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Workplace of Art

A Pinellas business makes machines...and a big impression

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Developing Diplomats

A local program teaches peace to preschoolers

What Gives?

It's open season for fall fundraisers - details in the Applause! benefit calendar

September - October 2004



Workplace of Art

by Rick Gershman

Polypack, a Pinellas-based manufacturer of packaging machinery, maintains a gallery-quality collection of works by local artists.

The question is, why ?

It's not exactly what you would call the scenic route: A drive down Gateway Centre Parkway in Pinellas Park offers no shopping destinations. No restaurants dot this stretch, either. No nightclubs, no golf courses, no fitness centers-none open to the public, at least.

While by no means unattractive-it winds through more greenspace than you'll find in much of Pinellas Country these days-the road exists purely to serve the needs of its namesake industrial-heavy business park. Gateway Centre has been home at times to local divisions of such mega-corporations as American Express, Federal Express and Airborne Express.

But Taco Bell Express? Sadly, no. It's all about industry.

Unless you are among the many employed in the business park- also home to such tenants as Lockheed Martin and a U.S. National Guard training center- there generally is only one reason you're driving down Gateway Centre Parkway. But even that maneuver, cutting through to avoid traffic at Gandy boulevard and nearby U.S. 19, has been largely discouraged by police speed traps.



So for the public at large, there's no reason to be there, nothing to do, certainly nothing to see.

Well, almost.

Come to think of it, there are those giant metal lizards.

Specifically: Biped, therianthropic lizards pulling a chariot that carries a majestically winged lizard, all of it carved from scrap metal, conceived and crafted by St. Petersburg artist Paul Eppling. Plus there's another lizard off to the side, stiking its head through a window.

And behind those giant metal lizards, come to think of it, there is that incredibly incongruous office building, with its rounded roof, atypical angles, lean lines and courageous colors, as designed by Tampa visionaries Alfonso Architects. What the heck is that doing here? To find out, you would have to pull onto adjacent Gateway Centre Boulevard and into the building's parking lot, get out and head to the front door to learn more. That's when Alfonso's real artistry would hit you. The building is home to a private company, but if you were invited to a meeting, you'd step inside the lobby and your eyes would focus on the inimitable stainless-steel DeLorean DMC-12-the non-car aficionado likely will recognize it as the Back to the Future car-parked by the reception desk.

Judiciously placed throughout the expansive lobby are other pieces of art, including paintings, vases, and more sculptures of glass and steel, the latter another Eppling creation. Delving further into the building reveals more art throughout the business offices. And with

only a few exceptions, the electric collection comprises work purely by Tampa Bay-based artists.

And did we mention the enormous collection of vintage European cars currently sequestered in a vast garage that leads from the lobby? Many represent the pioneering movement to front-wheel drive, and almost all are working and street legal.

So what is this place? And why is it here? Who puts an art gallery and a vintage car collection in the middle of an industrial park?

The fact is, this place sticks out like a sore thumb. A gorgeous sore thumb, perhaps, with a vibrant palette of reds and purples, but a sore thumb nonetheless. Art doesn't belong here, does it?

Alain Cerf thinks it does. This is the corporate headquarters of Polypack, and Cerf is the founder and CEO of the company, which builds machines that package consumer products. Sons Emmanuel and Olivier are vice presidents at Polypack, which sells virtually all of its wares far from Tampa Bay. While the company's international clients do fly in to visit Polypack, the company's aesthetic virtues are enjoyed primarily by-and intended for-the Cerfs and about fourdozen employees.

Except for the designer architecture, the art, and the cars, Polypack is not unlike the typical business for this area. An industrial equipment manufacturer and seller, Polypack is a place where machinists, engineers and salespeople combine to produce and market machines that apply shrinkwrap to saleable goods such as Hershey's Syrup and Irish Spring.

It's a sale office with representatives working the phones and working their clientele. It's a machine shop where skilled technicians cut and manipulate stainless steel to build packaging machines. It's an engineering center where problems-solvers on computers design new packaging equipment with amenities such as "intermittent motion sealing", "unlimited infeed collection" and other industry specific functions that surely make sense to the buyers. And yet, Polypack's offices features an excellent and diverse collection of art that includes local artists such as Eppling, St. Petersburg's Lynn Merhinge, Clearwater's Italo Gazzoli, and Tampa glass sculptor Susan Gott, along with the vintage car collection. Again, all of this is include a building that is largely unknown to, and unseen by, anyone outside the small crew who works here.

In an area when many companies are moving to Mexico or outsourcing to India but still expect your hard-earned cash, Polypack is a fascinating contrast. While perhaps a slight oversimplification, it's fair to note that Polypack really does not profit from the local populace, but by paying taxes, employing locals and supporting local artists-including presenting occasional art shows-it certainly does pay into the community.

But ascribe such benevolence to Alain and his wife Elisabeth, and expect your comments to be waved off immediately. They just know what they like, and want those things in their workplace and life. He contends: "I prefer something that is nice to something that is not nice".



Marketing Dogs by Carl Knickerbocker



Ancestor Spirit by Susan Gott

"My parents hate to be called "Patrons of the arts" per se," says Emmanuel, who attended nearby Seminole High School and the University of Florida. "The real reason we have a building like this is because we like it.

While the Cerf family patriarch knows what he likes, he also knows to leave the art to the experts. Polypack was in a generic leased office building in Largo before moving to Gateway Centre eight years ago. Alain recalls discussing the plans for the new structure with Albert Alfonso: "He asked what we wanted, and we told him, 'You're the architect-do what you want to do.'" This trust allowed Alfonso to design freely, and the result is a structure in which every detail has been carefully considered and professionally executed.

Emmanuel recounts a similar circumstance when Eppling drew up designs for his prominent Polypack piece, the anthropomorphic sculpture he went on to title Avian Evolution. The family instructed him to come up with what he wanted; he did, they liked it, and the rest is lizard lore.

In time, what had seemed such a disconnect about Polypack-the artistry out front in contrast to the machine shop out back-seems far more appropriate. Kevin Harris, a 10-year Polypack veteran who manages North America distributor sales, calls Alain a "Renaissance man." Harris says the building's impressive architecture and art collection not only make for an enjoyable working atmosphere, but also add warmth, promote credibility and impress potential customers. "It demonstrates the company is stable enough not just to survive but to be concerned with the aesthetics and the work environment," Harris says. "I would have to say that (having visited) many different companies throughout the United States, I



Tula by Carole A. Haberkorn

believe this has an impact on how you feel about yourself."

Also, Harris says, "it makes me feel good that the ownership here at Polypack supports the local arts. You can get art all over the world, but they're not just collecting art-they're collecting local art."

Alain's appreciation for art is clear from the architecture of the headquarters and the fine works that populate it. But get him in the garage and you understand where it all ties together: art and engineering intertwined. The cars run, they're restored and registered, and Alain drives them all the time. It's impossible not to get caught up in his appreciation for the cars, many chosen for his appreciation of how engineers conceived early front-wheel drive models before World War II. His love of innovative engineering can be seen in the machines he produces. In 1962, he developed the first automatic dual roll bundler shrink-wrapping system to use polyethylene film in the USA. And no, we have no idea what that means either. But considering Polypack's success, it must be a mighty good thing.

The Cerfs plan to have a public showroom built for the cars before the calendar year's end to show off the models, including Tractas from France (one was driven in the 24 Hours of Le Mans) and several Tatracs from Czech Republic.

One to look for is a gorgeous restored Dynamic: the 1938 model, from French automaker Panhard, was created with its steering wheel audaciously set in the middle

This allows Alain an opportunity to have a little fun with Frenchman reputation: "It's a French car. This way you can sit in the center with a girl on each side."

Harris says Alain's love for the cars is born from his passion for creativity.

"Polypack as a manufacturer does not produce a lot of cookie-cutter machines," Harris says. "The engineering staff, which Alain oversees, is creative and must be creative to succeed".

"Alain just has an appreciation for engineering in general. He finds these cars fascinating (because) these engineers worked with concepts that were unique to their day-for instance, frontwheel drive long before it was popular. They were the forerunners... Alain does not like (to)-in fact he will not-study the competition. He feels it detracts from your creativity and causes you to follow instead of lead."

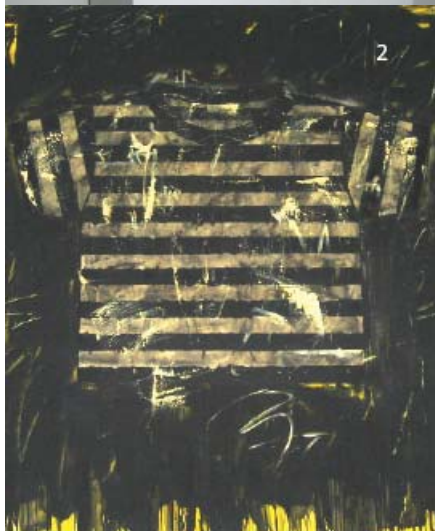
It will be interesting to see how the public showroom changes the dynamic at Polypack, where for years the Cerfs have been creating an artistic world for themselves without concern for the outside world.

One gets the impression that as long as the Cerfs and their staff are happy, that's all that matters.



1926 Voisin from France

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LOCAL ARTISTS IN THE POLYPACK COLLECTION

Jack Barrett
St Petersburg

Mindy Bickley
Redington Beach

Jack Ellis
St Petersburg

Paul and Sandy Epling
St. Petersburg

Italo Gazzoli
Clearwater

Susan B. Gott
Tampa

Carole A. Haberkorn
Clearwater

Jack King
Tampa

Carl Knickerbocker
Chulutoa

Duncan McClellan
Tampa

Lynn J. Merhinge
St. Petersburg

James Michaels
Palm Harbor

Artwork shown in this article is just a "small sampling" of the diverse artwork that adorns the halls and walls of Polypack, Inc.

