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New Artwork to Illuminate Campus

November 18, 2011

Artist Lyle London oversees assembly of the triple helix structure.

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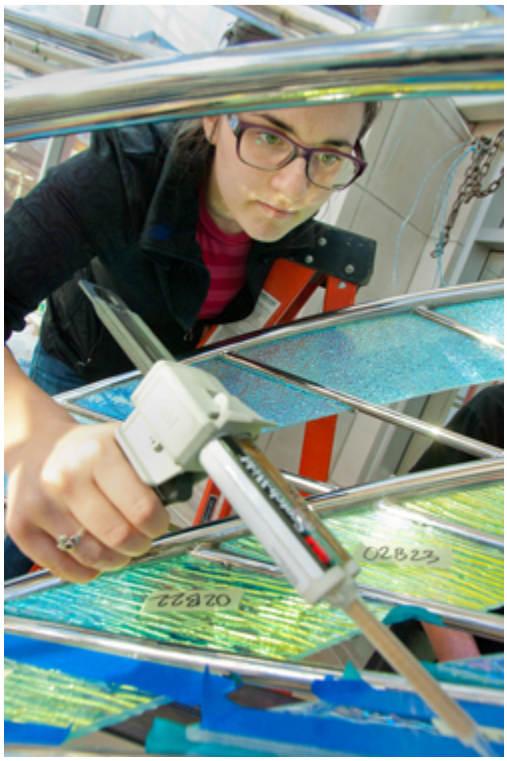
BLOOMINGTON, Ill. — Over a decade ago, in 1998, the Illinois Wesleyan School of Art was given an endowment gift of $2 million by B. Charles Ames '50 to name the art building after his wife, Joyce Eichhorn Ames. Over the years, Mrs. Ames, class of 1949 and a former art student, wondered if anything could be done to distinguish the building, utilitarian in nature, as a recognizable school of art. The plans that followed can now be seen from the Robert S. Eckley Quadrangle – a glass rotunda entrance that houses a unique sculpture by artist Lyle London of Tempe, Ariz.

The more than 2,400-square-foot glass rotunda will serve as the new entryway to the school of art building. With a substantial amount of work finished on the outside of the rotunda itself, the sculpture can now be placed within, as art students and faculty, as well as London, began working together this week to suspend it from the center of the glass tower.

Funded by trustee emeritus Flora Harris Armstrong, class of 1943, as a gift to the University, the work is an abstraction, taking the form of three interwoven, tapering helices. It is constructed from stainless steel and dichroic glass.



Riley Blindt '13 applies adhesive to several pieces of glass, as she and other students help with the installation of the sculpture.

The triple helix takes its inspiration from things found in nature, as London notes that many of his works reflect. London is particularly interested in biological microscopy, or the investigation of small structures in biology, such as DNA. He notes that the helix form can be found in a variety of other objects, as well, such as nautilus shells and spiral galaxies in astrophysics.

"The helix structure seems to be used in nature a lot, so I borrowed from the structure and integrated it in a way that had some promise for the viewer," said London, whose portfolio contains thousands of works.

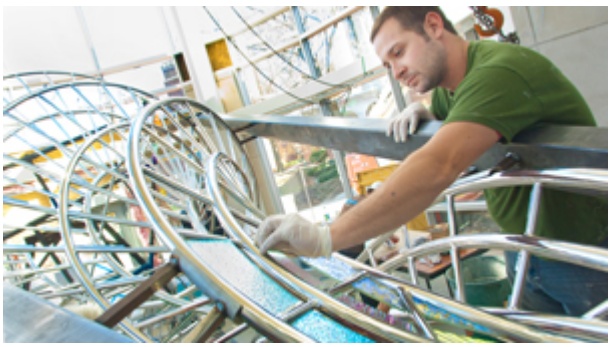
True to its DNA-like form, the structure has many intricacies. The glass is transparent from certain viewpoints, allowing the viewer to see behind it, which creates a color mixture as the pieces wrap around and overlap each other. The number of variables this creates is one of the aspects of the piece that London says he finds most fascinating.

The color in the structure comes from a computerized light system, which will be installed in January. The system is reprogrammable, allowing for a variety of scenes, or color combinations, to be displayed. Each scene lasts for approximately an hour. Mike Oesch, a 1999 graduate of Illinois Wesleyan University's School of Theatre Arts, will assist with the lighting program. Oesch has worked as lighting director for a number of the School of Theater Arts productions.

London, who emphasized the importance of student involvement in the project, plans on leaving the lighting system behind as a permanent learning tool. "There's no reason why students can't create their own scenes [with this system], not only to learn from, but to create finished environments for events or just nighttime viewing," he said. "It gives the participants a sense of ownership in the project and some interest in it, besides purely abstract interest for the viewer."

In order to see the maximum dynamic color range of the work, Illinois Wesleyan officials agreed to London's request to use low-iron glass in the rotunda windows. Unlike clear float glass, which is typically used in most buildings, low-iron glass does not create a green cast; it is crystal clear. With this type of window treatment, the colors of the structure will be exposed in their purest form, according to London. "We won't be looking at it through a filter," he explained. "You'll see the piece come out more fully on the campus quad."

While the majority of his works are ground-based, London is excited to see this piece suspended from the glass tower. "This is the opportunity of a lifetime, to have an architectural setting like this that literally revolves around the sculpture. That doesn't happen often," he said. "It was a great idea putting this work in this environment."



Fabricator Matt Schreick works on the installation.

Illinois Wesleyan President Richard F. Wilson remarked that when choosing the piece of art, a very specific kind of sculpture was in mind – one that could be suspended so as not to interfere with the entryway. This type of artwork, he believed, would allow for the entrance to serve as a reception space, while still highlighting the artwork itself. Essentially, the best of both worlds could be achieved with this layout.

Ben Rhodes, associate vice president for advancement, is particularly thrilled to see the structure go up, as he has been involved in the process from the very beginning. Rhodes first learned about London through his brother, Reilly Rhodes, who is an active member of the art community in California. Ben found London's work striking and knew it would be the most fitting style of art for the glass rotunda. After approaching President Wilson, Mrs. Ames and others with a few examples of London's work, the committee knew this was the work they wanted.

Work continues on the exterior of the rotunda as the sculpture is installed within.

"I'm like a kid at Christmastime, I just want to open the package and see it" Rhodes said, when discussing his excitement when the sculpture first arrived on campus. Rhodes believes that at night the sculpture will serve as a beacon and focal point for the campus, which will meet Mrs. Ames's objective to create a more prominent art building.

Rhodes also feels that the work of art will serve a variety of other purposes beyond the realm of public art. "The colors of the sculpture seem to be alive. They can and will change during the day as the light hits it. It transforms, and that's what students do, as well. Their lives transform – students change, grow and graduate. Life is never static. The sculpture seems to represent that," he said.

For London, who has a wide variety of clients, working on a university campus is a great opportunity. "It is the ideal environment for me because of the young people and the intellectual curiosity that permeates the environment. This curiosity is missing in a lot of other projects – it's all about deadlines and money," London said, explaining that while there is still some curiosity, the main drive is to produce a finished product by a certain date. "Here it's a little different. Not that you don't have deadlines to meet, but because we're able to get the students involved, it becomes a learning process."

London will return to campus at the beginning of the spring semester to assist with the lighting program. Dates for a public unveiling are yet to be determined, however Rhodes hopes it will be in January or February of 2012.

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