

A 5,000-YEAR ART PLAN GROWS IN EUGENE

Lee Sparks Pembleton is imagining the very big picture

“We’re working on a non-contiguous sculpture garden, a landscape art project which will eventually redesign most of the planet’s surface.”

I look for a trace of a smile in Lee Sparks Pembleton’s face as he says this. We’re at The Bier Stein with Lee’s wife, Kelly Pembleton, a keen amateur photographer. At this point I’ve known Lee for only half an hour, not long enough to judge his irony quotient. Redesign the planet’s surface! Surely he’s joking, right?

With a lean frame and thinning hair, Pembleton is 51 but looks closer to 40. His quiet demeanor behind glasses and bushy auburn beard give him the air of a college professor, albeit one who wears art T-shirts instead of tweed.

Originally based in Chicago, he’s been composing, performing and curating music and art for more than 20 years in venues ranging from the Smithsonian’s Hirshorn Museum to Chicago’s infamous Czar Bar to Eugene’s Park Blocks. His art has been exhibited locally, nationally and internationally.

At The Bier Stein, his thin stern face gives nothing away. He simply studies me over his beer through wire-rim glasses, and I quickly realize he’s dead serious.

“It’s a very long term project,” he adds. “It might take a hundred generations before it’s complete.” Again, no hint of smile.

A sculpture garden spanning a hundred generations? What are the logistics? Where is the land? Is it a prank? An art project? Eco-salvation? What’s the motivation? And just how does one plan any landscaping that far into the future? With the earth changing rapidly, it’s hard to forecast the landscape 50 years out much less a hundred generations.

The questions come in a rush, and I try to get them sorted before probing further. Pembleton answers them patiently.

It turns out the non-contiguous sculpture garden is merely one component of Earthbound Moon, a nonprofit “creating opportunities for site-specific sculpture.” Earthbound Moon’s staff of four — the “we” he refers to — is spread around the country, in California, the District of Columbia and now Eugene, arriving here last year with Lee and Kelly, fresh transplants from Chicago.

The sculptures, too, are strung across the country, from Texas to Illinois, New Mexico to Colorado. They’ve been commissioned in various locations after careful planning, and several more are in the pipeline.

If these past projects are any indication, Earthbound Moon takes a broad view of the term “sculpture.” Just about anything “Built on Spaceship Earth” (their website tagline) might qualify under the right conditions.

Each work is unique depending on the site and the artist. Sculptures so far have included a neon sign, repurposed books, cast-concrete lettering on the ground and re-appropriated readymades. Taken together, they make up the loose threads of an extremely non-contiguous sculpture garden. Photos are collected on the Tumblr site Earthbound Speculations.

Pembleton has a thing for acronyms. His emails are signed LSP. Earthbound Speculations is known as EbS, Earthbound Moon is EbM and various sections of the EbM website are called RIME, ESP and EbR.

One branch of particular interest to *Eugene Weekly* readers (EW, if you will) is &STRANGE, or Andacite Temporary Residency And Noology Garden Eugene.



&STRANGE is currently located in the yard of the Pembletons’ home in Eugene. It will move, along with the Pembletons, to a permanent home once EbM acquires property in the area.

In the interim, a short-term residency program has already begun. Artists live in the home while they design sculptures for the yard. At the moment an artist named Giovanni, fresh from Montana, is finishing up a project onsite.

The project has non-resident sculptors, too, and local artist Patricia Montoya Donohue has been commissioned to create work for the sculpture garden. When EbM moves to a permanent home, the sculptures will come along, all part of the non-contiguous project.

One might guess that a public sculpture would have to jump through regulatory hoops, especially one built with the eventual goal of redesigning the planet’s entire surface. But Pembleton says he has found Eugene city government surprisingly easy to work with.

“They repeatedly told me that their desire when meeting with artists is always to say ‘yes,’” he says. “This reinforced my feeling that this is an amazing place to be crafting a 50-, 500-, 5,000-year plan for arts and urban development.”

Five thousand years? Yikes! That’s a stretch for any urban planner, and particularly in a city that at times seems mired in the past. But Pembleton is a forward thinker, with a time frame somewhere between ambitious and outrageous.

“We need to expand our sense of history, of time, of belonging,” he explains. For another project, he once recorded the sounds of his life 24/7 for a full year. The resulting document was 8,760 hours of sound. That’s a challenging listen for most people, and even rarer is the person with a multi-millennial plan of any sort.

But Pembleton doesn’t seem fazed. He’s just happy that EbM has found a home in Eugene.

“The longer I live here,” Pembleton says, “the more impressed I am with how much effort and discussion seems to go into imagining and developing the city’s future ... I feel blessed that we are based here.”

In addition to city government, Pembleton has made inroads into the local arts community. EbM has a piece in the Salon des Refuses at the New Zone. In the downtown Park Blocks this summer they are posting historical placards documenting the multi-billion year history of the surrounding blocks “from the big bang to about 10,000 years ago.”

Also in the Park Blocks, EbM is coproducing ADRIFT at Studio Without Walls (SWoW). They’ve teamed with Charly Swing from ArtCity to create Speculation in Plein Air (SPA), a recurring outdoor event that repurposes existing landscape paintings (held every other Thursday at Monroe Park, next one Aug. 16). In early 2019 is the BRIDGE Contemporary Art Exhibition.

“Do you ever undertake small goals?” I ask Pembleton.

“Only if they are steps on the journey to failing to arrive at an impossible goal,” he replies coyly. “If I can imagine an end result, I am too lazy to bother producing it. The act of imagining it is satisfying enough.”

Imagination will have to suffice for the non-contiguous sculpture garden, since no one alive today will be around to witness its completion. If its fate is uncertain, Pembleton seems unbothered by the thought.

“EbM is a really slow composition,” he says, “a piece of music that is being performed too slowly to be heard by living human ears.” ■

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