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A 'TYTON' imagination

By GARY DEMUTH Salina Journal | Saturday, May 24, 2014 2:00 AM

How many submarines have their own ballroom, nightclub, horse track, Olympic-sized swimming pool, bowling alley, golf course and drive-in movie theater?



Only the TYTON sub, thanks to the wild imagination of artist Randy Regier.

Regier, a Wichita-based sculptor and painter, has built a reputation for creating a series of artistic "toys." These have included spaceships, race cars, a bloody Bonnie and Clyde car, a battery-powered astronaut, a futuristic bus and a series of action figures called "John Manshaft."

Much of his work is a homage to toys created in the 1940s and 1950s, combined with a contemporary satirical viewpoint.

"I envision my toys as the products of toy manufacturers from a sort of parallel consumer society, a world in which bad dreams are as likely to come true as good," said Regier, a native of Omaha, Neb.

That's especially true in his newest creation, a futuristic luxury submarine called the TYTON. Regier said he created the sub as if he were a visionary designer from the early 20th century envisioning what a passenger submarine might look like in the year 1958.

The TYTON toy submarine, which measures about 50 inches long, 14 inches wide and 22 inches high, is on exhibit through Aug. 31 at Salina Art Center, 242 S. Santa Fe.

It's like a dollhouse

The sub is split down the middle, which allows viewers to see a myriad of small rooms and compartments, many of them filled with tiny figures of people and animals, measuring about 1¹/₈₇ scale, or Matchbox car scale, Regier said.

Each tiny figurine was painstakingly painted by Regier's wife, Vicki, with the help of a magnifying device.

Looking into the sub, Regier said, is "like looking into a dollhouse. I wanted to create something that would be conceivable in a 1950s dream."

We can have everything

That said, why wouldn't a luxury passenger sub in 1958 have its own horse track and drive-in movie theater?

"It's quintessentially American in that 'Why can't we have everything?' " Regier said. "It has that 1950s nationalism combined with Cold War-era paranoia."

An example of Regier's social commentary is illustrated by a series of radium barrels in the ship's boiler room that have split open and are leaking radioactive waste directly under the children's day care room.

But essentially, Regier said, he just wanted to have fun creating the kind of toy sub that a particularly gifted 12-year-old model-builder might dream up.

Homage to model kits

"I grew up making model kits, but I've never done a homage to model kits before," he said.

"I built this as if I were 12, so if some decals are crooked or the paint is gooey or I've made clunky corners, that was very freeing to me."

What Regier did not expect his TYTON to turn into was a multimedia extravaganza, complete with a recorded soundtrack that mixes music, ship announcements and written dialogue of overheard "conversations" between the many passengers on the sub.

Locals gone wild

This nearly 30-minute "audio play" was supervised by Gail Lerner, a Los Angeles-based comedy writer, director and producer and friend of Regier, and Salina Art Center Executive Director Bill North.

Lerner gathered local writers and actors to create a mosaic of voices of people who might be sailing on the sub, from spies and stowaways to lounge singers and washed-up actresses.

"Randy had this luxury submarine with a nightclub, bowling alley and drive-in, and he got the idea to split the sub in two so you could see all those things with tiny figurines and toys inside," Lerner said. "So we made a list of all these things in

the sub and created scenes in all the rooms. Everyone's imagination went wild."

Using local writers and actors was part of the Salina Art Center's Warehouse Community Initiative, which provides opportunities to use the warehouse for artist-centered, community-driven activities. The initiative is funded in part by the Horizons Grants program of Salina Arts and Humanities Foundation and the city of Salina.

Couple of singing sisters

Lerner said the collaboration with local talent went beyond her expectations.

"Everyone jumped in with both feet," she said. "You often have to encourage people to contribute, but everyone had so many ideas and they were so enthusiastic and talented."

Lerner recorded the soundtrack for the sub over a three-day period with the assistance of Kevin Shand, of New York City, a professional sound designer and engineer.

Shand also contributed songs recorded and produced for the project by Grammy-winning musician and music producer Michael Leonhart, with vocals by singing sisters Olivia, 13, and Charlotte Knutsen, 11.

"Gail said she needed music for this amazing ballroom on the ship, so Michael did these inventive, original arrangements of standards to capture the exotic feel of this ship," Shand said.

The result, Lerner said, is 30 minutes of interwoven music and overheard conversations. "We have to thank Randy for giving us such a fertile playground," she said.

Play is about freedom

Regier considers himself lucky that he gets to make a career out of creating the kind of work that inspired him as a 12-year-old.

"I don't want to be 12 again, but it's nice to be able to continue to play," he said. "Play is about freedom -- freedom to make up one's world or one's place in the world. I feel that as long as I can feel like that 12-year-old kid, I can create really rich things."

-- Reporter Gary Demuth can be reached at 822-1405 or by email at gdemuth@salina.com.

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