests on the part of Racine Art Museum's audiences. Many people today think about issues of sustainability and the role of industry in both environmental and cultural conversations. Kearney's work touches on these ideas, while also indirectly acknowledging Racine, Wisconsin's manufacturing roots, as well as its lesser known history as the site of significant early automotive industry developments. His engaging animals and figures reflect the artist's ingenuity and talent, as well as his desire to connect."

Jessica Zalewski, RAM Marketing and Publications Manager, observed, "Visitors to the gardens of RAM's Wustum Museum of Fine Arts are immediately drawn to Kearney's shining sculptures. They've become the focus of many a selfie and Instagram post, and sit in the background of summer wedding photos taken in the park. The metal goats, giraffes, and pelican are constant companions at our annual hands-on art events for families, like Kids Day each June and Fall Family Fun Fest in late October. Clearly, our museum guests love them, and Racine residents smile every time they drive by Kearney's six sculptures on Wustum's grounds."

What began in Chicago as neighborhood art, greatly appreciated by local

residents who cherished "their Jack" and his vulnerable heart for nature, has become a high place on the world stage of fine art. His award winning achievements span the globe, that specifically includes Rome and Venice, Italy, Santo Domingo, Taipei, and Niamey, among others. Perhaps the man's greatest legacy was spoken by his granddaughter, Samantha Kearney, "I wish everyone had the opportunity to meet my grandfather — he was an exceptionally kind and creative man with a real knack for storytelling."

Below: This 20-foot tall life-sized T-Rex, that stood in front of Chicago's Field Museum at Dino-Rama Wild & Woolly exhibit, is Jack's most massive work. Image courtesy of Lynn Kearney



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