

Christmas comes early to Old Colorado City museum

-Guy Priel

Stepping through the doors of the unassuming storefront at 2418 W. Colorado Ave. in Old Colorado City is to enter another world. It's a world of imagination, holograms, magical Christmas displays and disappearing buildings. It is, as the sign on the outside of the building states, "Magic Town." This is the Michael Garman Museum, housed inside the old Bible College building across from Bancroft Park. And, Christmas has already arrived, as Santa Claus makes an appearance, carolers sing and buildings throughout the village are decorated in their holiday finery, as the marquis at the Crown movie theater proclaims "It's a Wonderful Life" is showing at midnight Christmas Eve.

The Michael Garman Museum is 3,000 square feet filled with thousands of hand-made characters inhabiting dozens of buildings at 1/8 scale with holographic illusions and magical effects, including people and rooms that disappear right before your eyes.

"It's a gigantic playground for the mind," creator and sculptor Michael Garman said. "Part carnival, part dollhouse, part sculpture."

The miniature city was inspired by Garman's experience as a vagabond in the 1950s and 1960s as he traveled America and the buildings give a nod to the places he visited, including an homage to Colorado Springs. "There are snapshots of my time in Buenos Aires, Santiago, San Francisco, Dallas and Philadelphia. It took me over a million dollars and parts of four decades to pull it from my mind and get the thing built."

As visitors look down the alleyways and see the lights dim, the sculptures appear to move and entire new scenes appear. Holograms heckle visitors as they pass by and sound effects transport visitors into the scenes revealed in each window and around each corner.

Garman began constructing Magic Town in 1975 and has been adding to it ever since. He describes it as a gritty Americana that blends humor and honesty to portray a world as familiar as a big-city neighborhood and as fantastical as Walt Disney's "It's A Small World."

Born in Fort Worth, Texas in 1938, Garman learned how to make his own toys including intricate, pipe-cleaner men that caught his imagination. For 10 years he perfected his figures, building detailed scenes for his characters. After graduation, he embarked on a photography journey through Mexico with \$35 and a camera.

"When my money ran out, I'd go to different businesses and offer to sweep up for a meal or a place to sleep," Garman said. "Without exception, they'd say, 'no, no. Get this boy something to eat.' They were all so hospitable, feeding me or giving me a little extra money. I made a meager living street hustling, just telling stories and showing photos of my travels."

He talked his way onto trains and buses. He continued heading south through Mexico, Central America and across the Panama Canal, then kept walking, he stated.

"I slept in fire stations, on park benches, sometimes in creek beds and sometimes out under the stars," he said. "Each day began a new adventure."

He finally made his way to Santiago, Chile, where he talked his way into the School of Fine Arts, where he attended for free. While there he began sculpting little figures. The school let him fire them for free and then he would sell them door to door for \$1 each.

“There, at the bottom of the world, I discovered the love of my life - my characters,” he said.

For the next two years he traveled through 13 countries, meeting hundreds of generous people who inspired his craft and set him on his life’s journey.

Returning to Dallas, he continued to create one-of-a-kind sculptures, “pouring his heart and soul into each one.” As he sold them he began to feel a sense of loss. “I missed my sculptures, my friends,” he said. “I lost a piece of myself every time. What I wanted was to collect my own work.”

As Garman saw it, as long as he made and sold the sculptures, the very people who inspired his creations could never afford one for themselves.

“I like people who work for a living,” he said, “people with grit in their eyes and a story to tell. The way a cowboy saunters in from the field, the way a pilot tells a story with his hands. These are the stories I want to tell.”

With that idea in mind, Garman began to perfect his techniques. His goal was to sell handmade art at affordable prices. He created the sculptures, poured the molds and painted each piece by hand. As his line grew, he began increasing his staff. He hired expert artisans and trained them to reproduce his originals with intricate detail and hand crafting.

His sculptures have been collected by celebrities and heads of state, including Arnold Schwarzenegger, John Elway, Tom Brokaw and former Presidents George Bush and Ronald Reagan. His sculptures are presented to soldiers, teachers, firefighters and golf professionals and his cityscapes appear in businesses all over the world.

He lives in the same building that now houses his museum.

“It’s truly been a wonderful ride,” he said. “This is the culmination of everything I have tried to do with my art. I came to realize that my characters needed a home. So I went to work on creating Magic Town as my story - the story of my travels, the characters that I hung around with in earlier days.”

While hitchhiking across America, he noted great beauty in alleyways. “There the sun reflects off bricks, with garbage cans, vines, cats and rats,” he said. “It fascinated me, It’s an ugly-beautiful.”

His three-dimensional art tells stories using all the technology available in the 21st Century: architecture, painting, sculpture, theater and film, all combined to create a special moment to glimpse in a window and discover a secret world that seems almost magical.

“That’s what I built and what I plan to keep right on creating,” Garman said.

He has been featured at the White House and in Architectural Digest.

With the \$5 admission to the museum, visitors get to participate in a complimentary scavenger hunt with a prize and hints available if they are unable to locate all the items. Senior, child and group rates are available, as well as guided tours. Visitors can also upgrade their scavenger hunt for an additional charge for additional prizes. The museum is open 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. seven days a week, excluding holidays.