

## Art professor creates sculpture for Hobby airport



Houston's William P. Hobby Airport will feature William Cannings' clouds in May of 2022. His artwork will be located at gate 50. This image is a simulation of what the piece will look like fully installed.

Hanging from cable wire, levitating above, soft clouds reflect light from a ceiling-high window. At first glance, these clouds resemble balloons with billows and shine, but upon further inspection these clouds are handcrafted sculptures made of firm industrial steel.

Artist and associate professor of sculpture at Texas Tech William Cannings was chosen to incorporate his art into the William P. Hobby Airport in Houston in May. Cannings was chosen for this project out of 350 submissions from Texas artists varying from sculptors to painters to photographers. Curator of public art for the Houston Airports Alton DuLaney said the panel of art experts chose Cannings' piece because it felt uplifting, inspiring, peaceful and perfect for an airport.

"William Cannings' piece was part of a multi-project call for art that we started about a year and a half or two years ago, and in that we bought 74 works of portable works of art, which are small paintings and sculptures and things that are movable. We commissioned 10 site-specific works. He was one of the 10 artists chosen to create the site specific works," DuLaney said.

Cannings' sculptures focus on taking rough industrial materials, inflating them and molding them into softer shapes. While working at Texas Tech, he developed the technique. He first asked himself the question, "What if I could inflate steel like a balloon?" He said he enjoyed watching metals transform in a way people hadn't considered.

Born in Manchester, England, Cannings said he spent his life torn between three passions: engineering, art and cycling. He understood mechanic work, was an accomplished cyclist and had a passion for art. He said he considered all of these to be potential career paths.

“I was a big pain in the butt and my mum did not want to deal with me, so my dad would take me to work with him when I was young on the weekend,” Cannings said.

His father, a woodworker, owned a construction company where Cannings began his journey as an artist. It was in that space he said he learned many of the technical skills that he implements into his art today.

“I never wanted to be employed or work within that realm. It seemed too tight to my mind. I like to paint and draw and collage and, so I went off to art school and we had a workshop with a sculptor from Manchester,” Cannings said. “That workshop with the sculptor really kind of bridged two different worlds for me, that kind of the vocational world that my father lived in, and the fine art world that I wanted to exist in, and it kind of set me off on a path that I knew sculpture were what I wanted to do.”

He began his educational journey with fine art locally with an undergraduate program at Loughborough University so he could continue pursuing cycling. Cannings said he was a well accomplished second-category racer, which is one category below professional.

During his undergraduate years, Cannings discovered an exchange program with Virginia Commonwealth University in the United States. Though he could have pursued cycling as a career, the timing of the exchange program on top of a couple injuries veered Cannings’ career fully in pursuit of art, he said.

“I’m a leaper, not a looker. I could not plan my life because every time I’ve tried to plan things, you know the best laid plans of mice and men and something messes up and seems like, well, I just seem to enjoy life more when it’s an opportunity presents itself,” Cannings’ said. “It feels right in my gut, follow through. And so I’ve really led my life like that.”

And just like that, Cannings said he emigrated to the United States over 3,000 miles away from his family. He didn’t know it at the time, but VCU was and continues to be one of the best sculpture programs in the country.

“VCU is a very competitive environment and reminded me of the competitiveness of the cycling world I really loved,” Cannings said.

Because of student debt and a rocky immigration status, Cannings took a year off from school to work as a British and Italian sports car mechanic. He said this opportunity reminded him of his times in the studio with his father and it allowed him to build further on his mechanical and problem solving skills.

Once he finished his bachelors in fine art with VCU, Cannings was offered a free ride with Syracuse University, where he achieved his masters degree. Throughout his education, Cannings worked as a studio assistant alongside his professors and eventually moved into teaching roles.

“I like tools, I like making, and I have pride in what I do, and I like to do it well. And so, I was always hired by my faculty as a studio assistant. I look back and I got a better education as a studio assistant than I really did within my classes,” Cannings said.

In 2000, Cannings accepted a job with Texas Tech, teaching welding, foundry and creation-based courses. Moving to Texas, the Cannings family was in awe. He said the cultural mentality and democracy of the United States felt very familiar to him, but what he did not expect was the scale of things. Everything was bigger from the trees to open fields.

This move opened up a multitude of opportunities for the artist. During this period of his life, Cannings and his wife, Shannon, had two daughters, Cannings designed the sculpture space in the campus 3D Art Annex, and his work began to take off, landing galleries in Houston, Galveston and Dallas.

“Things kind of really snowballed very quickly for me and threw me into the spotlight with my work,” Cannings said. “I talked about being a leaper not a looker. I approach my artwork in the same way at times. Just wondering– I wonder what if, and just asking questions of my practice and the materials around me.”

Jerod Foster, friend of Cannings and associate professor of practice for the Department of Journalism and Creative Media Industries said one of the things he admires the most about Cannings is his perspective.

Foster and Cannings met through a cycling group and got to know each other really well, Foster said.

One of the first things Foster noticed about Cannings was how much he loved West Texas and found the beauty in the flatlands. Cannings’ clouds installation was inspired by the landscape around him, the flat plains, open sky and saturated sun, he said.

“Living here on this wonderful flat plane of the llano estacado, and the atmosphere that we have, the sense of time and space and somewhat relevance as humans. We get these glorious moments of beautiful clouds and I just wondered, you know, what is kind of the iconic pop cloud,” Cannings said.

Once installed in May, the piece will feature 30 levitated clouds that have been cut, welded, inflated, sanded, primed, and painted. Cannings said he attributes his experiences working alongside his father in Nantwich, studying under his professors, the discipline and persistence he learned in cycling and serendipitous moments such as discovering new ideas to leading him to this point in his work.

– Tea McGilvray