

Shape, form and space



Chris Newman with his "peelings."

Chris Newman calls his latest sculptures "peelings"—strips of brass about 18 inches long, each one shaped to "straddle" a space.

"They allude to a form that's not there," Newman explains. "Like the skin or peelings of an orange. I find them interesting."

Newman's interest in shape, form and space is more casual now than some years back, when he spent all his time sculpting and teaching fine arts.

But the Medical Center's assistant vice president for corporate planning and market research still has a studio where he likes to spend an evening or two a week.

"Suspension V," one of his earlier works, is on display in the Rush University Library. As in many of his pieces, Newman uses aluminum for this configuration of geometric shapes that he balances "to convey, statically, certain dynamic feelings of masses suspended in space."

It stands about five feet tall "so viewers can walk around it, run fingers along its surface and even poke their heads through the inside space," the sculptor says. "I want to engage the viewer physically as well as aesthetically."

The title, "Suspension V," calls attention to his principal intent in this particular work, but that's not the case with all his geometric pieces. "When I put a name on a work I've

finished the title isn't always all that important if it's an abstract geometric," Newman explains. "What the sculpture says actually has nothing to do with words. The title is evocative, but not explanatory. In many cases it's just meant to be interesting."

Other titles for instance, are "Slide," "One Side White," "Intellectual Bubble," and "Aronical," named after his older son, Aron.

Over the years Newman has signed his name to dozens of geometrics and more than 20 different art exhibits have featured his work. In 1968 he won honors at the annual sculpture show at the Cheltenham Art Center in Philadelphia.

He's been spotlighted in one-man shows at the Ruth White Gallery in New York and at the Philadelphia Art Alliance, and he was one of just five chosen for an exclusive showing called "Chicago Sculptors" in an exhibition at the Federal Building in 1978. His work also appears in private collections in Boulder, Chicago, Cleveland, New York, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh and Boston.

Newman's training in the fine arts includes both a master's and a bachelor's degree from the University of Pennsylvania, and he is also a Harvard grad, receiving a B.A., cum laude, in history and literature.

Until about 12 years ago art was his "top priority."

"But I came to realize that I was alone most of the time," Newman says. "My sculpture demanded a huge time investment and it was essential to be alone while I worked. One of the hardest things that I had to come to terms with is that the actual making of my sculpture allowed very little human interaction. That was a major consideration in changing my focus."

His general attraction to business developed into a specialty in health care management. Within five years his credentials included an M.B.A. in hospital administration from The University of Chicago and expertise—in marketing, long-range strategic planning, feasibility studies and market analysis—with nationally recognized health care consulting firms. In 1980 he founded his own consulting firm and five years later joined the Medical Center.

Now art is a diversion and a relaxation.

He's recently included imagery in his sculpture. On a table in one corner of his studio, for example, sit two opened styrofoam egg cartons. He's been gradually filling them with bits and pieces of things that catch his eye—like a toy model car and an acorn and...

"This is experimental and very much different from what I've done before," Newman is quick to add, "but I find it a form of sculpture that I am now responding to."

The finished assemblage will eventually become a metal sculpture in a multi-step process that involves covering the piece with a plaster mixture; melting out the plastic and other combustible bits to create a mold; and then pouring in liquid metal.

At the same time Newman continues to work on his small metal "peelings" as well as larger geometric configurations, including a sculpture that dates back to 1968, which he categorizes as "one of the pieces that I keep working on—on and off—while I try to figure out why I like it."

"I usually work on three or four things at a time," Newman adds. "I can't do one piece from beginning to end without starting other things. I'm not built that way."