

Nicholas Rees

It was the summer of 1993 and Nicholas Rees found himself creating in the midst of destruction. The artist had to work fast because his subjects - the Labatt Brewery and the Seagram Distillery – were being torn down faster than he could get their images on paper.



“It was not unusual to notice a solitary figure, sometimes two or three, watching the progress of demolition as I drew,” he wrote. “Usually these were former employees of the plant, come to pay their respects or to reminisce, and sometimes they would talk to me about it. A way of life had ended for these people and for the community as well.”

There were other times, however, that Rees was alone and felt like he was the only one who cared about the destruction of these Waterloo landmarks. He also lamented the sale of the machinery inside the buildings. The industrial tools were an integral part of the daily lives of hundreds of workers as well as important pieces of the City’s history. It was a particular piece of machinery, an old barrel hoop driver used in the historic Canbar factory that inspired Rees. Although he could not stop the destruction of the factories, he decided to initiate a programme that would help preserve the machinery.

The Industrial Artifacts Project was started in 1996 and involves the placement of pieces of machinery in public areas throughout Waterloo Region. The relics are meant to be reminders of the area’s rich manufacturing history as it moves into the “information age.” They are also of interest for their visual appeal as public sculpture. Many of the pieces would have been scrapped had they not been redeemed by Rees.

Rees was born in South Africa and moved with his family when he was 8-years-old to Ohio where his father was a teacher. Four years later, the family moved to Waterloo where his father took a position as the principal of Renison College at the University of Waterloo.

Rees attended Queen’s University, the University of Guelph and finally University of Waterloo where he studied fine arts part-time for several years. He has traveled extensively in Europe and has conducted workshops and private lessons for art students locally. He was the first artist-in-residence at the Homer Watson Gallery and became well-known for his printmaking. After taking a carpentry course in 1985, he made his own printing press which expanded his repertoire and inspired the sculptor in him.

In 2006, Nicholas Rees was the artist-in-residence for the Waterloo Regional Arts Council and released his latest book called *A Memory of Ruins: Industrial Demolitions of Kitchener-Waterloo*. The book displays his skill as an accomplished printmaker but also his gift for writing.

One passage from the book reads, “Grandeur, loneliness, ghosts – something accusatory. These are the feelings that come from contemplating ruins, especially the fleeting ruins of the Industrial Age that often quickly give way to glass block architecture, strip malls, or simply another parking lot.”

Photo courtesy of Nicholas Rees.