



Artist gives 'life' to remains of prehistoric animals

by [Mark Houser](#)

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In a workshop in the hulking shell of the former Westinghouse Electric plant, Keny Marshall is busy rejuvenating mammoth relics of a much older sort.

Marshall is site manager of the Pittsburgh operations of Phil Fraley Productions, a New Jersey company that builds the fossilized skeletons of prehistoric creatures for museum exhibits throughout the country.

Trained as a metal sculptor with a master's degree in fine arts from Louisiana State University, Marshall never imagined he'd find himself in this line of work.

"I had no idea there even was a guy who puts dinosaurs together," said Marshall, 37, whose looks more artist than engineer with his wavy black hair and long Vandyke beard.

After working seven years designing and building mechanical exhibits at the Children's Museum of Pittsburgh, Marshall took a job grinding, welding and hammering custom steel mounts for dinosaur bones at the Turtle Creek shop.

He spends most of his time planning jobs at the nine-person operation, supervising installations on site -- the firm rebuilt the Carnegie Museum of Natural History's dinosaur exhibit -- and figuring out the logistics of crating and moving the giant specimens.

Lately the workshop is focused on renovating a 10,000-year-old mastodon skeleton for the State Museum of Pennsylvania in Harrisburg.



Keny Marshall displays several vertebrae from the Marshalls Creek Mastodon, while Tom Werner works in the background.

As reggae and jazz compete to drown out the hammers and power grinders in the metal frame shop, restorationists remove old wax and fiberglass once used to strengthen the fossilized bones. It's a sculpting and reconstruction job, too, because the original specimen was cut in half and mounted on a wall like a bas-relief. When the shop is done, the exhibit will be a full 3-D skeleton in a lifelike pose.

The team is guided by detailed drawings and paleontological research, but there is room as well for artistic expression as long as it's disciplined.



Reference photos and drawings help restorationists at Phil Fraley Productions in Turtle Creek get the anatomy right.

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"There's a lot of sculptural guesswork, as much as I hate to use that word," Marshall said.

Coincidentally, the specimen and the supervisor share a surname. The Marshalls Creek Mastodon, discovered in a central Pennsylvania peat bog in 1968, has a curious pedigree. It was dug up by Alton Murray, who spent years lecturing and writing about how his fossil finds disproved the theory of evolution and instead showed most of the animals drowned during Noah's flood.

Marshall has no comment on that. But in his spare time, he does artwork that might draw equally cockeyed looks.

For instance, a piece he exhibited at a Downtown gallery two years ago trained cameras on two puffer fish in a glass bowl. When they moved a certain way, horns blew.

Marshall is the creator of "Crickets," part of the citywide BigBots robotic art exhibit. His robots, in the garden of the Mattress Factory, each pound a woodblock in response when the others do, supposedly mimicking insect behavior.

He met his girlfriend, sculptor Carin Mincemoyer, at the South Side co-op artists' lofts where they live. They carpool, too; she's a fossil preparator for the studio.

The couple's artist friends generally don't begrudge them their 9-to-5 routines.

"We actually like our day jobs, so a lot of times they're jealous," Mincemoyer said.

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With the hands of an artist and the eyes of a scientist, Robert Dicristofaro meticulously restores mastodon ribs.



Tom Werner creates a replica skull for a morenosaurus, a type of long-necked marine reptile from the late Cretaceous.



Keny Marshall, front, and Robert Dicristofaro, rear, are restoring a Mastodon at Phil Fraley Productions, in Turtle Creek, a shop fueled by equal parts science, coffee and rock and roll.