

Carving out a dream



Photos by STEELE BURROW/Staff Photographer

"No one tells me what to do. There's a lot of freedom," sculptor Eliseo Garcia of Farmers Branch says of his art. The 2009 state three-dimensional artist, who works out of a Dallas studio, got his big break with a piece at DART's Westmoreland station.

Sculptor known for Dallas-area public works honored as state artist

By ERIC AASEN
Staff Writer
eaasen@dallasnews.com

You may have never heard of Eliseo Garcia, but you've probably seen his works of art across the North Texas landscape.

Abstract sculptures at a Dallas fire station. Bas-relief murals in a Frisco recreation center. A 25-foot-tall piece of limestone art at a Dallas Area Rapid Transit station.

Garcia, of Farmers Branch, has been named the state three-dimensional artist for 2009. Various state honors are given annually to artists, musicians and poets based on the quality of their work and their commitment to the arts in Texas. A state poet laureate, musician and two-dimensional artist also are named.

For Garcia, 61, it's the latest honor in a successful career.

But becoming a full-time sculptor like Garcia is a struggle. For years, he could only pursue art in

between working regular jobs and raising his family. Garcia shows that if you stick with something long enough, you may get what you want.

"I had it in my heart and dream and spirit," he said.

As a child, Garcia scanned the newspapers, copying editorial cartoons. He thought he'd be a cartoonist or an illustrator.

After studying art in college, he knew that being a full-time artist would be a challenge.

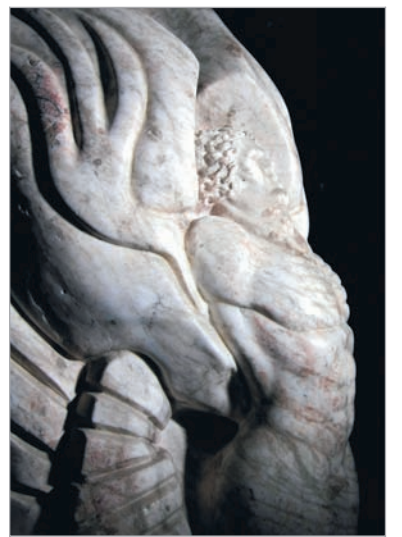
"I just kept hammering away," he said. "I felt I needed to take responsibility and work, and maybe one day I'll get my break."

That day came in the mid-'90s, when DART sought artists to create art at transit stations. Garcia submitted his "meager qualifications" and developed plans for his sculpture.

To his delight, his work was chosen.

"At first, I was shocked," he said. "Then I

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Garcia's works include 1991's *Guardian*, made of alabaster, and several public art projects.

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thought, 'How am I going to do this?'"

Garcia spent the summer creating *Cycles of Life* for the Westmoreland DART station. The sculpture includes a base similar to a Mayan pyramid and is topped by a winged figure.

As he worked, he invited onlookers to chip away at the stone.

Garcia enjoys sharing his work with others, said David B. Hickman, a Dallas sculptor who has also won the Texas three-dimensional artist award. "He loves to be carving something and have kids come by and have them take a hammer and chisel and take a whack or two at it," Hickman said. "It's a nice thing to do and an educational thing."

The DART project propelled Garcia into public art, opening more doors to other projects.

"It showed me there was nothing I couldn't do," he said.

Garcia has completed public artwork in several cities, at venues that include the Irving Arts



STEELE BURROW/Staff Photographer

Eliseo Garcia enjoys sharing his work, a colleague says, and sometimes lets onlookers take up the chisel for a moment.

Center, Tommy and Sue Brown Park in North Richland Hills, and, in Dallas, the Arcadia Park Library and a fire station.

Those pieces built his portfolio and profile, which helped earn him the three-dimensional artist award.

Winning state artists have achieved critical acclaim and are considered to be among the best in their field, said Gaye Greever McElwain, director of marketing and communica-

tions for the Texas Commission on the Arts, which helps oversee the appointment process.

Nominated artists are asked to submit materials showcasing their work, McElwain said. Experts are brought in to offer feedback. Winners are named by a committee of citizens appointed by the governor, the lieutenant governor and the speaker of the Texas House of Representatives.

But for Garcia, there isn't

much time to bask in the spotlight.

Instead, he works in the blazing summer heat. He wears a hat and a towel around his neck and stands under an umbrella with a huge fan buzzing nearby.

Currently, Garcia is working on a 40-foot-long bas-relief to be displayed at Children's Medical Center Dallas.

Nature pops out of the limestone. Birds are flying and fish are swimming. Ducks rest in the water. Nearby, there's a waterfall, a longhorn and a ladybug. Bluebonnets and butterflies, too.

The Texas nature scene is designed to be whimsical and appeal to children. Garcia wants to give kids who may be stuck in the hospital "a feeling of openness and freedom."

His Dallas studio, filled with chunks of stone and metal, is like a second home. There's a toilet, a shower and an office.

But last week, as Garcia was working, his studio caught on fire.

Garcia is doing fine, although the studio is damaged. An electrical malfunction is the likely cause.

He lost some of his artwork and drawings, and other sculptures will need to be repaired. But he fears he would have lost everything if he hadn't been at the studio.

Firefighters protected as much as they could, while talking art with Garcia.

"They were admiring the art, but at the same time they were putting out the fire," he said.

Despite the fire, art is his life. "No one tells me what to do. There's a lot of freedom."

For Garcia, art is practically an obsession, said his wife of 35 years, Mary Lou.

"If he's not working, he has to check out his studio," she said. "I joke with him, 'It's not going to go away.'"

He's so involved in his work that he has to be reminded of a family event or function several times in advance, she said.

"When he is focused on his art, you better stay away from him," she said. "That's his love. That's his passion."

And his wife couldn't be prouder.

"His dream came true."