

# Fairbanks sculptor's ideas often take her outdoors

## WORKSPACE

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*Rachelle Dowdy installed four animal sculptures in the Key Bank Plaza on Fifth Avenue downtown last month. "A lot of my sculptural ideas come from the building trade," she said. "... You grow up in Alaska doing it yourself, and that's how I picked up a lot of skills."*

What is a studio? It's not as easy a question to answer as you might think. A space that can serve as a painter's atelier might not do for a writer's garret, nor would it fit the bill for a music room, a carver's bench or a place to block out the scenes of a play. What passes for a studio is as various as the artists and art forms that occupy them.



And if you stretch your definition to "anyplace art is made," then a mountain slope in the Chugach is a studio where the plein-air painter works at top speed to capture the shifting light as it moves across the passes and the Inlet. The vacant lot near the Anchorage Museum of History and Art is a studio because it has been pressed into service on several occasions for creation of dance performances, public sculptures and architectural mock-ups.

And then there's the Key Bank Plaza downtown. You know the one: in front of Starbucks, across the street from the arts center. You've probably crossed it on your way to a performance, an ATM, a quick cup of coffee. On a recent sunny afternoon, it was the sculpture studio of Fairbanks artist Rachelle Dowdy. She was installing a quartet of sculptures that were presented to the city as the concluding gesture of the

8th World Wilderness Congress in Anchorage in October. Dowdy had been working on the commission since July and was finally ready to install them.

On the day of the installation, Dowdy's "studio" had a lot in common with a construction site. A Komatsu forklift hulked in the middle of a taped-off rhombus that was cluttered with the inevitable fluorescent orange cones, a welter of tool belts and heavy-duty power cords, jigs, wooden pallets, 5-gallon buckets of sand and assorted debris. There were angled pieces of rough 2-by-4 crisscrossing the cracked pavement; an 18-volt DeWalt drill abandoned to one side with a Phillips-head driver chucked into it; a boom box smutted with concrete dust that muttered pop music. A pile of bronze-colored, 2 ½-inch deck screws -- reclaimed from a knocked-down set of forms -- caught the sun on a piece of plywood scrap.

Dowdy had used the forms to help her fabricate four concrete platforms to hold a moose, a bear, a fox and a goose above the sidewalk fray. No ordinary examples of wildlife, though, these are fused, centaurlike, to human legs and torsos. Except for their elevation and their bizarre physiognomy, they could be mistaken for other pedestrians, ambling along on private errands, headed back to the office from lunch, striding over to Nordstrom to look at a pair of shoes.

Dowdy has managed to give her animals the body english of the experienced urban walker, along with the abstracted, inward-looking facial expressions most of us wear as we walk the city's sidewalks. There's something interesting about the pieces beyond the artist's somewhat jokey use of a human-animal hybrid; they have personality, presence, and they make the plaza feel occupied and purposeful.

"I chose to make the animal figures this way because of something I heard on the radio one time," she said. "There was this survey that said something like 75 percent of Anchorage liked living with wild animals as part of their lives."

However artful Dowdy's work might be, there was nothing even remotely "arty" about Dowdy herself as she moved from statue to statue wearing flannel shirt, heavy jeans and work boots. There was nothing affected about her outfit; what else would one wear around tools and building materials? As she worked, she was straightforward and natural, mugging for a photographer's camera, all business as she packed sand around the base of the bear.

"Hey, Brendan, this one needs sand in back too," she said, calling to Brendan Kelliher-Combs, her helper on the project and brother of painter Sonya Kelliher-Combs. The circular saw he was using to cut away a section of form stopped with a whang, and he carried the bucket over to dump more sand where she needed it. Brendan also helped Dowdy on her last large-scale outdoor installation, a flock of 300 Bohemian waxwings she installed at the Alaska Psychiatric Institute just about a year ago, bolting each member of the flock individually to a wall.

"I hated that project," he says. "All those birds ..."

Dowdy, however, likes to work outside as much as possible. It's something she comes by honestly, having been raised in Fairbanks as the daughter of a junkyard owner.

"A lot of my sculptural ideas come from the building trade," she said. "So the idea of building and sculpture just seem to work well together. You grow up in Alaska doing it yourself, and that's how I picked up a lot of skills."

On this project, for instance, the statues are made of ferroconcrete, the steel-reinforced material that's more familiar in buildings and pavements. Once she poured, shaped and cured the statues, Dowdy brought them to the site on a truck bed, and once she used the forklift to get them onto their pedestals, she began treating them with Lumiseal mixed with oil and pigments. Not only does the mixture protect the figures -- to a point -- it also gives them their personality.

"The surface ends up seeming glazed the way an oil painting is glazed," Dowdy said. "Ferroconcrete is sort of a cheap alternative to bronze. But bronze just patinates. The concrete pits; it's more organic. I like that. I'll finish them off with kayak resin or clear Rhino Hide, which is basically a truck-bed liner."

She laughs. "Basically, they'll have giant condoms on them."

The statues did look bronzelike in the low afternoon sun. The light created honey-toned glints on their surface, and it caught in the eyes of the fox, creating an expression of crafty surmise. If you walk by some afternoon soon, you might be well advised to keep your eye on your latte and your hand on your wallet.

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