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Beach's Neptune artist finally visits the work he sacrificed for

By RICHARD QUINN, The Virginian-Pilot

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Building the Beach's King Neptune statue cost artist Zhang Cong his wife and his business. But he never flinched: His translator said Cong saw the work as "a promise to the Virginia Beach people that he has to keep, no matter what sacrifices he has to do." Delores Johnson | The Virginian-Pilot

VIRGINIA BEACH

A thin man with a ponytail stood silent under the King Neptune statue on the Boardwalk the other day.

He seemed no different than the million other tourists who have walked under the sculpture's piercing glare and mammoth hands.

Unless one looked in his eyes. Zhang Cong's were welling as he stared solemnly at the sculpture.

His sculpture.

Cong gave up nearly everything he had to build King Neptune. He ran out of money because he made it too big, then his business went bankrupt. His wife divorced him, and his father died of cancer.

Still, Cong toiled.

Now, two years after he finished it, Cong stood in front of what he considers his life's work, seeing it together, in place, for the first time.

"Very exciting," he said simply, through a translator. "The tears are almost here."

Cong's visit was the climax of an artist's tale that started in 1999 with a chat between a developer and the head of the Neptune Festival.

Bruce Thompson, the hotelier, said a statue near the 31st Street Hilton he wanted to build could be a nice touch. Nancy Creech, the festival's president, thought so, too.

Five years later, Thompson asked if Creech could raise the \$500,000 it was thought the statue would cost. It took her army of fund raisers just four months to make the budget. Not a dime came from public coffers.

Meanwhile, in 2004, respected Richmond sculptor Paul DiPasquale had begun designing King Neptune.

DiPasquale's Roman god was a wizened, older man, holding court over the ocean he both protected and called home.

Plans called for a towering edifice standing about 28 feet tall on a base of rock and concrete. American foundries would charge \$800,000, maybe \$1 million to cast such a bronze monstrosity, DiPasquale was told.

Frustrated, DiPasquale vented over lunch with a friend and colleague, Richmond businessman James Xu.

"Why don't you go to China?" Xu asked. "We've been doing that for 3,000 years."

A month later, when DiPasquale still couldn't find a sculptor to cast his piece, the pair met again. DiPasquale had only a few words to say this time.

"Let's go to China."

Zhang Cong is an artist, not a businessman.

As Xu auditioned foundries and artists in China, he found technically proficient work. Coppersmiths with a talent for beveling the bellies of Buddha effigies, but not the emotive details of a man's face. Or the defined musculature of a king's chest.

Cong was different. A lanky 32-year-old with a broad forehead and expressive eyes, he had textbook talent and a creative eye.

He even looked like an artist, with his ponytail of black hair that touched the small of his back and the sprouts of a goatee peppering his chin.

Xu noticed him immediately.

"A doer," he said, "instead of a talker."

Cong got the job and went to work in the fall of 2004, in leased warehouse space in Ningbo, a port city of 6 million people on the East China Sea where Xu's company has an office.

DiPasquale had told him how tall he wanted the piece to be. DiPasquale had a vision of the span between Neptune's shoulders and the size of the turtle he would hold in his left palm.

The artist in Cong simply ignored all of that.

"The Neptune," he said through his translator, Ben He of Ningbo. "A king, a god. Big is everything."

Cong's Neptune grew by the day. The width of his shoulders puffed from nine feet to 12 feet. His hips swelled from five feet to eight-and-a-half. He was 34 feet tall.

DiPasquale could have panicked over the budget, worrying where the money would come from to pay for this enlarged deity. Instead, he empathized with the soul of a sculptor.

"He had the guts to say, 'I don't care, I want to make it as commanding as it can be,'" DiPasquale said. "Another artist might have called it a liability. I saw it as an asset, that kind of courage."

DiPasquale and Cong became partners, separated by language but bound by a joint masterpiece. Workers sweated through 14 hour days, seven days a week.

Cong's workers used the lost-wax method of bronzing crafted 4,000 years ago - involving melted wax molds and diesel-fired furnaces - to painstakingly create each piece.

The price of the copper used to make the bronze rose three times. The amount of bronze needed increased 30 percent.

At one point, DiPasquale and Cong talked about starting over.

And then things got really difficult.

In China, where one's word is as strong as industrial steel, the line between dedication and obsession can be fine.

So when Cong accepted the responsibility of casting King Neptune, the rest of his life took on less importance.

"Using his words, it's a promise," Xu said. "A promise to the Virginia Beach people that he has to keep, no matter what sacrifices he has to do."

They were many.

Cong's father was diagnosed with cancer soon after work began late in 2004.

Still, Cong worked.

Hours in the warehouse outnumbered those spent anywhere else, and his wife moved in with her parents.

And still, he worked.

His father died. His wife divorced him. He used up all the money the Neptune Festival had raised, then spent some of his own.

He stopped, finally, only after his business went bankrupt. The project was salvaged when Xu contributed enough to finish the job.

King Neptune arrived in Virginia Beach on May 10, 2005. His builder got here 871 days later, just in time for the highlight weekend of this year's Neptune Festival.

Cong would have been here sooner, but the struggles that began during Neptune's birth continued after the creation left home.

Cong's business struggled for two years. He didn't have enough money to pay his lease at the foundry. He couldn't afford to hire more workers, which meant he couldn't take on more artistic jobs.

He took work in a commercial foundry to pay his bills. Business is so-so, he said during his visit two weeks ago.

Cong's trip to see the sculpture came together after festival leaders last year saw "Neptune: Making the Myth," a documentary of the story behind the statue. The film was put together by Coastal Training Technologies Corp., a Virginia Beach company.

"Someone having that kind of difficulty had the courage, the dedication to get this done," said Richard Cheng, a former computer science chairman at Old Dominion University, who was impressed by Cong's story.

The Neptune Festival hosted a fundraiser for Cong earlier this year at Cheng's Virginia Beach home. It raised more than \$10,000, later passed to Cong in a real check, not a ceremonial one.

After a few months of work, Creech, the festival's president, finally found someone who understood the rigid travel rules between China and the United States. A visa was arranged. Cong arrived in Richmond on a Wednesday morning. He was in Virginia Beach the next day.

The next two weeks were a tour of honors: He was a panelist at a film festival in Richmond. There was a news conference with Chinese diplomats in Washington and a sight seeing trip to New York City, paid for by the donations given at Cheng's house.

The best sight he saw, of course, was his Neptune.

As the sun set behind him, Cong stood on the Boardwalk and took pictures from every angle. He posed for as many shots as he took.

Then, staring at the project that cost him his factory and his family, he was asked a simple question.

Is this your best work?

"I think so," he said.

He paused.

"At the moment."

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