

Art of Glass



Sculptures behind Skeen Hall offer a fresh look at the desert world through ordinary window glass.

The sun glints off furrows in the field, raindrops make splashdowns and moonlight glistens on sand dunes in the panels of Ken Leap's sine waves series.

Photos by Darren Phillips

Artist Ken Leap, above, installs one of the glass panels in his sculpture series in Skeen Hall's McElyea Courtyard. A single panel contains 240 pieces of glass, each just under a quarter-inch thick. The finished panels near the fountain, right, create furrow patterns by reflecting and refracting light.





Leap, a former meteorologist, used weather symbols for lightning and rain in the stainless steel frames. He says the icons on weather charts resemble Native American symbols. The glass panels on the left show ripple patterns like those from raindrops.

Leap, a meteorologist and electrical engineer turned artist, transformed sine waves into sculpture by writing a computer program to create templates for cutting the glass.

The six stainless steel frames contain stacks of 240 glass pieces, each the thickness of a window pane. The panels reflect and refract light, creating greenish blue images with depth.

“In composing the images, I use mathematics to do what you’d do with a camera,” Leap says. He calls the technique refractive relief sculpture.

The images in the glass are dynamic, affected by weather and the viewer’s perspective. Steel frames provide sky elements for each scene.

The three panels on the hill above the burbling fountain in McElyea Courtyard have sun and ray symbols in the frames over glass furrows. Lightning and rain symbols loom over two glass panels of ripples nearby. Closest to the building, a single panel shows a steely moon above sand dunes.

“The symbols used on weather charts—depicting various meteorological phenomena—have a striking resemblance to Native American symbols,” Leap says. “I wanted an environmental theme with agriculture tied to weather, so that was a great connection.”

Leap, who worked for eight years as a meteorologist and electronics engineer for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration in Boulder, Colo., could never have forecast the turns his career has taken.

His second job, as a senior product engineer for medical monitoring equipment, wasn’t beneficial to his mental health. But still in Boulder, he met his wife, Regina, who was pursuing her doctorate in mathematics.

They married, and she accepted a teaching position with Eastern New Mexico University in Portales, where he’s taught engineering technology and mathematics as an adjunct faculty member. But after several years, Regina knew he was ready for another change.

“She asked me what it would take to keep me in Portales,” Leap says. “I said, ‘I’ll work on a degree in art,’ and she said ‘Let’s start a family.’ We made a deal that I’d be Mr. Mom and stay home with the kids and work on a new degree, and she’d continue to teach.

“Now we have two kids, and I have a career in art.” Jessica, 7, and Christopher, 5, are helping their dad with his latest project, building a boat.

While Leap says parenting and making a living as an artist are more challenging than engineering, he’s pleased with the family bargain. “We’ve made some sacrifices, but

the freedom is satisfying.”

As an art student, Leap started in graphic design to take advantage of his technical and computer skills. To complete his degree, however, he had to take fine art classes. “I fell in love with painting and drawing and abandoned graphic design,” he says. His other interest was sculpture.

For a class in two-dimensional design, Leap needed an idea for an abstract work, usually a challenge for new students. His concept came from a sculpture class, where he’d been using glass to build cubes, drawing inspiration from the work of Taos- and Los Angeles-based artist Larry Bell.


“I had a stack of glass on the workbench and was viewing the light coming through the edges of the glass,” Leap recalls. “I made a self-portrait by cutting the edges and stacking them up as a relief sculpture, which was bound to have abstractions. From then on, I kept experimenting.”

The results won glowing reviews and commissions. *Math Horizons* magazine featured Leap in a cover story about his technique.

In New Mexico, Leap’s work can also be found in the Bernalillo County Courthouse and on the ENMU campus, as well as gallery shows and private collections.

Though sometimes questioned about the durability of his art of glass, Leap has never had a public work broken. Just in case, he maintains the templates so that he could replace a portion or entire panel of glass.

And after seeing the effects of a daily dose of sprinkler water on one of his ground-level designs, he made the NMSU sculpture frames 12 feet above the ground. The only maintenance needed for the 1,440 glass pieces of his sculpture? “A little Windex to remove mineral deposits.”

It doesn’t seem like a lot to ask for a new window on the desert world. 



The panel nearest Skeen Hall is topped with a steel moon illuminating dune patterns in the glass.

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