

A Welcome Balance: Finance Professor Sculpts on the Side

By Aaron Ragan-Fore

Many of us have hidden talents and pastimes, qualities and quirks known only to our families and closest friends. But finance professor Robert “Rocky” Higgins has a hobby that might seem a little out of place in the literal-minded world of international finance ... sculpture.

Higgins has been creating three-dimensional artwork since he was in his 20s, and is only becoming more prolific as time passes. His portfolio now encompasses works in media ranging from wood to ceramics to concrete. His decades-long passion may come as a surprise to his colleagues and students. Higgins rarely mentions his passion while at work, unless visitors to his office ask about the self-made sculpture decorating the room.

“My art provides no financial insights,” he quips.

Higgins first began sculpting while he was home in San Diego on a break from his undergraduate studies at Stanford University. Bored, the young scholar decided to construct a wooden piece with a tropical theme, and carefully chipped away at a palm log with a hatchet and hammer until a four-foot Tiki goddess figure emerged.

The goddess has followed Higgins since then, and is now one of the centerpieces of a collection of more than 40 works of art. Concrete gargoyles top fence posts in Higgins’ yard. A concrete houseplant in the living room requires little watering. A happy ceramic pig welcomes guests to Higgins’ vacation home. The artist describes his style as “Northwest eccentric,” a term that encompasses his flair for colorful, whimsical, almost cartoon-like characters.

Higgins may be a bit too modest about his work, which has spanned varied materials and forms through the years. “I’ll use whatever medium has been easiest to get to, or closest by,” he laughs. After a brief flirtation with wood, Higgins moved on to ceramics. These days he favors a process in which wet concrete is applied to a wire armature to create a figure. “I like three-dimensional rather than two-dimensional work because I have more control over it,” says Higgins.

“I think that concrete art has not reached anywhere near close to its potential,” he says. “Most people think of it as lawn art. With ceramics you can get a shiny, smooth glass-like finish, but I’m learning to love the rougher finish of

concrete. Besides, if you don’t like the head, you can just bash it off and make a new one.”

Higgins is not terribly interested in publicly displaying his work or entering it in competitions. He considers his artistic endeavors a respite from his academic pursuits. “Finance and art are diametrically opposed, which provides a welcome balance to life,” he grins. “Finance is analytical, detailed, logical, and rigorous, and art is none of those. Sculpture has always been just an alternative to counseling for me.”

The prospect of life after academia would mean more time to sculpt, but for now Higgins is preparing an eighth edition of his textbook and refining a paper for journal publication. He contents himself artistically with his current extracurricular project, refurbishing his original Tiki goddess sculpture, now that some of the wood has rotted. He is using his currently favored method of applying concrete to a construction foam armature.

“The Tiki goddess has been in the family for over 40 years, and it has been distressing watching her deteriorate,” says Higgins. “Concrete seems a viable way to restore her youthful beauty. Perhaps my restoration attempts are a metaphor for how we would like to turn back the effects of time, a feeling that grows as we age.”

Such a poetic turn of the phrase might seem out of place in a finance class, but shouldn’t be unexpected coming from this particular finance professor. After all, Rocky Higgins is also an artist.

