TEXAS TECH UNIVERSITY

Professor's Art Installed at Holt Cat San Antonio Headquarters

by Amanda Castro-Crist

The 37-foot chain-link sculpture is by School of Art professor William Cannings. An orange inflated raft, silver inner tubes, overstuffed pillows: the pieces created by artist William Cannings invite the human touch. They're familiar objects, with what should be a familiar feel, but once contact is made, the façade disappears. Instead of vinyl, rubber or cloth, the pieces are steel, shaped using heat and bursts of air.

Visitors to the new corporate headquarters of San Antonio-based construction equipment dealer HOLT® CAT, the largest Caterpillar® equipment dealer in the U.S., will now get to experience the puzzling sensation themselves. Cannings' newest installation, a 37-foot chain of inflated steel links, now hangs from the lobby ceiling in the new building.

"In terms of a single length, this is one of the biggest pieces I've created," said Cannings, a Texas Tech alumnus and sculpture professor in the J.T. & Margaret Talkington College of Visual & Performing ArtsSchool of Art. "The links are based off the infinity symbol, and the way the chain works, it could just carry on and on. HOLT® Caterpillar machines were the first, to my knowledge, big pieces of equipment that used tank treads, and that was the inspiration. Those caterpillar treads are kind of an infinite design where you can add another like a chain and it can go on forever."

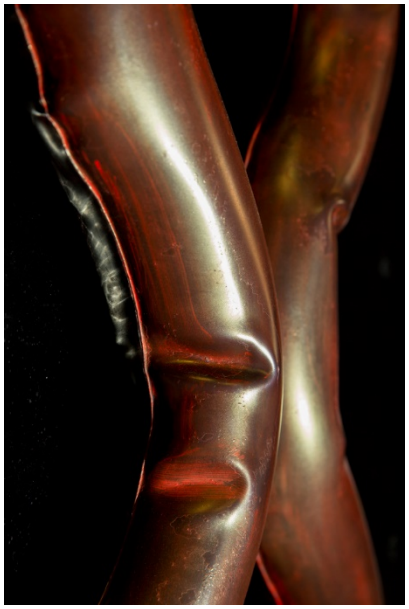
Creating a chain reaction

The piece is made of 17 three-foot-tall steel links, all cut using the same pattern from sheets of steel. The welded patterns were then heated, inflated and painted red with a colored wax.

"Because of variables in the process, the links all inflate slightly differently and they have creases in different places," Cannings said. "They might kink in certain places or dent in others, and they begin to have a life of their own, and it just becomes very visually engaging. I love all the creases – it makes them human."

Cannings said it took about a year from the initial proposal in October 2016 to the two-day installation of the finished piece this October.

"They approached me because they are art collectors," Cannings said of the company. "They'd seen work I'd done at a show in Houston and really enjoyed it. It's just enormous exposure, and what a privilege and how lovely it is that somebody has given me this opportunity and they see the value in the work. I'm one of 20 Texas artists that will be installed in the new headquarters."

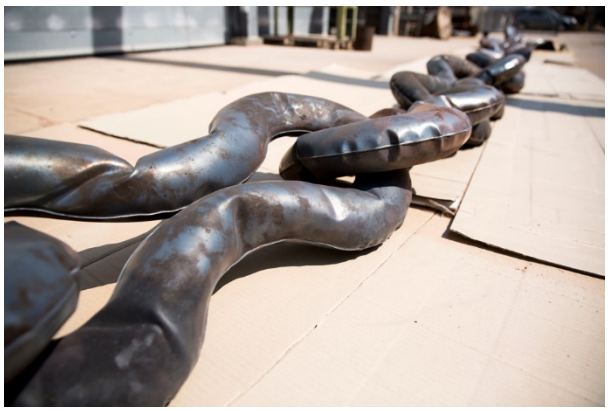


Cannings said part of his inspiration for the sculpture came from his memories of constructions sites as a child.

“My father was a cabinet maker, but he also had a construction company in the ’70s,” Cannings said. “I would go to work with him and walk around job sites, and guys on the big earth-moving equipment would invite me up to pull levers and ‘drive the equipment’ because it would keep me out of trouble. I’m used to seeing the Caterpillar tracks, and they’re built up of a design that’s infinity. You could put them together and they would span around the globe.”

After several trips to San Antonio to meet with an architect, engineers and interior designers, Cannings created a maquette – a small-scale model of the piece – and superimposed it on a rendering of the area in which it would be installed at the HOLT® CAT headquarters. Once the spring semester was over, he began cutting the patterns out of the sheet metal and welding the edges together to prepare each link for inflation.

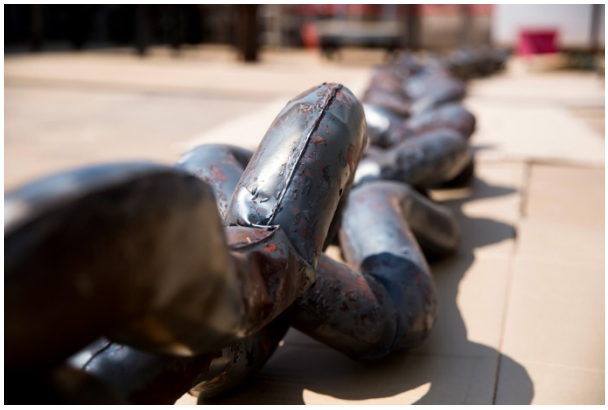
“Traditionally, a blacksmith would use a hammer and forge things like horseshoes or hinges and nails and change the shape of the material through those hammer forces,” Cannings said. “I get them hot, cherry red, and when metal gets that hot, it becomes very plastic.”



Once the pieces were inflated and cleaned, color was added. Because of the way the parts of this sculpture are linked, Cannings said he couldn’t use the same type of paint that usually gives his art a high-gloss finish.

“I chose a wax because all the links are articulated, and if I used a paint substrate like I usually do in my work, it’s just going to chip and scratch, and it’s impossible for me to refinish that without having a spray booth and a lot other equipment,” Cannings said, “We dilute the wax with some thinner, then

we wipe it over the surface, let it dry and build it up. Because it's a wax, we can mix different colors, and when we get it to the opacity we want, we just buff it up and it gives it a lovely sheen. If this surface scratches or chips off, I just take a rag and wipe it to fix that."

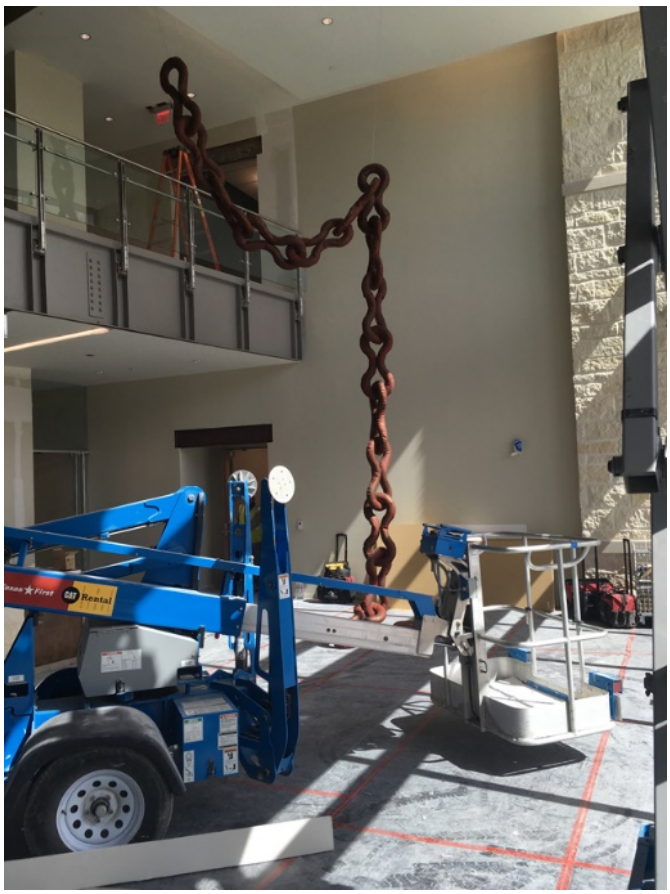


The result, a deep, rusty red, alludes to the patina found on older CAT machines on display in San Antonio.

"I thought, with the muteness of the space it's going in, it would have a nice pop," Cannings said. "But it wouldn't be vulgar."

At the bottom of the piece are links laying on the floor of the lobby. The chain rises to an anchor point on the ceiling before looping 12 feet of the chain to another ceiling anchor about 9 feet away. The sculpture was built to be interactive, both on and off the ground, Cannings said.

"There was great concern because, apparently, a lot of the employees have kids and they were worried that kids would just start climbing it," Cannings said with a laugh. "So, we had to consider the weight of the sculpture, which is about 125 pounds, plus an additional 150 pounds. The top cuts right in front of a second-story walkway between their main conference room and offices, so people will get to walk past and reach out and touch it."



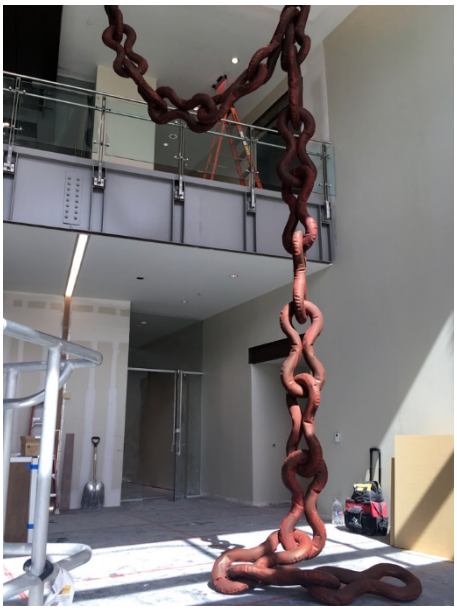
Tactility is important to Cannings and the pieces he creates. Touching a sculpture they might first think is inflated vinyl or rubber conceptually changes the piece, he said.

"It's why I am a sculptor more than a painter or drawer," Cannings said. "I need to survive on this tactility. I'm a lover of my materials, and so I want my audience to be able to have that connection, too, so that they can, if they're cheeky enough, begin to touch it."

Artist development at Texas Tech

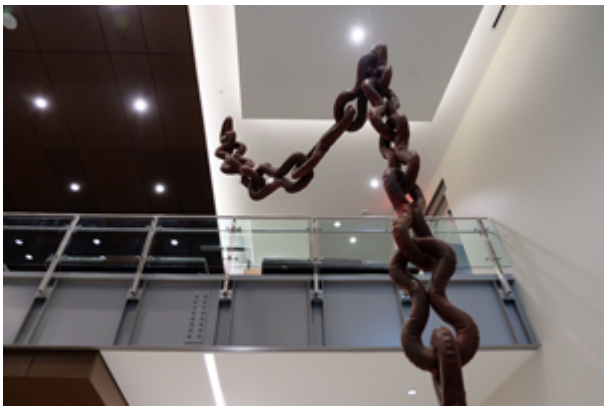
The HOLT® CAT sculpture is just one of many pieces like it that Cannings has created for various installations and shows since he began working and teaching at Texas Tech in 2000. Many of these pieces are created in the School of Art's 3D Art Annex, which Cannings helped design.

"People have asked, 'Why are you staying at Texas Tech?'" Cannings said. "My response is, 'Because I got to design this awesome space and now I get to work in it.' My research wouldn't be possible without the use of these facilities. It would be very different and limited, but because the university supports our research and academic freedom, and it's just permitted me to question a little more freely what it is I'm doing, what about it keeps me intellectually engaged and what about it keeps me developing and evolving with it."



Museum of Texas Tech University, said Cannings' work demonstrates a strong connection to Pop Art's attention to everyday objects, especially those related to mass production and commodification, like Cannings' tires, overstuffed chairs and ottomans, pillows, air mattresses and beach balls.

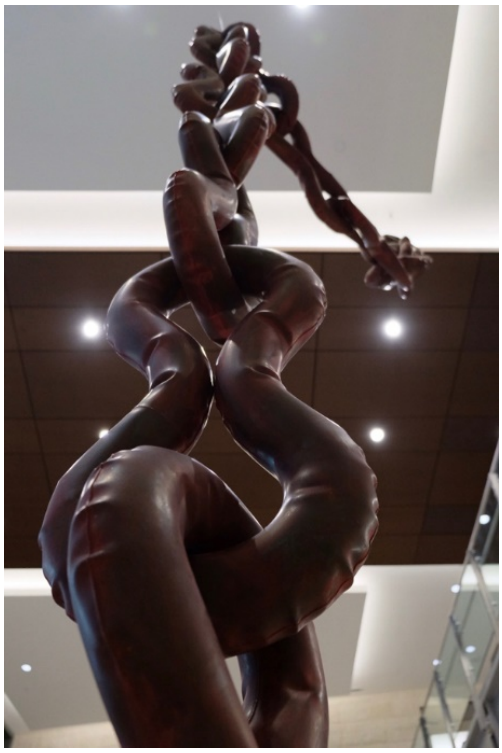
"The dimensionality of Cannings' sculptures often is the result of inflating his welded steel object," Briggs said. "Many, as a result, have pneumatic qualities. The edges or seams ripple like an over-inflated bicycle tube. He exploits this aspect of his sculptural toolkit by sometimes allowing the inflated works to explode, quite literally to bust loose at the seams. This creates a 'wound' that often stands in dramatic contrast to the smooth surface of the steel." Wounded or whole, the works appear on floors or lawns, hang on walls, suspend from ceilings or rest on pedestals with a monumental presence, Briggs said. They command attention through the clarity of their mass, the richness and depth of their painted surfaces, and the intensity of their color.



"Cannings has exhibited his work widely and in a variety of important venues," Briggs said. "Each time he does, it reflects on Texas Tech University as a manifestation of the creative and professional commitment made by one member of its faculty. It is a very direct message: Here is an artist who is committed to a creative discourse, whose contributions to that discourse are regularly and singularly acknowledged by others in that discipline, and whose activities serve as a

model for students. All of this advances the standing and reputation of Texas Tech University and its School of Art."

In addition to gallery exhibitions, other projects by Cannings have included a 24-foot sculpture of parabolic forms at the Charles Adams Studio Project and a moving piece in the Poydras Corridor Sculpture Exhibition in New Orleans that features colorful, inflated squares that spin on their stacked axes. The latter has survived three hurricanes.



"In some installations, he physically connects one work to another or hangs them from a ceiling so they appear as a balancing act or otherwise unstable," Briggs said. "This uneasiness creates for the viewer some tension, some dynamics, freezing for a moment the potentiality of kinetic energy of the object. Ironically perhaps, the works are as solid as steel."

For Cannings, using air to create sculptures from welded sheets of super-heated metal started as an experiment that has now evolved into a continuous challenge to see how far he can push himself and his art. He said he encourages students to do the same.

"It feels good to be an artist on this campus," Cannings said. "You've got to stay in touch with your ideas and what you're doing. The university supports the arts and humanities and they see value in us. Take advantage of the utilities and resources available to you now, because before you blink, you'll have graduated."