

Jeff de Boer's ball of light ignites into blaze of colour

BY NANCY TOUSLEY CALGARY HERALD, CALGARY HERALD FEBRUARY 4, 2009



Calgary artist Jeff de Boer with his latest sculpture.

Photograph by: Stuart Gradon, Calgary Herald

Digital art a first for artist

A small knot of excited people stood on a cold street corner Tuesday night, talking over the sound of a generator running at the site of a broken water main and waiting for the lights to come on inside Jeff de Boer's latest work.

Like a singer warming up, the giant stainless steel ball began to emit pops of light until glowing wavy lines of lavender materialized and turned into other colours as an 11-minute light show got underway.

Tonight, the vivid light show will be 19-minutes long and it will include a one-minute animation that will make the ball, which is eight feet in diameter, appear to be an orb of fire.

De Boer's sculpture, *Light Up the Universe and Everything*, is one of two public art works commissioned by the Torode Group of Companies, which are being unveiled today. *Calgary Root*, a sculpture by American artist Steve Tobin, was installed Tuesday in front of 8 West, a Torode retail and office tower at 8th Street and 8th Avenue S.W.

De Boer's sphere, which on this Tuesday night appears to be revolving because of the way the light is

programmed, is near the northeast corner of 1st Street and 13th Avenue S.W. Motorists and pedestrians will be able to see it for blocks, when the ball is lit up at night. During the day, viewers will see a metal sphere with a patterned surface that is constructed from wavy-edged stainless steel plates, which are held in place by large domed rivets, and supported on a three-metre-tall steel column.

"I would describe it as a fusion of static metal sculpture and digital kinetic sculpture that by day is one thing and by night is another thing," says de Boer.

The 45-year-old Calgary artist is known for making tiny, perfect metal mouse and cat armour and large public projects, like *When Aviation Was Young*, the two gigantic "wind-up-toy" towers in the WestJet lounge at Calgary International Airport.

The combination of digital technology, light and metalwork in *Light Up the Universe* and *Everything* is one of a few firsts for de Boer. It is his first digital sculpture, his first attempt at working with metal and coloured light, and his first outdoor sculpture. All of this points to a change of direction in his career.

He had been mulling over the idea for a long time, though, and when the ball got rolling, it went lickety-split.

"It all happened so fast," he says. "You are so used to going through process (for public commissions). Torode had faith. That's something that doesn't happen very often. I had been thinking about the idea for years and I had to put the proposal together in three days."

The outside of the ball is covered with nine rows of 16 panels with wavy edges, each of which is made of special, corrosion-resistant stainless steel. Each of these panels is made from two smaller ones, which have been welded together. A large, domed, light-reflecting rivet holds each panel in place. The surface is watertight and bears a visual resemblance to de Boer's miniature armour, although on a vastly enlarged scale.

Inside the sphere, there are 736 LED lights in 16 strings, each operated by a separate computer. Each light can be operated individually and has the capacity to emit 4,000 different hues. A master computer located in the building adjacent to the sculpture tells the 16 computers inside it what to do.

"There is a lot of digital art around these days, but being a sculptor, I have never given over to the computer. I'm still a maker of things," says de Boer. "But you see the power of digital and you want to work with digital."

"The digital technology has finally come along, and also the fabrication technology, and everything has arrived at this moment in time to make this sculpture possible. It's really about putting those two things together."

De Boer first started working with LED lights for the large project he did for the atrium of the Alberta

Children's Hospital. The more he explored the technology, the more he realized its potential. "So it's been a five-year evolution to this point," he says.

Once the Light Up the Universe commission was in hand, the work went relatively quickly. The design phase took three months, the fabrication seven. De Boer had a team of companies he works with (he describes them as "artist-friendly and open-minded to challenging projects") ready to go. He worked with Brock Schroeder of Halcrow Yolles to engineer the sculpture and MAF, Metal Alloy Fabrication, to build it.

The computer program that runs the light show will change in the future. "We don't know what it can do yet," he says. It begins as a 19-minute program that loops. In the future it could do many other things, including complex animations and programs keyed to special events like Christmas, New Year's or the Olympics. The possibilities are endless.

"I also think it may be possible that sometime in the future, other artists might want to play with it, too," says de Boer. "If an artist was inspired to do something, they could get access to the technology, which I think would be lovely."

De Boer has never shied away from large projects. "I come out of craft. I was trained to deal with detail. Making large things (involves) a lot more details, but if you break them all down you can deal with details one at a time. I've always told people I have only one skill, it's just really flexible."

ntousley@theherald.canwest.com

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