

Superplexus began as a solution to a problem given by my 11th grade art teacher, Ed Hairston, at Casa Grande High School in Petaluma. That year, in 1979, my family moved from Illinois to California when my dad retired from the Federal Government. My father believed in service to society, which is why he worked for the government in the first place. This has been a theme among my siblings, many of whom have become federal employees and also educators, including myself. Some are involved deeply in volunteer work to help feed the homeless.

My dad was an architect, but in order to advance in income he eventually became regional director for GSA's federal building division for the Midwest. I didn't fully understand his work, but one project that stuck out was his involvement in an environmental demonstration project in Saginaw, Michigan: a federal building that had an amazing array of advanced designs from solar heating to recycling human waste into fertilizer for the grounds. It was full of breakthroughs, but was ultimately defunded when the Regan administration came to power, which was formative to my political and environmental perspective to this day.

Another project my father was involved in was the commissioning and installation of Alexander Calder's monumental sculpture, FLAMINGO, outside of the Federal Building in Chicago, where my father worked at the time. Ever since 7th grade, I pictured myself as a sculptor or an architect, but back then I thought of sculpture as carving. I didn't have enough understanding, education or experience to grasp the importance of Calder's approach to constructed work, but over the decades since, this has become one of the most useful methods in achieving my vision. Constructing and assembling art was completely foreign to me back then, but ultimately satisfied the architectural builder in me.

This brings me back to that 11th grade art project.

My teacher's command: "Design a board game". Like most assignments in high school, I took that to mean I could do whatever I wanted. Ever since 6th grade, I was an avid maze drawer. I also loved a game called "Labyrinth", which was a wooden board that tilted, and had walls and holes in it. Two knobs controlled the tilt of the board, navigating the ball. So instead of a board game, I sought to create a truly 3-dimensional version of a labyrinth. Through experimentation, I found that I could wrap a pathway around and upon itself in space so that both the front and back surfaces of the structure could be utilized, allowing for incredibly dense pathways. This transformed my way of thinking. My first piece was ugly and clunky, but was mostly conceptual. The idea of concept rather than pure aesthetics in art was definitely foreign to me. Two years later, I attended Santa Rosa Junior College where I became a dedicated sculpture student. John Watrous was my instructor, and he really opened the door to my creative thinking. We did projects that had me thinking in new ways at every turn, and expanded my vision of what art was and could be. Sculpture was not only carving, casting and working in clay, it was building and designing, assembling and constructing. It was environmental, architectural scale, and even ephemeral. Sculpture was really without limits.

All throughout graduate school my work involved concepts around spatial thinking, machine aesthetics, story telling, and archeological mysteries and relics. This involved every material and process imaginable, but none of it related to my high school 3D labyrinth concept. To be honest, that project was so hard on my mind to create that I held back on developing it.

After graduate school I began to design and build furniture as an artistic release because it had permanence and function that I craved. Most of my artwork up to that time was not meant to really be permanent, and I needed that grounding. I did this work on commission, as well for my own home, and found it very satisfying. I wrote an article for a woodworking magazine on how furniture can combine with fine art.

It took 10 years for me to be in a place in my thinking to delve back into the 3D labyrinth concept in depth. This led me to create a series of hand made models that could be presented to a toy invention company in San Francisco. Over the next decade I dedicated most of my creative energy to this, and we successfully launched the line of games known as Perplexus. My wife came up with that name while trying to find a way to describe both “complex” and “perplexing”. As it turns out, “plexus” is a latin word meaning something that is complex and interwoven. The games have garnered many dozens of international awards, including the Game of the Year in 2013, and Innovative Art and Design Visuals of the Year award in 2021 for my Harry Potter themed Perplexus.

After 25 years, I was finally in a financial position to stop working 15 hours a day to make ends meet, and to again start to focus on my own personal sculptural work - as well as to design and build many interactive museum exhibits. I worked with Collette Michaud, the founder and CEO of CMOSC to design and build a major set of exhibits for her Children’s Museum. I had been teaching sculpture and design part time at SRJC for about 25 years by then, and was able to involve students in these creative projects. In fact, my former student, Emiko Ogasawara not only created some amazing work for the museum back then, she also spent weeks helping me hand sand and assemble the sculpture before us.

Creating Superplexus interactive and static sculptures was a complex process and took every ounce of my creative problem solving. I further refined the conceptual aspects of this work, finding that there were four main elements that make up the work. The first: I was making a labyrinth, which meant a single, continuous path from beginning to end full of pitfalls and dangers. Second: there were no superfluous elements; meaning every element had a purpose. Third: everything had to be structural; a self supporting integration of objects. And fourth: the entirety was an aesthetic sculptural form. All four of these elements informed design from beginning to end.

I have made pieces for museums and spaces in Australia, Germany, Sweden, Poland, the UK, and across the United States.

As I mentioned, there are two distinct approaches to this work of public and private art. The first being physically interactive, where the structure is on a gimbal that allows a large sphere to rotate by hand in every orientation. The other is the static series, as seen here in Gray Matter. It is meant for interaction in a purely intellectual and visual way.

All of my static Superplexus sculptures have stories to tell. For example, one that was placed at Healdsburg City Hall is about a life well-lived. It is called “Percorso Di Vita”, or Path of Life. It represents the path one takes in their personal journey, and how all of those twists and turns make up the whole of who you are. Another piece, made on commission for a private family is called “Entwined”. It is actually two completely different pathways that weave in and out of one another in a way that represents both the individual and the couple. They allow one-another independence and yet support each other in every way. A piece created for the 100th anniversary of Santa Rosa Junior College is entitled, “Veritas”, or truth. It is about how we have to protect education and hold it to truth telling in this age of misinformation.

The millennia old tradition of public sculpture has vastly changed over the centuries. In the past, works were commissioned and solely selected by the elites and ruling class to further their agendas, solidify victories, reinforce beliefs, and mark territory. For eons, figurative works were the near-exclusive subjects worldwide. Travel anywhere in the world and see how much monumental works of figurative public sculpture have reflected and shaped communities' identities. These works are a major draw for tourism as well as civic pride. The 20th century saw the transition from figurative to abstract sculpture as a reflection of intellectual, scientific, and technological influences, supplanting the concept of glory with contemplation, site specificity, and integration with the landscape. Instead of messages of power and dominance, works began to reflect a sense of place and community.

Because of our social and political structure, the United States has had a difficult time embracing public art, especially because public funds and public sites are employed. Time and again resistance to spending, and a distrust in decision makers has lead to a lack of public art. This has trickled down to a dwindling of the arts in public schools, having a detrimental effect on creative thinking as well as a sense of identity and belonging.

We are fortunate to live in a community that embraces art from the ground up. Yet with all of the artworks seen around Sebastopol, most are privately owned and maintained, and can be removed at any time.

This is where the Percent for the Arts comes in.

“Gray Matter” is both a pun on the message and materiality of the sculpture; it is of course made of gray stainless steel, carefully and meticulously hand sanded to follow the contours of the complex metal structure. It’s also about the human capacity for knowledge. The public library as a concept is not only an invitation for all to source vetted information, it is an extremely important icon of the right to intellectual freedom. The work is meant to aesthetically enhance the building structure, draw the eye into the sculpture’s interwoven pathways, and to let the viewer relish in its complexity. Complex issues require complex understanding - a concept that must be reinforced in all levels of our society.

My work is about the interconnectedness of everything. We are all part of the web of life, and no part can exist without the other. We are not separate entities - as my brother James pointed out to me yesterday, and my wife, Becky expressed today.

On the day the sculpture was being installed, I spoke to an older gentleman observing with his two very young grandchildren - they had just exited the library. I pointed to the sculpture and asked the little boys, “What do you think that is?”. One boy replied, “Is it awtwork [sic]?” “Yes”, I said, “but what do you think it looks like?” The grandfather offered his idea: “It looks like a brain!”. I responded, “it’s called Gray Matter.” The grandfather finished by saying, “Gray matter is what our brains are made out of. Let’s keep going to the library and see if our brains can grow that big!”