

Primary colors

Sculptor Billingsley focuses on color in his local pedestrian display

BY ISABEL HEBLICH
STAR-NEWS CORRESPONDENT

Some of the best things come about from a dare. Case in point: the use of color in Carl Billingsley's new public sculpture show.

Billingsley is in Wilmington this week to lecture and install a new sculpture at UNCW and to give a walking tour of five sculptures on display in downtown Wilmington as part of the Pedestrian Art exhibit.

"I'm a sculptor," Billingsley said in a phone interview last week. "But I'm also a teacher," and one who encourages experimentation from his students. A colleague of Billingsley's at East Carolina University challenged him on his non-use of color, asking, "What are you afraid of?" This prompted the artist to begin painting his giant steel sculptures last summer, and to create the bright, engaging artwork scattered about downtown.

"The form of the work has the biggest priority," Billingsley said. "But this time I started with the notion of color."

From perusing his Web site (www.billingsleyatelier.com) or imagining his current display sans color, the fascination with creating reactions between large, often simple shapes is evident. Billingsley translated his equation of juxtaposing clear forms to include a similar effect with bright colors.

"I did it with a bit of trepidation," Billingsley said. Though the idea-transplant was successful, he knows being an analogy for the forms is not color's only job here; it takes his sculptures into another dimension of understanding.

A sculpture's shape, size and volume are "primary qualities": properties of the measurable physical reality, the ones Billingsley has been toying with thus far.

A sculpture's color, on the other hand, is a "secondary quality": it depends on the perceiver's sense of sight, which is highly subjective and gullible.

Billingsley's sculptures *Prism Arc I* and *Prism Arc II* use the same shade of yellow from the same can of yellow paint. But *I* is yellow and orange, whereas *II* is yellow and blue, so the yellows appear different. Not only does this color pairing change the sentiment of sculptures with similar form — *I* lends itself to an intimidating intellectual monument and *II* leans toward a power symbol of inspiration



Billingsley



PHOTO | MATT DOLS

CONVERSATION PIECES: Carl Billingsley's sculpture 'Barbara Allen,' on display on Water Street between Dock and Orange, is his interpretation of a classic ballad where unrequited love kills the song's young man and grief slays Barbara Allen. A rose from his grave and a briar from hers eventually grow together.

— the day's changing light warps his sculptures to new meaning as well.

"Light is the real form giver," Bilingsley said. "The way light modulates over a surface tells us about that surface."

The color on his sculptures gives off light, sacrificing some of the depth and dimension they would've had without color, tricking the eye about the forms themselves. The brighter and darker colors on *Prism Arc I* and *II* go against the natural logic of light. But this battle and harmony with light is fitting because Billingsley's subject matter in each of his five Pedestrian Art sculptures — *Heliotrope*, *Port*

City Sunrise, *Barbara Allen* and *Prism Arc I* and *II* — relates to the mother form giver.

All this might seem contemporary in concept and visually modern, but the institution of public art is not.

"Some of the earliest art is public art," Billingsley said. "Art is not just something that people buy or that is in museums."

Billingsley will address this in a lecture today, along with how "there is just the thinnest difference between any of my pieces and the brass confederate soldiers in a courthouse square."

A daring argument I can't wait to hear.

WANT TO GO?

WHAT: 'The Carl Billingsley Exhibition' of public sculpture

WHERE: Downtown Wilmington

WHEN: Through July

DETAILS: www.pedestrianart.com or www.creativewilmington.com

WHAT: 'God, Mother, Country and Public Art,' a lecture by Carl Billingsley

WHEN: 7 p.m. Feb. 21

WHERE: UNCW's Cultural Arts Building.

DETAILS: Free. www.uncw.edu/art

WHAT: 'Sculpture: Concept to Creation'

WHERE: Cultural Arts Building Art Gallery, UNCW

WHEN: Feb. 22 through March 28. Opening reception is 6-8 p.m. Feb. 22

DETAILS: www.uncw.edu/art

WHAT: Guided sculpture walk led by the artist

WHERE: Meeting place is 'Prism Arc II' at the intersection of Front and Market

WHEN: 10 a.m. and noon Feb. 23.

DETAILS: Free and open to the public. A trolley will be available for travel.

WORD ON THE STREET

Hear what local residents had to say about Billingsley's art at StarNewsOnline.com/multimedia