

Once Upon a Time at Fairyland

When fantasy worlds collide



A cute-as-a-button bunny

By C. J. Hirschfield

In one corner of the cavernous room are frightening looking “miners” – huge hulking figures that look like a cross between space aliens and creatures from *2000 Leagues Under the Sea*. Made of leather, copper and cow horn, their eyes are definitely not human.

In another corner sits a model of a bunny – cute as a button. Oh Lord, please keep them apart!

Ultimately the miners are bound for an island resort/hotel/aquarium in Dubai, while a much larger version of the bunny is destined to perch atop a column in Aesop’s Playhouse, Fairyland’s new children’s performing arts theater.

The creative mind behind bringing both the miners and bunnies to life is the same talented artist responsible for the huge mitt at AT&T Park that has delighted millions of fans. In his Richmond studio, Ron Holthuysen and his dedicated band of Scientific Art Studio craftsmen and artists joyfully jump between worlds to create compelling envi-



Photos courtesy of Scientific Art Studio

A futuristic miner made by Ron Holthuysen.

ronments that teach and delight. They apparently have absolutely no problem switching gears from the chilling to the cuddly, as demonstrated by the work that’s currently in process.

And yes, there are also numerous models of realistic sea life scattered about – a refurbished elephant seal, a transparent California sea lion – work currently being done for Sausalito’s renowned Marine Mammal Center.

Ron Holthuysen grew up in Holland reading folk tales, myths, legends, and the books of Jacob Grimm. He has read and understands more than a bit of old Dutch and Norse, which proved helpful in his translations. But he admits that he’s just doing what he was doing when he was

three years old – “figuring stuff out, building things, studying nature.”

As an adult he says that he had reached the end of what he could do in Holland, so he moved to the U.S. in 1994 to start his business here.

“In Holland, I was seen as the crazy guy,” he laughs. “But here, I’m the serious artist.”

For Fairyland’s new Aesop’s Playhouse, scheduled for its grand opening at the end of June, Ron and crew will be designing and building a number of animals from beloved tales, as well as Greek figures depicting the arts. The challenge is to create figures that are sweet, but not Disneyesque.

He’ll be utilizing some of the same techniques and materials that worked for the ATT park mitt – scanning the figures, building the structures using steel fabrications, and then sculpting the surface. He knows that much as we love cute, durability is key to the success of this project.

So two of Ron’s current clients are a sheikh from Dubai, and our little storybook park just down the street in Oakland. The Dubai project, with a theme that combines outer space, Middle Eastern myths and Atlantis, will soon be loaded onto ships that will take the 30 custom creations to an island far, far away.

The Aesop’s Playhouse at Fairyland will ultimately feature huge comedy/tragedy masks in the shape of the tortoise and the hare, in addition to the animals that will be smiling down on our theater audience.

“For me, this is no problem,” states the artist. “I live in all of these worlds at the same time.”

C.J. Hirschfield is Executive Director of Children’s Fairyland, which is located next to Lake Merritt at 699 Bellevue Avenue, Oakland. For more information call 452-2259 or e-mail cj@fairyland.org.