

ARTS • EVENTS

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Artists capture curiosity of youth with interactive exhibits



PHOTOS BY PHILIP KAMRASS/TIMES UNION

CAROL MAY AND TIM WATKINS design and build exhibits - like the scale-model of "Totally Tots," pictured here, destined for the Brooklyn Children's Museum.

BY SCOTT WALDMAN
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Tim Watkins and Carol May use slithering snakes, blue sand and walls of water to make children smile. The artists design interactive exhibits for children's museums that give thousands of young people places to hold puppet shows, caves with glowing petro-glyphs to crawl through and walls on which to write.

The couple, who are partners in business and in life, have created dozens of interactive exhibits for kids and sculptures for public art installations...Watkins and May create exhibits that will someday occupy thousands of square feet of museum space and make children want to crawl, climb and imagine. Watkins, 55, said it isn't a stretch for either of them to think like a child.

"It's part of the artist psyche, being a kid," he said.

They have created pieces for children's museums and sculptures in five states and Canada, including Calgary's Creative Kids Museum and the Troy Junior Museum. They've also done work for the Grammy Awards, the New York Historical Society and the Center for Holocaust Studies in New Jersey.

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Their work for children contains noisemaking, play-acting and even reading rooms in areas called "Bing Bang Bonger" and "Paint on It." Their adult-centered work includes paintings and kinetic sculptures, some more than 20 feet high that visitors often want to climb on.

May begins the process by sketching ideas on paper with colored pencils. Watkins helps her tweak the design with practical construction suggestions before she redraws the initial idea. This back-and-forth can happen more than a dozen times, so the artists each contribute to the design and execution.

Then their studio becomes a cacophony of screeching metal or wood being cut.

They have barely had a break since 1998, May said, because one project lines up as soon as another is completed.

One recent intensive late-night session produced a large scale model containing large, fluid shapes that will hang in a massive two-story window and twist from a solar-powered engine mounted on the roof.

May, 57, knew she'd be an artist at age 9. She said her creative inspiration for her pieces today come from the same place they did when she stole the paint from her brother's paint-by-number set and made a studio for herself in the basement.

"I've never had a break, being a kid and an adult, I've never had a separation," May said.

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