

Washington nuclear artist sculpts bridge to science

Hanford man given ton of uranium by Germany

By FIONA HUGHES

American sculptor James Acord wants the world to know he's not a shameless, self-promoting crackpot or a money-hungry screwball artist out to shock the world.

When people realize what his latest project involves they're usually intrigued that an artist wants to pay tribute to the atomic age. The curious can find out what his sculpture will look like March 16 when Acord visits Vancouver to give a slide presentation and lecture.

Canadians may not yet be familiar with Acord, but Americans, particularly the people of Hanford, Wash. (a nuclear reservation), are becoming aware of the man who became the first private citizen in the world to own nuclear materials.

That's right — the stuff of Three Mile Island and Chernobyl. In 1991, the German government donated a ton of uranium to him to make art. The uranium fuel arrived built into long, hexagonal, stainless-steel tubes called breeder blanket assemblies, worth more than \$1 million.

It took Acord a year and a half of endless paperwork to get licensed to take possession of the gift. Prior to that, he took graduate courses in nuclear engineering to fully understand what he was getting into. He moved to Hanford to have access to advanced nuclear technologies and now considers himself a member of an exclusive club.

"As an outsider, I have become a member of the club, which generally operates in secrecy," he said. "It humanizes the technology that affects us all. I can now represent a person's view of the technology, not just the industry's."

"When I sit at a table with other radiation technicians they have to listen to me. I am expected to be a responsible member of the nuclear community."

The 50-year-old sculptor's goal is to build a monument to the atomic age, bridge the gap between art and science and humanize nuclear engineering. He has no intention of endangering the public or the world.

"One of the goals I set for myself when I first began working with radioactive material was that there would never be any increase in hazard to the environment or to the public," Acord said over the phone from his home in Hanford.

"What I am doing is an endeavour to make the world a safer place by pulling these materials out of the environment and safely containing them in big chunks of granite. All sculpture materials are dangerous to a certain extent. You have to learn to be careful with whatever you're working with. You have to inform yourself and not fall asleep on the switch."

Canadians don't have to worry about Acord transporting his art north of the 49th parallel. He's not allowed to take it off the Hanford site because the state radioactive materials licence confines him to that location. So how does he expect people to understand what he's doing?

"The sculpture is site-specific for one of the cradles of the nuclear age," he explained. "It helps communicate what this place is about and warns people in the future not to drink water here and not to plant crops here."

"Everybody won't be able to visit Hanford, but on one hand, the sculpture can be well known even if people never see it but only hear of it through word of mouth. The sculpture is meant to inform people of the dangers of nuclear technology. It's the most important project of my life."

Acord, who can't afford health insurance, and lost his wife and house because of his dream, expects to complete his monument in five years. As for his opinion on advancing nuclear technology — it's here to stay, so we have to learn to deal with it.

"Nuclear power is the promise and the peril of this age," he said. "You can't wish technology away. It is both good and ill, depending on how we use it. As a sculptor, I feel the nuclear age does exist and won't go away."

"I have two feelings about advanced technology. It is like the music of Mozart — it belongs to us once it exists. But one segment of society manages it in complete secrecy. Being a member of the club, I can humanize it."

Acord explains his project at Simon Fraser University's Harbour Centre campus March 16 at 8 p.m. Admission is free. Call 291-5100 for reservations.