SCULPTING A CREATIVE VISION FOR THE ARTS

By KATHLEEN TUCK

His bronze and marble statues dot sites around the country, each one honoring a historical figure, war hero, firefighter or other worthy individual. Now, the clay versions of many of those works are displayed in his studio and gallery on the Boise State campus — the only place in the country where you can see them all together.

Benjamin Victor’s 9-foot bronze statue of Steve Appleton, a Boise State alumnus and former CEO of Micron Technology, was recently installed in the courtyard on the east side of the university’s Micron Business and Economics Building.

And while the Boise State artist in residence and professor of the practice continues to create new works from his 7,500-square-foot studio space in the former Mechanical Technology Building, he’s now helping shape something even bigger — a stronger sculpture program in the university’s Department of Art.

Working with program head Francis Fox, Victor is helping to shine the spotlight on the university’s sculpture program and shatter the stereotype that art is an impractical career choice.

“That’s not true,” Victor said. “Every facet of society uses arts to highlight things about their business or area of expertise. That’s what’s really exciting for the community, our students and their parents. Economic development is a huge component of the arts.”

Fox has taken several students to tour Victor’s studio, where they benefit from viewing the sculptor’s technique in various works. But it’s the professional outreach the two are crafting that Fox finds most exciting.

“It’s a symbiotic relationship where students benefit from internships, skill building and attracting the attention of other artists to the university,” he said.

Fox is passionate about art, and even more so about sculpture.

“I love how sculpture can physically draw you in and then expand your thoughts beyond what is actually there,” he said. “One of my favorite quotes comes from art critic Peter Schjeldahl: ‘Sculpture’s prerogative is to confront us with the fact of our material, physical, bodily reality, making that fact available to thought and feeling — and making it sociable, an open secret shared with others in a common space.’”

Fox sees sculpture entering a renaissance phase, as virtual space and physical space intersect in the digital age. “New equipment is allowing us to grab a slice of life, much like what happened with painting in the wake of photography,” he said, noting that 3D printing techniques are providing sculptors with previously unimagined options.

Boise State students get a taste of his vision through a variety of materials and sculptural processes, including woodworking, metal fabrication, mixed media projects,
foundry and non-metal casting, carving and modeling in a range of materials, and the growing field of digital processes.

The program also boasts access to technology including Next Engine scanners and 3D printers, and to an on-campus metal casting foundry for pouring bronze and aluminum.

Victor would like to see that foundry used to pour one of his own bronze sculptures, giving students a chance to create a professional large-scale sculpture while also providing funds for new equipment. The project would be the perfect marriage of the arts and real-world experience.

And Victor sees other good things ahead as the university continues to grow and expand. He’s especially intrigued by the enthusiasm of Bronco Nation and believes it’s a passion that can be harnessed.

“People are interested in the arts and they’re excited about what we are doing here,” he said. “We want people to be as passionate about the arts as they are about the sports on campus. We’re just scratching the surface of what we can do here, and I want to be part of that.”

Francis Fox, right, demonstrates a metal pour in the campus foundry.