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## Keeton's Folly

by Marimar McNaughton  
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Staff photo by Joshua Curry

Toby Keeton stands with SwitchTower 4022, his nearly completed folly design for the Cameron Art Museum's Architectural Follies Competition.

Wilmington's Market Street urban sprawl, —a disjointed, inharmonious assemblage of storefront facades linked to crossroads by turn lanes and traffic lights, rapidly dissolves at the intersection of Westig Road near Cinema Drive. Turning off Market, trees reappear and a quasi-industrial landscape unravels where three railroad lines converge around the former Westig boat manufacturing plant, now the place of business for Michael Ross Kersting Architecture, where Toby R. Keeton is an intern.

Keeton is one of three young designers recently honored by the Cameron Art Museum's Architectural Follies competition. In architecture, a folly is a building constructed primarily for decoration.

Keeton's piece, SwitchTower 4002 was inspired by the landscape around the old Westig plant and the train yards of his youth.

The Kent State graduate, a part of Kersting's firm since September 2008, turned down opportunities in larger cities like New York and Philadelphia in favor of this position—designing, drafting, rendering and making the coffee under Kersting's eye in a mid-major southern city, a small town on the verge of becoming. Keeton said he could not have found a better education.

For the past month, he has been building a full-scale version of his folly, which will be erected at the museum's Pyramid Park this weekend.

"I've been scurrying to assemble all of the parts here, and then we're going to deliver them on Saturday," Keeton said. "It should be interesting."

Keeton said he was introduced to the folly competition when he attended a function in conjunction with the Gwathmey Siegel retrospective, hosted by the museum last year.

"Follies have a really rich history. They're something I've always been fascinated with since I got into design. In school they were always used as examples of really pure stylization. The thing that I'm really interested in is that they take on faux functionality. They pretend to be something," Keeton said.

Usually, Keeton said, a folly is some kind of pavilion or garden structure. He cited Marvin Blackwell's Honey House, a little shelter in the woods for storing honey, and on his blog (SwitchTower4022.blogspot.com) he illustrates other alternative follies and follows the process.

"The function is sort of a front for other motives and usually just aesthetic motives—the designer's will to impose very personal and obsessive ideas about design or architecture on the way things look. That's kind of the jumping off point that I took."

Keeton said his obsession, what he hoped to tackle and what front he chose to pair with his folly, married an early childhood connection to his Pittsburgh, Pa., roots and the location of Kersting's offices off-off Market Street.

"We're sitting on this island that's in between three strands of the Coastal CSX railroad. It's really active. Trains come back and forth all day. I grew up outside of Pittsburgh. I've always been surrounded by factories and railroad tracks, and I love it. I've always kind of had a personal obsession with industrial buildings."

Finding accidental beauty within the architectural complexity of his favorite Wilmington building, the Corning plant, he imagined this clearing in the woodsy Westig site as the permanent home for his folly after its six-month run expires at Cameron.

"I started thinking of it as an ambassador for our place here. We call our little triangle of land here the Switchyard, because of the switching of the track all around us. I started remembering from my past the old railroad switch tower ... these old huts on stilts that guys used to sit in before the rails were computerized ... to see oncoming trains. The trains would actually signal them up in the tower ... and they would switch the tracks appropriately."

Keeton's folly is like an infant progeny of the old boat shop, mimicking the parent style in a gestural sketch suggesting the use of like materials, and the shadows it casts on the pavement are reminiscent of train tracks.

When he was notified he had a month to complete the project, Keeton took his \$750 advance on the \$1,500 honorarium, hired Intra-coastal Iron to fabricate the legs from one and a half-inch steel tubing and then went dumpster diving for found objects, reclaimed materials, found wood skids, or pallets, fiberglass panels and charred cedar.

"I've been successful finding materials and repurposing them," he said.

Towers—from skyscrapers to deer stands—basically have three functions Keeton explained. They are designed to take up space vertically when ground space is scarce, they are designed as a sentry post for getting a good view or they are a landmark.

"The folly," he said, "is this fake, functional thing. It's a switch tower that nobody can climb. It's a landmark. It's something you see from the ground and it gives you a sense of your position. In that way, it's less of a building than a sculpture."

Keeton's will be the third and final folly installed on the museum's grounds. The two others—both interactive—are Haint Blue, designed by Daniel Harding and the Community Research and Design Center, School of Architecture, Clemson University and Tar House designed by native son, Matt Bua, New York.



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