WASHINGTON CITYPAPER
MEMBER SUPPORTED

ARTS

Tape Player

by JESSE STANCHAK
JULY 23RD, 2004

Somewhere in the woods of Northern Virginia, five alabaster figures stand in a circle, poles in hand, ready for battle. Upon a cautious approach, it becomes clear that the forms are not warriors at all, but sculptures—made of tape.

The woods are the temporary home of works by sculptor Mark Jenkins (no relation to the Washington City Paper's own), whose clear-packing-tape sculptures have dotted landscapes on two continents. Now, the 33-year-old Fairfax native is moving his work indoors for his first solo show. Jenkins' exhibition at Gallery Place's HNTB Architecture showcases 10 of his sculptures alongside photographs of outdoor installations in Virginia and Rio de Janeiro.

It was during a stint in Brazil as an English instructor that Jenkins says he cultivated an interest in sculpture. He stumbled onto his preferred medium by accident, after creating a large ball of the tape one lazy afternoon. "There wasn't any kind of premeditation there at first," he says. "It just came."

"What struck me about [the tape] was the texture," he says, "how it's like glass, at times like ice. It's very reflective and captures light. I think humans have an inherent attraction to things like that: ice, diamonds, standing water."

Jenkins made a series of structures out of the tape, leaving them on the beach for passers-by to encounter. "The Brazilians are generally very curious people, and they'd come right up. [The sculptures] captured this wonderful light out there on the beach, so that you could almost believe they just washed up there."

One of Jenkins' beach installations was re-created for his D.C. show. Titled Sea Life #2, the packing-tape-and-fiberglass sculpture is a massive replica of a strand of sea kelp that Jenkins created for the beach in Rio—he even let the piece wash in and out with the tide. Not everyone immediately identifies the sculpture for what it

is, however. “There was this type of sea kelp on the Oregon coastline that I was really fond of,” he says, “so that’s what it’s modeled on. But now everyone says it looks like a sperm, and I guess I can see that.”

Jenkins says he prefers outdoor settings because they invite interaction with his sculptures in ways that galleries might not encourage. “In a gallery, people know it’s art and treat it that way. You’re not supposed to touch it or come near it,” he says. “I like art that you can access directly, without any barriers. It’s like God without the church.”

Recently, Jenkins has started to experiment with geologic shapes. The move is a natural one, because he studied geology at Virginia Tech long before he began to sculpt. “The [sculptures’] forms mimic nature, but it creates weird juxtaposition, since the tape is such a man-made material,” he explains.

Jenkins notes that the newer works represent the first opportunity he’s had to use his earth-science background since he left college. “A lot of my pieces resemble stalactites, natural forms like that. When I’m mimicking wind-eroded land forms, I realize that I’m finally putting geology to use. I don’t know if that makes my parents feel any better, but it’s enough for me.” —Jesse Stanchak

“Mark Jenkins: Recent Sculptures” is on view through Wednesday, Aug. 11, at HNTB Architecture, 421 7th St. NW. For more information call (202) 628-7525.