

# THE ARTS

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# Artist finds home for metal sculptures

## San Group hopes to develop public art program for berm around its property

SUSIE QUINN  
Albarn Valley News

Two metal sculptures have cropped up on a berm at the corner of Stamp Avenue and Roger Street in Port Alberni, where a dozen mature trees were recently removed.

Albarn Valley artist Michael Wright created the sculptures—a grey whale and a sea turtle—over the past few months. They were installed on the berm on San Group property in late November.

The metalwork is a departure for Wright, who is known in the Albarn Valley for his paintings—some of them hang in Starbucks at Pacific Rim Centre, and he has exhibited them on a residential fence in his neighbourhood. While he briefly took up wood carving, he only recently started metalwork.

“I’m known for my paintings and I do it all the time,” he said. “I’m lucky people collect me from Tofino—my paintings. I would really like to open a gallery.”

The whale came about almost by accident. “One day I went up to the scrap yard at Calvin’s foundry (Albarn Foundry Ltd.) and he had all these beautiful pieces of stainless steel laying there—a whole pile,” Wright recalled. “I said ‘my God.’ I think they came from the old sewer plant and there were beautiful curves. So I took them home, thought about it for about a week and said I’m going to make a whale.”

The whale is 16 feet long and made



Port Alberni artist Michael Wright builds up a base of river rock below his metal sculpture of a grey whale on the berm that lines the San Group property at Stamp Avenue and Roger Street. (Nov. 23, 2022) (SUSAN QUINN/Albarn Valley News)

of intertwined steel pieces. The fins fold up so the sculpture will fit into a container.

“I had a great time (making) it. I love it. So I’m into metalwork.”

Wright was looking for an appropriate place to display his sculpture: he had it on a trailer in front of the Albarn Liquor Store in the 2900-block of the Albarn Highway, but wanted somewhere more prominent. He said he asked the Port Alberni Port Authority and the city about displaying his sculpture “and they just showed no interest.”

He approached San Group about putting it up on the berm. San’s com-

munity liaison Amit Chandra Shekar, who had seen the whale exhibited along the highway, immediately said yes.

“Amit thought this corner (at Stamp Avenue and Roger Street) would be good but he wanted it lined up with the [San Group] sign so they work with each other,” Wright explained.

San Group is providing the location to exhibit the whale, but the artwork is still for sale. The base is 16 feet of built-up rock and timber—temporary and accessible from private property, should anyone else want to purchase the work of art, Wright said.

Wright has since added a green

copper sea turtle to the berm. The turtle is about half the size of the whale, but still around eight feet long.

Chandra Shekar liked the idea of Wright exhibiting his work in this manner so much that San Group is exploring the option of using the berm as a large visual arts display for artwork that cannot be viewed in a conventional art gallery. Two years ago San donated a small corner of their helipad to Nuuchah-nulth artist Tim Paul for n’aasn’aas’aqsa, the First Nations language pole.

Chandra Shekar would like to see machinery from the Western Vancouver Island Industrial Heritage Society

displayed along the berm. Another project he has been working on, along with Albarn Valley Chamber of Commerce CEO Bill Collette, is to bring the former chamber focal point sign to the San berm.

The carved cedar sign, designed by artist Kim Shroeder and carved by Elmar Schultes, dates back to the 1980s. It used to sit on the chamber’s property under a “Welcome to the Albarn Valley” sign. The sign was taken down and put into storage in 2011 when the chamber’s new visitor info centre and office was built. After moving around to a few different places it is now stored at the city’s public works yard.

The sign depicts different points of history and activities of the Albarn Valley, and is still popular with people who remember it. There have been campaigns over the past few years to re-erect the sign somewhere so people can enjoy it.

The chamber donated the heavy, 25-foot-by-11-foot sign to the City of Port Alberni in 2015 “on the premise that they would erect it somewhere in the city. We were told it would be that year. Well, that was eight years ago,” Collette said.

“We’re hoping the city will release the sign. San Group have agreed to clean it up, look after it and pay for all costs, which is really a bonus.”

Artists and other cultural contributors with ideas for public art on the berm can submit their ideas via e-mail to amit.chandra@sangroupinc.com.

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