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Santa Fe sculptor sends his works on the road to botanical gardens around country

By Joseph Ditzler | jditzler@sfnewmexican.com Jul 2, 2018 Updated 12 hrs ago



Jennifer and Kevin Box laugh together while discussing the colors for the new steel lilies at Kevin Box Studio off of Highway 14 on June 13, 2018. Gabriela Campos/The New Mexican

The people who run the Memphis Botanic Garden in Tennessee are excited about Kevin Box.

The Santa Fe sculptor, known for his origami sculptures in bronze, steel and aluminum, is bringing his *Origami in the Garden 2* exhibition to the city on the Mississippi River for a six-month stay starting in September. The exhibition is the smaller version of two that Box and his crew constantly have on the road around the country. It

comes in a tractor-trailer with 17 pieces of art: cranes, planes, plants and other objects.

“It’s the one hot one that everyone wants,” said Gina Harris, director of events and programs at the Memphis garden. “You throw a picture of that in a gardening magazine and it’s, ‘Oh, my god, I want that.’”

The boom in botanical garden exhibitions is a win-win for Box and the venues where his studio’s *Origami in the Garden* exhibitions make their stands. Box, 41, combined an artistic vision with clear-eyed business acumen to find commercial success, said Selby Fleetwood, co-owner with Eddie Buchbinder of Selby Fleetwood Gallery on Canyon Road.

In May, the gallery marked 10 years representing Box’s work in Santa Fe. All of their artists are doing well, much better than in 2008, but Box is doing particularly well, Fleetwood said.

However, shifting trends in the art business, whether gallery sales competing with online sales and millennials eschewing acquisitions for experiences, are creating anxiety among artists and gallery owners. Box said his art is finding buyers, but the garden exhibitions accomplish several things. They create a new revenue stream, build a new audience for his work and promote the art market in Santa Fe.

“What I’ve found is that the most successful market in the United States, for me, No. 1 is Santa Fe,” he said in a May interview. “I just want to shout from the hilltops to everybody in Santa Fe how big a deal it is.”

For Box, botanical gardens are a nationwide platform to display his art, six months at a time, in places like Chicago; Minneapolis-St. Paul; Tucson, Ariz.; Naples, Fla.; and Memphis. He can size the exhibit to fit the venue with either a monumental version or a scaled-down treatment with fewer pieces.

“It’s nuts, really,” he said. “We have two, three shows traveling right now on two different scales. The monumental show is three tractor-trailers full of work, and it’s like no joke moving that thing around.”

In Chaska, Minn., just southwest of Minneapolis, the monumental version of Box’s exhibition opened in April for a six-month show at the 1,200-acre Minnesota Landscape Arboretum. Like other gardens, the exhibit costs no more to see than the usual price of admission. The gardens typically find a corporate sponsor to cover the exhibit costs and then reap additional revenue through increased attendance.

Box’s work, some of which is created with other artists, is popular for several reasons, said Susie Eaton Hopper, spokeswoman for the Minnesota arboretum. Some shows, including the Dale Chihuly exhibition last year at the New York Botanical Garden, are expensive and require additional costs for security and insurance.

“One of the things really amazing about [*Origami in the Garden*] is it’s very sturdy, and these pieces are really able to withstand the outdoors in all the elements. Plus, many of these pieces can be touched by the visitors,” Hopper said. “That is not always the case. In fact, many places have to work to keep people from touching them.”

Art exhibitions at botanical gardens have been a trend for some time, part of a larger effort to offer more than just a walk through a garden. In Memphis, which until recently struggled to remain financially sound and relevant in a digital age, the facility's calendar is full of educational programs and concerts along with weddings, cocktail parties and art exhibits.

"If you're going to keep your doors open, you have to be more than a garden," Harris said. "This is just a kind of a new thing we're delving into. Not only does it bring in more money but it brings in a new generation."

The larger version of *Origami in the Garden* opened in April at the Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden in Richmond, Va. Attendance was up nearly 7 percent for the first two months of the exhibit over the same period last year, according to an email from Beth Monroe, public relations and marketing manager for the garden.

Box, a native of Oklahoma, started his career as a graphic designer. He still designs promotional and marketing materials for the studio, which employs five people. His wife, Jennifer Box, is the business manager. His mother, Susan Maclin, previously an archivist for the former Phillips Petroleum Co., inspired him to work with paper, which segued into working with metals.

"It's been a really big deal for us to be able to travel nationally to these major gardens, where literally hundreds of thousands of people from all walks of life are getting the experience of seeing our work displayed in some of the most beautiful gardens in the world, really," Kevin Box said.

Despite talk that gallery sales are down and millennials are not yet buying art, if they ever will, as their parents and grandparents have done, Box said he's doing well, sales-wise. And, he said, Santa Fe is a big part of that success.

"It's not just that Selby Fleetwood Gallery has been my top-earning gallery for 10 years running. It's that not another gallery in any other market has come close," Box said. "The next gallery giving her a run for her money is in Napa Valley. They have five locations. A gallery with five locations in Napa Valley is still not outselling one gallery in Santa Fe. That's impressive."

His work is also available in Palm Desert, Calif., and in Aspen, Boulder and Vail, Colo., but he's withdrawing his work from galleries in other cities because sales are declining. The commercial side of art is changing, Box said, and he's adapting his business model to accommodate that change.

"That's my experience, and I have 10 years of sales evidence of that," he said, "that the sales at the major cities' galleries have been on a steady decline to the degree that we just cut it off and said we're not doing it anymore."

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