Turning old metal into new hope
California artist welds for charity

By Kevin Cole, Associate Editor

In the midst of the Mojave Desert lies a parcel of land that is a welding dreamscape. Rising up out of the Joshua trees and yucca bushes, set against a panoramic mountain view, are hundreds of unique steel statues, all welded by one man—Simi Dabah (see Figure 1).

Dabah was born in 1927 in Manchester, England, and moved to California as a boy. Now 74 years old, he resides in Los Angeles, where he spends a little time every day working on his art.

"Through most of my life I've been involved in art," he said. "Early on I did a lot of artwork outside of the welding range.

"About 30 years ago I got my first five-minute welding lesson on an oxyacetylene outfit from a friend of mine, and that was the beginning of my dealing with metal. From then on that's all I've dealt with. So for more than 30 years I've been welding, starting with very thin metal and using the oxyacetylene process. Finally I bought a small arc welder, and my projects just kept getting bigger and bigger."

Since he first began on his path as a welding artist, Dabah has made more than 500 metal sculptures, ranging in size from 6 inches to 32 feet high.

Art With a Purpose

What's more unique about his work is that, although he averages more than one sculpture a month, all of the money made from it goes to charity. Dabah donates much of his work to organizations such as schools and hospitals, which subsequently auction it off to raise money. Dabah has made his living in real estate, and although art is his passion, he doesn't want to live the artist's lifestyle.

"The commercial art world is not something I want to be involved in, with agents, dealers, and politics," he said. "I'm into the process and not the lifestyle.

"I'm not an art aficionado. I do this because I feel compelled to do it," he said. And part of this compulsion may be based on the good he has been able to accomplish through his art, by aiding such organizations as the Boys & Girls Clubs of America."
Figure 1
This nearly 20-ft. sculpture stands on Dabah's own personal desert sculpture grounds in Joshua Tree, Calif.

From Grave to Cradle
Dabah constructs all of his work from scrap metal. He visits Los Angeles-area scrapyards at least twice a month, looking for metal, mostly flame-cut remnants, to transform into works of art.

"I can see the beauty in what everyone else throws away," he said. "I take pride in the fact that I am saving my sculptures from the scrapyard."

Dabah said he looks to salvage mild steel bar, plate, and pipe ranging from ½ to 8 in. thick for his artistry, often working with pieces of metal that require a forklift to move. He said that when deciding what scrap he wants to bring home from the scrapyard, he looks around at what's available and begins to formulate ideas about the finished work from what he sees.

"Equipment, weight, and my ability to weld help me decide what I can do," he said.

The Ideas
Dabah said conception is the most important part of a project, but that he has an "endless flood of pictures" in his mind to generate ideas for his works. Once he comes up with an idea based on the available materials and his vision, he said he begins sketching what the finished piece will look like.

Most of Dabah's work is abstract, containing oddly angled metal and casting shadows that seem to be art themselves (see Figure 2). But occasionally a piece that resembles life can be seen in the odd shapes and twisted forms that comprise the body of his work (see Figure 3).

Although he has very little formal training, Dabah does all of the work himself and only recently asked for help from a professional welder for larger projects. In 2000 he brought in Art Parker, a professional welder from Pioneer Welding in 29 Palms, Calif., to help him with a few sculptures that were more than 20 ft. tall (see Figure 4). Dabah said his self-training allows him to learn from his failures, and he knows that "if it falls off, I didn't do it right," but he also said he is always interested in tips from the pros.

Figure 2
This sculpture stands on the campus of Copper Mountain College in Joshua Tree, Calif., and shows Dabah's typically abstract work — oddly angled metal and shadows that seem to be art themselves.

Figure 3
A piece that resembles life, such as this metal cactus camouflaged among the real thing, can be seen occasionally alongside the odd shapes and twisted forms that comprise his typical body of work.
The Process

Although he first got involved in oxyacetylene welding, Dabah now sticks to the shielded metal arc welding (SMAW) process and owns three welding machines. He used various electrodes while learning to weld, but now mainly uses 7018s.

In addition, he has accumulated over the years a 20-ft. trailer to haul material from the scrapyard and the finished art to its resting place, a 4,000-pound forklift, an oxyfuel cutting torch, several grinders, and two abrasive-wheel chop saws. Having all of this equipment at his fingertips allows him to do it all, from sketching to assembly.

After he welds the materials into their final artistic forms, very little is done to them. Dabah said he occasionally applies a semigloss clear finish to them, and has even tried painting a few of his pieces, but generally prefers to leave the artworks' surfaces unfinished.

Where Does It All Go?

"The process of placing my work takes a lot of time," Dabah said, and his art has turned up in prominent and more obscure places alike. One of his works found a home in the heart of Beverly Hills, near Rodeo Drive (see Figure 5). The abstract sculpture, more than 10 ft. tall, has stood on the grounds of Cal Fed Bank, at the corner of Wilshire Boulevard and Canon Drive, since 1972. Another prominent place some of his work can be seen is on the property of the UCLA Medical Center in Westwood, Calif.

Dabah said almost all of his work has managed to stay within the borders of California, except for a few pieces that may have been bought and taken out of state. A lot of public institutions in Los Angeles display his sculptures, such as schools, hospitals, and colleges. More of it can be seen on his property in Joshua Tree, Calif., a small town of a few thousand nestled in the Mojave Desert. The town's community college — Copper Mountain College — has several of Dabah's works. Even the main highway leading into the panoramic community boasts a pair of his sculptures, welcoming visitors.

Simi Dabah chose to spend his life in California, and the product of his artistry seems to surround him wherever he hangs his hat in that state. He is a man whose metal-sculptured mark will likely stand for centuries, but his works are not only a testimony to his talent and vision, but also of his good deeds. And what more could a man ask to be remembered by?


Associate Editor Kevin Cole can be reached at kevinc@thefabricator.com.

Find past "Artist's Gallery" articles by using the search box at www.thefabricator.com