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ENTERTAINMENT

# A legacy in steel and stone: Vermont sculptor looks to future of 200-acre park

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ENOSBURG FALLS – When he arrived at the plot of rolling farmland off Boston Post Road more than half a century ago, David Stromeyer moved into a humble old barn with no phone, no toilet and no tub. Instead of a stove he cooked with a two-burner hot plate.

Stromeyer wasn't there just to live. He was there to create.

The barn's living room, such as it was, became Stromeyer's studio, where he used a gantry crane to help him build large sculptures, or at least as large as the barn's cramped confines would let him. The hills and woods around him were his inspiration, and his staging ground.

"When I bought this land, all I knew was I wanted to make sculpture here, and it has grown to this," Stromeyer said at his nearly 200-acre Cold Hollow Sculpture Park. "From the get-go I've always been interested in seeing the art in a landscape, and that being very much a marriage of the two."

Stromeyer was drawn to rural Vermont during the Vietnam War-era back-to-the-land movement; the graduate of neighboring Dartmouth College had skied many of the state's mountains. He has spent the past 50-plus years in Enosburg Falls making hundreds of multi-ton sculptures out of steel, stone, concrete and aluminum. His works have been

displayed around the world, from the National Museum of American Art in Washington, D.C., to a hospital in Northern Ireland.

The only place to see a representation of his complete life's work is at Cold Hollow Sculpture Park, which he and his wife, Sarah Stromeyer, established in 2014. Each year, thousands of visitors stroll the grounds free of charge, touring dozens of the sculptor's huge yet approachably buoyant works of art in a rural spot in Franklin County about 10 miles south of the Canadian border.

"It seemed logistically much better to bring the people to the work where they can see the full scope of a career" than to scatter them around the world, Stromeyer said.

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He continues to make massive art in the 90-foot-long studio that years ago replaced the decrepit barn as his workspace. He's a lowkey 75-year-old with kinetic creative energy and no plans to stop sculpting.

But when he and his wife created the park, they knew they had to think beyond the present that Stromeyer's work so often ensconces him in. What happens to Cold Hollow Sculpture Park when Stromeyer is no longer filling it with new work? How does that public space go on? How does his legacy survive?

## Moments in play

When asked if he has any children, Stromeyer waved his arm in the direction of the park's expansive landscape.

"Here you are, looking at them," he said, gesturing toward the park's 70 works of art.

Stromeyer has no next-generation heirs, yet his children take on many forms. A sculpture near his studio, titled "Moments in Play," features an undulating beam bearing balancing boulders; the work somehow extracts grace out of stark steel and stone. Across the field,

Stromeyer positioned two sculptures resembling the human form in close proximity, as if in conversation.

“I have them kind of looking at each other,” he said. “I don’t know what they say to each other in the night.”

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Stromeyer is a lithe figure with a youthful presence. His gray hair holds onto hints of brown. It’s in a perpetual tousle, like the hair of a boy too distracted by play to bother with a brush.

Play is serious business for Stromeyer. A work he’s in the midst of, with the working title “Double Play,” will consist of two colorful sculptures displaying that four-letter word in a frisky, askew form. (He created 13 versions of miniature fiber-board models of the work before settling on just the right position for the L in play.)

Stromeyer analyzes play in “Art Making on the Land,” a book he and the nonprofit park published this year.

“I try to approach life with a child’s wonderment, uninhibited by a possibility of ‘failing,’” he writes. “This sense of play, I believe, loosens thinking, fosters inventiveness, and allows for newness, flow, discovery.”

That attitude comes from Stromeyer’s childhood in Marblehead, Massachusetts. As a youth he developed osteomyelitis, an infectious bone disease that ravaged the femur in his left leg and affected the one in his right leg.

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“Once out of the cast I had to be on crutches for several more months. When I could finally throw them away, I had no intention of stopping — ever,” Stromeyer writes in the book. His childhood play included sometimes building a gas-powered airplane or a boat model, often from scratch.

“My habit of making with a sense of play and full physical engagement — my head, my hands, indeed my whole body — was born,” he writes. “I loved this physicality, this dance that made me feel so alive in the world.”

That love continues to this day, as Stromeyer said on a recent morning at his studio.

“What’s kept me going is the physicality of it,” he said of his work. “I really enjoy engaging my body with everything I do.”

Much like a child, Stromeyer won’t let the trivialities of daily life interfere with play. He eschews the intrusions of email or snail mail while he’s in the studio up the hill from the Stromeyers’ home. If someone wants to reach him by phone during the day, he said, they’d better happen to find him in that brief moment he’s back at the house having lunch.

A playful spirit is reluctant to sacrifice the energy to contemplate the future, to think of what happens to the park when the sculpture stops — “once we are no longer here to walk these fields,” as Sarah Stromeyer writes in “Art Making on the Land.”

## The next step of growth

The Stromeyers had to consider what will happen when they are no longer around to care for the park, to put up new sculptures, reinforce the existing ones as they slowly sink into the soft turf or hire a local farmer to hay the field that contains the art.

The couple created an estate plan in 2000 that included turning the grounds into a sculpture park. The park opened in June 2014.

They turned the sculpture park into a nonprofit in 2019 as part of their “strategy for organizational development,” according to Sarah Stromeyer. That laid the groundwork for Cold Hollow Sculpture Park to go on into perpetuity.

"Really what we need to do now,” she said, “is we need to take the next step of growth.”

Leading up to the park’s opening, the Stromeyers reached out to Rosemary Gill. She’s the daughter of a lifelong friend of David Stromeyer and has spent years in the field of

nonprofit management and organization. She runs the education department at Milk Street, the Boston-based food-and-media company, and serves as a board member and unpaid executive director for Cold Hollow Sculpture Park.

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“They had wanted to have the sculpture park be their legacy in Vermont, but that wasn’t a skill set they had developed because they have other careers,” Gill said of David Stromeyer and Sarah Stromeyer, who’s a dancer and writer. Gill said her job was to do the boring work of management, to “codify their vision into systems.”

The couple’s vision, Gill said, doesn’t always match what’s considered best practice in the nonprofit world. Those practices, she said, might involve admission fees or renting the space for private events.

“That’s so against what David and Sarah want to do,” Gill said. “It forces us to find other revenue streams.”

Cold Hollow Sculpture Park supports itself through the “generosity of community,” Gill said. That community includes outside donors, people leaving cash in a jar at the park and supporters who underwrite sculptures and, rather than take them home, leave them at Cold Hollow for others to visit. Stromeyer sells some sculptures, including one called “Tango” that was moved from Cold Hollow to the campus of its current owner, the University of Vermont.

Stromeyer prefers not to have detailed descriptions of his work adjacent to his sculptures, which Gill said also flies in the face of what other nonprofits might do. Cold Hollow provides a map and brochure with brief notes to fill in some gaps for visitors.

“He cares deeply about each work, but he doesn’t feel proprietary about the meaning,” Gill said. The park is so remote it has poor cellphone coverage, which Stromeyer said he appreciates because it lets visitors roam the grounds and use their imagination when viewing the sculptures.

“People come back with wild interpretations I never would have thought of,” Stromeyer said. Sarah Stromeyer said visitors often tell them the park is “magical.” They want people who come to the park to “open their eyes and feel something,” she said.

Once Stromeyer stops making new sculpture, Gill said there are other ways to bring life to the park. Cold Hollow already hosts annual programs in which creators in other fields talk about and demonstrate their work at the park. An ongoing range of public programs or temporary exhibits, Gill said, means Cold Hollow can stay true to its mission of being “widely and wildly curious.”

The park is also its own living organism. The place keeps changing because the natural conditions of northern Vermont continually ebb between cold and hot, cloudy and sunny, windy and calm. The look of a sculpture on one visit can differ dramatically from how it appears in new conditions on a return trip.

“When the backdrop changes,” Gill said, “it means the experience changes.”

## The toll of work and play

Stromeyer has visited other spaces that feature the work of one artist, which he appreciates. “I just find it more intriguing to dive into the person’s work” than to see several artists’ work in a museum, he said. “You understand the development better.”

He also appreciates that that dive into his work unfolds on the plot of land off Boston Post Road. “I’ve never regretted buying this land,” he said. “It’s got enough contour to be interesting.”

He elaborates in “Art Making on the Land” on the importance of the tract he chose. “For forty-five years I thought of my sculptures as individual expressions,” Stromeyer writes. “With the formation of Cold Hollow Sculpture Park, I realize that I have always been working on one big artwork, which is the Park.”

He continues to love the physicality of his work, but that work takes a toll. He had to have the bones and tendons in his hands rebuilt 10 years ago after decades of playful toil.

“Obviously this type of work has taken a physical stress on my body,” he said. “When I get to the shop, I don’t feel any of that. It just goes away.”

As long as his body holds up and the creative ideas keep coming, Stromeyer said, he’ll keep making art. He and his wife minimize the harsh impacts of northern Vermont’s winter weather by spending the season in their other home, in Austin, Texas.

His true home and his legacy, however, live full-time at Cold Hollow Sculpture Park, where the course of his creative life exists in one place.

“It’s beyond ‘one place,’” Stromeyer said. “We live somewhere else in the winter, but my heart is here.”

## If you go

The Cold Hollow Sculpture Park is offering a series of programs in 2022 with the theme “How We Make Things.” Admission is free, but RSVP is required. Programs, all at 2 p.m. Saturdays (except Sunday, June 19, the recently-announced rain date), are:

June 19, “The Joy of Jazz” improv with Vermont trumpeter Ray Vega
July 16, “Hidden Algorithms & the Human Experience” featuring Dartmouth College mathematics and computer-science professor Dan Rockmore
Aug. 13, an artist talk and kite-making workshop with artist-in-residence Kisa Sauer of Germany
Sept. 17, “Using Power to Empower” with Bob Freling, executive director of the Solar Electric Light Fund
Oct. 8, “Science in Words and Pictures: To See the Fantastic with Everyday Eyes” with Sajan Saini, education director of the AIM Photonics Academy at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Cold Hollow Sculpture Park, 4280 Boston Post Road, Enosburg Falls.
www.coldhollowsculpturepark.com

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