



Roadside art at Texas Pipe & Supply's Eclectic Menagerie Park

WHAT THE HELL'S ON THE SIDE OF THE ROAD

This month: a metal menagerie

DRIVERS APPROACHING DOWNTOWN HOUSTON on Highway 288, right before reaching the Loop 610 interchange, are often distracted by something off to their left, a group of 26 cast-iron sculptures reminiscent of a scene from *Jumanji*. There's a 42-foot-long armadillo squatting atop a hillock; three cows perched on a narrow platform 18 feet off the ground; a giant, spread-eagled hawk, talons pointed menacingly at the traffic. It isn't all animals: there's also a life-size Piper plane and a scale model of a stealth bomber that took almost three years to build.

Although there are no identifying signs, this bizarre collection of roadside art is known as the Eclectic Menagerie Park by its owner, Texas Pipe & Supply, a century-old, family-owned oilfield supply company. Since about 2001, board chairman Jerry Rubenstein has been commissioning large-scale artwork that he then installs on land the company owns. (Although the park is private, visitors can access the sculptures by parking on the side of the 288 feeder road.)

The Menagerie's gamekeeper is a crusty, 64-year-old Willie Nelson lookalike named Ron Lee, who serves as Texas Pipe's head welder-slash-company artist. Lee has personally built hundreds of scrap-metal sculptures for the company, plus some for Rubenstein's several homes around Texas. Lee

creates them in his on-site work studio, which Texas Pipe has constructed and outfitted for the purpose. He's also responsible for maintaining the Menagerie's collection; when high wind knocked a wing off the plane, Lee welded it back on. "It ain't going anywhere now," he says. "It may not fly, but it sure won't break."

Texas Pipe receives countless e-mails from passing motorists asking about the sculptures, and the park has even caused a few wrecks by distracted drivers, but the Eclectic Menagerie has always kept a low profile. That may change, however, with the unveiling of their largest work to date, a ten-story cast-iron fishing pole complete with reel, line, and a stainless steel hook, from which will dangle a red Mazda Protégé. It was designed by Rubenstein and built by Lee, who is fast acquiring a reputation as the Rodin of Texas roadside art. On the day we visited Texas Pipe, the fishing pole was in the final stages of construction, and Lee was busy figuring out how to keep it anchored in the ground. He had already dug an 18-foot-deep concrete foundation into which the handle of the fishing pole would fit.

Lee has never sold one of his sculptures to an outside buyer and said he isn't interested in recognition from the Houston art world. "It's been an outsider art deal so far," Lee said. "We don't really care, to tell you the truth. I build big—money's not the object here." —Michael Hardy

One-Sentence Stories



After at least six days trapped beneath a Katy Freeway overpass, a chihuahua was rescued by animal control and is expected to make a full recovery.



Days apart, two local women, both named Ana, were alleged to have killed or attempted to kill their lovers, both professors.



Meanwhile, at the Apple store, sales of the Joel Osteen iPhone app were said to be brisk.



A citrus-loving fiend dug up a lemon tree from an Oak Forest lawn and made off with it; the homeowner wished a case of dysentery on the thief.



Westboro Baptist Church came to town to protest the Southern Baptist convention; a local man met them with a placard reading "I Want Attention Too."



Exhibitionists rejoiced at the announcement of the reopening of River Oaks make-out bar Marfreless. —J.N.L.