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July 03, 2008

Out on a Limb

Tree sculpture at the Brooks gives cyclists a place to park.

by SHARA CLARK

For more than 20 years, local artist Tootsie Bell has been designing intricate jewelry. But her most recent project, standing at 12 feet tall, dwarfs her usual creations.

As part of the Brooks Museum's "eARTh matters" environmental program, Bell designed and created three bicycle racks. The museum hopes the steel freestanding "trees" — and a \$1 discount off admission for cyclists — will encourage patrons to bike to the Brooks.

"[Bell] understood that we are a museum, so they needed to look sculptural, but she also saw the Brooks within its context here in Overton Park. She took her cue from nature," says Elisabeth Callihan, the museum's public relations and event manager. "The work was also, and most importantly, highly functional as a bike rack."

While scoping out the area, Bell noticed people locking their bikes to the stair railing in front of the museum.

"There wasn't really an option for people who wanted to ride their bikes," Bell says. "I wanted to create something cool — art that could function as a bike rack."

From first sketch to installation, the project took about five weeks to complete. Bell subcontracted with welder Napoleon Boyd of Mason, Tennessee, to assist with the project.

"I knew working with him would enable me to do most of the work myself. I wanted to do as much as possible but didn't have the space or tools," Bell says.

Bell owns her own shop in East Memphis, Bell Fine Arts Jewelers, and has been exhibiting her jewelry locally for more than two decades.

"I never dreamed I would have the opportunity to have public art at a museum," Bell says. "I've done small work for a long time, and I love it, but I love the idea of doing something large and public."

Being part of this project has increased her environmental awareness and encouraged her to make changes in her life. She hopes it will do the same for others. "I drove by the other day, and I saw a lady sitting on a bench eating lunch. She was looking at my art, and I wondered what she was thinking," Bell says.

Since the start of the "eARTh matters" program last year, the Brooks has launched a large recycling effort, switched from harsh cleaning products to more eco-friendly citrus and peroxide cleaners, and replaced their heating and air conditioning system to a more



BY JAMIE RUSSELL

Tootsie Bell's bicycle racks grew out of the Brooks' "eARTh matters" program

energy-efficient model.

"The bike racks look great," says Brooks associate curator Stanton Thomas. "I can see them from my office. And even better, I see people using them, too."

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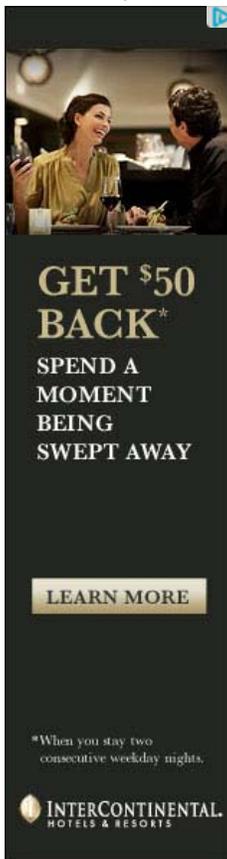
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