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Front Page

The Mercury News

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Putting teeth in public art

WITH DOWNTOWN FRENZY OF SHARKS, S.J. TO JOIN CITIES THAT PUT ANIMALS ON PARADE



Courtesy of Sharkbyte art
A shark sculpture by San Jose artist Joe Saxe will be considered June 7 for the downtown display.

BY JACK FISCHER
Mercury News

The bulls may be long gone from Silicon Valley, but it seems the sharks have just begun to circle.

A San Jose restaurateur, hoping to duplicate the success of Cows on Parade, Chicago's bovine extravaganza of two years ago, plans to festoon downtown San Jose with 100 decorated fiberglass sharks.

The sharks are the latest in a series of decorate-the-fiberglass-animal displays that began with 800 cows in Zurich in the summer of 1999 and have since multiplied throughout

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or 1998 and has since proliferated throughout the United States, with everything from Mr. Potatoheads in Providence to turtles in Tampa and angels in Los Angeles. In between there have been pigs in Cincinnati, still more cows (in New York and Waco), and horses in Lexington, to name but some.



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The sharks are to appear on buildings and in street medians and parks throughout downtown in August and continue through October, said Joel Wyrick, owner of Waves Smokehouse and Saloon in San Jose and the mastermind behind the exhibit, which aims to promote downtown retailers and raise money for charity.

In January, a Los Altos art consultant wanted to install 1,000 fiberglass bulls up and down the Peninsula under the theme "Silicon Valley Stampede: Home of the Bull Market." The effort foundered with just 25 sold, making it perhaps the earliest known harbinger of the bear market.

"If we ever get back to a bull market again I'm all set," said the consultant, Carol Dobb, who went so far as to have a prototype bull designed by Washington, D.C., artist Walter Matia, who created the bull mascot for Merrill Lynch Corp.

So far, Wyrick, with his more modest plan, is doing better.

After coming up with the idea last summer and persuading the San Jose Downtown Association to sponsor it, Wyrick said, he has sold 73 of the finny "canvases" to a variety of local sponsors, from IBM and former San Jose Mayor Tom McEnery to a Los Altos middle school art class. Still, the task has been hard enough that Wyrick halved his original plans for 200 sharks.



Courtesy of Sharkbyte art
A shark submitted by Los Angeles artist Man One.

Evolution of the shark

But why, aside from the obvious tie to a local hockey team, sharks?

"It was by default, really," said Wyrick, 41. "Originally, I had envisioned fruit. I'm a native San Josean. I picked fruit in the orchards as a kid. But the artists I spoke to weren't into it. As one said to me, 'I'm sorry, Joel, but prunes don't move me.'"

Wyrick said his suggestion of microchips met a similar reaction, so, half as a joke, he suggested sharks and microchips -- hoping to call the extravaganza "Fish and Chips."

"But we were worried we'd sell lots of sharks and no microchips, so sharks it was."

Not surprisingly, the San Jose Sharks hockey team will be a key

promoter of the event, although Malcolm Boudelon, the Sharks' executive vice president of business operations, insisted the team would have helped Wyrick even if he had picked a different animal.

As Wyrick has structured it, he and the downtown association are charging each sponsor \$3,500 to buy a shark. The price covers \$1,500 to pay for fabrication of the shark, \$1,500 for an artist to decorate it, with the remaining \$1,000 covering administrative costs of staging the event.

Wyrick hired Blaine Kern Studios, a New Orleans-based company that fabricates animals and other objects for the Walt Disney Company, to craft the plain fiberglass animals, which it did using workers in Spain. Wyrick said the 6-foot-long, 35-pound shark models now are either coming through customs or sitting in a warehouse in Oakland.

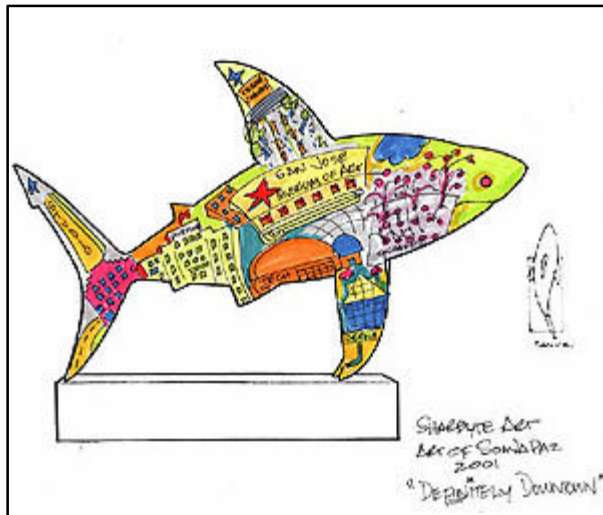
``We're still trying to figure out how to make these things heavy enough, so that they don't disappear when Joe Fraternity comes downtown," said Wyrick. San Jose's Garden City Construction Co. has agreed to help create bases for the sharks and install them.

Artists' proposals

To date, the event organizers have solicited design proposals for decorating the sharks from 100 local artists, and Wyrick said he is accepting proposals until Monday.

On the evening of June 7, the San Jose Museum of Art has agreed to a special after-hours showing of the artists' proposals, so shark sponsors can select a design. Sponsors also have the option of selecting their own artist, or even decorating it themselves.

The decorated sharks will be scattered in unlikely places throughout downtown. The boundaries will be Compaq Center to the west, Fourth Street to the east, St. James Park to the north and Interstate 280 to the south. Wyrick hopes they will draw plenty of gawkers -- who will linger in the restaurants and shops.



Courtesy of Sharkbyte art

A design from San Jose artist Sonya Paz are among the concepts from which sponsors will select the sharks. The San Jose Museum of Art will hold an after-hours showing to consider the designs.

Finally, sometime in November, event organizers plan to auction off all the sharks, with 70 percent of the proceeds going to a charity of the sponsor's choice. Another 20 percent of the proceeds will go to city non-profit groups, including the San Jose Art Commission, and the remaining 10 percent will pay for the cost of the auction, Wyrick

said.

Chicago raised \$3.4 million auctioning slightly less than half its bulls, with a Pennsylvania woman paying the evening high of \$110,000 for one.

Wyrick said he is pleased to be raising money for charity, but no less pleased at the possibility of bringing business to downtown merchants.

“Usually, at downtown events, people go to the booths at the event itself, so it doesn't help merchants,” Wyrick said. This is the first downtown event where these dollars will go to the merchants themselves.”

Just when you thought it was safe to go back downtown.

For more information, see www.sharkbyteart.com.

Contact Jack Fischer at jfischer@sjmercury.com or (408) 920-5440.

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