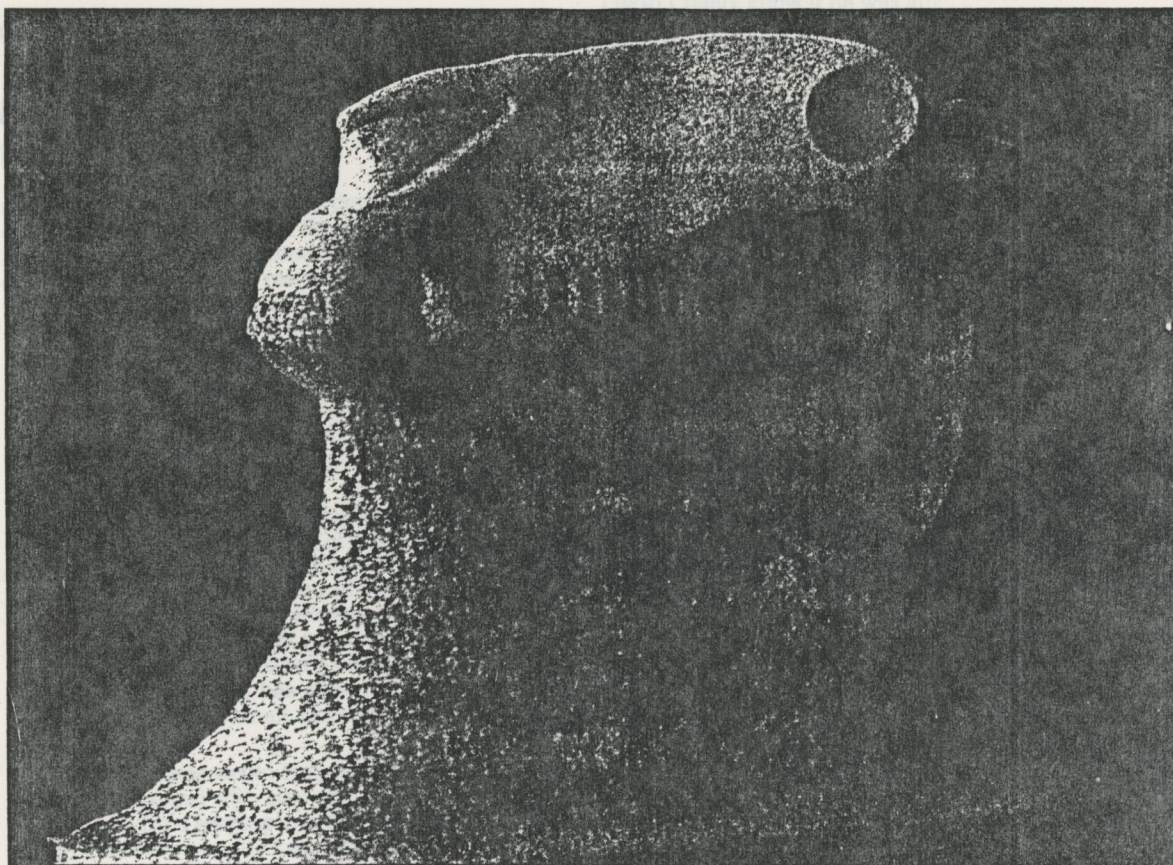




James Acord photo

This granite carving of a horse's skull holds a plug of uranium inside. Now the artist, James Acord, of Richland, Wash., wants to use nuclear fuel assemblies and granite to build a massive sculpture at the Hanford site that would explain the nuclear age.

Atomic artist

Sculptor pursues ambitious, radioactive vision

Brandon Loomis
Post Register

The lament is familiar at any social hour for nuclear engineers: Why on earth do we want to bury a national treasure like spent nuclear fuel?

But who let the artist in the room? We were talking energy and medicine here, not contour and beauty.

James Acord changes the mix. And he wants to bring others into the room with him.

Acord, 50, is a Seattle-born sculptor who was perfecting his granite technique in Vermont when the Three Mile Island reactor accident put nuclear technology in the national conscience. His fascination for the atom started there, and continued when he returned to his hometown amid a raging debate about nuclear waste disposal at

Washington's Hanford site.

He didn't know it then, but as he immersed himself in the nuclear culture, he would become a lone voice in the art world who saw beauty in splitting atoms, and who would try to give this technology to society by stripping away the fear. Only art can reduce the mysterious science to a level that doesn't intimidate people, and therefore helps them understand it, he contends.

"Until we have used a technology for a pure, unadulterated flight of beauty, maybe we haven't used it at all," says Acord, in eastern Idaho last week to speak to nuclear scientists and students. "Does society truly own a technology if it has only been used for weapons?"

Like the first people who chipped stones into spearheads, nuclear scientists created this technology for weapons, he says. But those prehis-

toric people eventually adopted the technique into many aspects of their lives, including the art of carving stones.

Struck by the unseen phenomenon of radiation, Acord started collecting antique plates with a uranium glaze that he crushed and burrowed inside granite carvings, out of sight but not out of mind.

Drawn deeper into the nuclear age, he moved to Richland, Hanford's home, and started the alien process of learning nuclear engineering at the local college.

Acord is proposing a sculpture almost the size of a football field on some of the most contaminated land at Hanford.

It would incorporate tall granite monoliths with carved pictographs

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showing the history of nuclear development, good and bad, from the laboratory to the mushroom cloud. Shorter slabs would show the reactors and facilities that were at Hanford, and would direct the viewer's eye across the landscape to their former sites.

The 12-foot-long hexagonal fuel assemblies would be arranged among the monoliths and tuned to create music in southeastern Washington's desert wind.

He also plans to make a long-lasting metal with small amounts of a radioactive fission product that can be stabilized into another, non-radioactive element. Like a bronze worker, he wants to form the stuff, not just work it. He had hoped to use Idaho's EBR-II reactor, but since that has closed he will contract with a small university reactor.

The sculptures would rest on a giant mound capped with clay and rock to keep rain from seeping into the contamination below, and to keep the contamination from seeping up to the visitors.

Maybe it will help people understand what happened at the Hanford weapons plant, and prepare them to make rational decisions about where to take the technology from here, he says. For all its dangers, mostly created under the shadow of Cold War, nuclear science offers medical and other unimaginable advances.

And maybe parts of the sculpture will warn future generations or life forms that might stumble across the site not suspecting what is below.

Acord hopes to piggyback on site cleanup efforts so most of the dirt-moving will be at government expense and he'll only have to raise the funds for materials and some student labor.

All he needs now is the Department of Energy's approval.

Difficult as that may sound, Acord's dedication to the subject matter has earned him some unlikely followers, and may open some doors.

The president of the American Nuclear Society, who works at Hanford, says he laughed when Acord first went to an ANS meeting and introduced himself as an artist. But Acord's persistence and desire to learn gained him entry into Hanford's circle of scientists.

"I didn't really know if he was authentic, but (now) I believe he is," Alan Waltar says. "I'm a convert at this point."

Speaking for himself, and not the ANS, Waltar says he hopes to see Acord's giant sculpture someday. And he believes Acord is the kind of person who can get it done.

"What he's doing by definition is pushing frontiers in all directions,"

Waltar says. "Given the right champion here and there, strange things are done — and I don't mean weird, but breakthroughs occur."

A public relations officer at Westinghouse Hanford Co., the site contractor, says Acord is inspiring, and he makes her day every time he calls.

"Even if nothing ever comes of it, it's worth the time," Margi Legowik said. Acord does numerous slide presentations and brings artists from Seattle to tour the site, she says. He's already breaking down the barriers between nuclear scientists and the public without even breaking ground at Hanford.

A friend who exhibits Acord's earlier work at a Seattle gallery says he's a well-respected granite carver, but most neighborhood artists have trouble figuring out why somebody would want to play with uranium. Peter Bevis says it finally sunk in for him, though.

"The highest form of technology is closeted away, controlled by only a few powerful people," he says. Acord is changing that, and helping to make former nuclear secrets into suitable conversation topics.

Acord says he's committed to the job. Perhaps he has reason to be, with what he's given to it so far. His wife, also an artist, moved with him to Richland but later left because the culture of a DOE town was so foreign. After going around and around with bureaucracy, he eventually became the only individual with a license to own nuclear materials, which allowed him to keep the uranium fuel assemblies from Germany.

He had one pinkie amputated at the first knuckle because using automated chisels forced bone chips into the ligament. The other pinkie will be amputated soon.

When he first moved to Hanford and wanted to learn the science, he changed his appearance to blend in with the scientists.

He has short-cropped dark hair and black plastic frames for his glasses, and reminds one of the man who drives around with deadly nuclear materials in his trunk in the sci-fi cult film "Repo Man." "Great flick," Acord agrees.

He wears sweaters and ties, and the only thing to give away his true occupation is the slight white spattering of something on his black shoes.

Building a monument on the Hanford desert would be quite a physical and bureaucratic feat, he says, dragging on a Camel cigarette. But he believes he can cut through all that, and gain public support by proposing a bite-sized piece of cleanup with some art on the side.

Maybe not, he confesses. So why not give up?

"It takes a certain lack of logic to be an artist," he says.