
Sculptor shapes the flakes

By Margaret LeRoux Photography by Tom Rettig

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Piles of snow may cause many New Englanders to groan in dismay, but David Rothstein delights in them. Where some see a snowbank as a chore to be shoveled, he sees the potential for art.

Rothstein is a snow sculptor. He carves huge blocks of snow into figures that are sometimes whimsical, other times abstract, but always ephemeral as they inevitably melt away.

Rothstein, an environmental attorney for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in Northampton, grew up in Worcester. He got hooked on snow sculpting in 1997 in Anchorage, Alaska, where he was doing a law clerkship.

“In Anchorage in the winter, the sun rises at 10 a.m. and sets at 2 p.m. You can either be a hermit or embrace it,” he said. Rothstein chose the latter and joined in the city’s two-week-long winter festival, “Fur Rendezvous.”

“Two friends and I entered the snow sculpting event, having no idea that we were in way over our heads,” he explained.

On the first day when the novice sculptors saw what they had to work with -- a 10-foot cube of snow weighing 20 tons -- Rothstein’s friends bailed out. He stayed with it and for a week chiseled away at the sculpture every night after work. During those long, cold hours he was befriended by fellow snow sculptors.

“Everyone was helpful,” he said. “They loaned me tools because all I had was a small axe and a knife. It was the first time I ever lost myself in something creative.”

Rothstein’s statue, a bear wearing sunglasses sitting on a lawn chair, captivated the festival’s participants. “People would stop by and at first they’d ask -- ‘Is it a train engine?’ I’ll never forget the moment someone recognized it as a bear,” Rothstein said. “I gave him a hug.”

When he moved back east, Rothstein found very few snow sculpting events. During a trip to Jackson, N.H., he made a sculpture in the yard of the inn where he was staying. The director of Jackson’s Chamber of Commerce saw it and convinced him to do a snow sculpture demonstration at the nearby ski resort of Black Mountain. That developed into a sanctioned snow sculpting event, now in its 11th year.

The 2011 event drew 16 teams and more than 2,000 fans. Rothstein’s abstract and airy cube, “Bent Out of Shape,” won the invitational prize, while New Hampshire snow sculptor Dick Devellian won the New Hampshire Sanction Award.

Snow sculpting is much more collaborative than competitive, Rothstein noted. “We’re all out there to do art,” he said. “We all start with the same eight-foot block of snow and it’s amazing to see what everyone comes up with by the end of the weekend. I like the idea that it’s a team effort. It’s as much about the friendships as it is about the art.”

The universe of snow sculptors is small, but international. Rothstein has competed throughout the United States and at events in Canada, Europe and in Ushuaia, Argentina.

Snow sculpting tools for the most part are very low-tech, unlike ice sculpting with its ear splitting chain saws.

“It feels natural to carve with hand tools,” said Rothstein, whose 5-foot saw is similar to those used for cutting blocks of ice in the 19th century. He also uses two-person wood saws and chisels. There are no official snow carving tools. “It’s a hodge-podge of things you find at yard sales or pet supply stores,” he added.

The ideal temperature for carving snow is between 20 and 25 degrees Fahrenheit, “cold enough for the snow and not too cold for the sculptors,” Rothstein said. At a snow sculpting event in Burlington, Vt., a few years ago, the temperature was 29 degrees below zero. “We would be out carving for 15 minutes, then we’d have to retreat to the warming tent,” he said. “It’s easier when you’re not fighting the temperature.”

More frequently the weather has been too warm, causing the sculptures to melt or collapse.

For the competition in New Hampshire last winter, Rothstein’s sculpture was very spare and linear. The skill and artistry were in carving razor straight lines from the cylinder of snow --then opening up the center. It’s a deceptively simple creation, but devilishly hard to execute properly.

Traditional snow sculptures are essentially huge lumps of snow; their character emerges from the details carved out of them. Rothstein creates abstract figures by tunneling through the snow “so you can see through it. This creates shadows that give the sculpture another dimension,” he said.

Carving air into a sculpture is not only technically challenging, it can be dangerous, too. “You have to carefully consider whether the sculpture will stand up and you have to factor in the effects of changing temperature on the snow,” he said.

Rothstein’s award-winning sculpture started with a 6-inch model made of floral foam; he then scaled up the dimensions to 8 feet.

“It took a while to figure out how thick to make the columns so that they would maintain the structural integrity,” he said. He also had to factor in the weather. Temperatures got up into the 30s during the day with some sun.

As Rothstein carved the block of snow on Saturday, he made a column up the middle to support the sculpture’s overhang. The difficult part was removing that center column. He waited till almost midnight when the temperature was in the single digits, explaining that “then the snow is at its stiffest, so the chances of the sculpture falling in on itself were at a minimum.”

Snow sculpting brought out artistic abilities Rothstein didn’t realize he had. “My mother was an art teacher and is a docent at the Worcester Art Museum, so I guess there’s artistic talent in my blood,” he said, “though my family thought it was a little weird that it’s showing up in snow sculpting.”

Rothstein says the long, cold hours of creating art from snow made him appreciate how drawing is at the root of everything. “That’s the biggest challenge for me,” he concludes, “to draw three dimensionally.”