



MARC LESTER / Anchorage Daily News

Art Oomittuk's piece "Naluqatuk Kagruq" was recently installed in front of the Arctic Slope Regional Corporation building on C Street in Midtown.

Dreaming big

Inupiaq artist's first sculpture soars outside Arctic Slope office

By PAULA DOBBYN
Anchorage Daily News

Othniel Art Oomittuk screwed 500-pound bones into the frozen ground last week. In a dim late-afternoon light on Monday, the Inupiaq artist showed off his newest creation, the result of a commission by Arctic Slope Regional Corp.

"This should withstand a pretty good earthquake," said Oomittuk, 39, knocking a knuckle against the sturdy sculpture.

Towering above him, a massive whale jaw bone made of bronze shot 15 feet up into the air. Strung between the two bones with stainless-steel rope was a seal skin, also made of bronze, with the faces of an Inupiaq woman and man on opposite sides. Their eyes are made of baleen.

"I wanted a connection between the whale and the people," said Oomittuk, an Arctic Slope shareholder, explaining the design.

Oomittuk was born in Point Hope and went to high school in Barrow where whaling, hunting and other subsistence gathering was the centerpiece of the culture.

The enormous sculpture that Oomittuk installed last week adorns the entrance to the new Arctic Slope office building at 3900 C St. in Anchorage. It's his first sculpture. Oomittuk had hoped to have it ready for the Alaska Federation of Natives conference in October but the foundry he used in Tacoma, Wash., was backed up.

The whale and seal skin sculpture is titled "Naluqatuk Kagruq." The name means whale festival in two dialects spoken by North Slope Natives, Oomittuk said.

The piece is modeled after a well-known sculpture in Barrow that stands behind Brower's Cafe on the shore of the Arctic Ocean.

Oomittuk is an up-and-coming

Oomittuk ... has won three consecutive first-place awards in Northwest Indian art competitions.

Native artist who lives in Rainier, Ore. The piece for Arctic Slope is a huge career step, said Oomittuk, a mixed-media carver who is making a name for himself within Native American art circles in the Lower 48.

Oomittuk, who carves masks from yellow and red cedar, has won three consecutive first-place awards in Northwest Indian art competitions. He has exhibited in Oregon, Washington and Japan. His success and growth as an artist is noteworthy since Oomittuk has been carving for only five years.

Oomittuk decided to try sculp-

ture after learning that his Native corporation was trolling for art to grace the exterior of the new building. He drew a design, built a model and sent it off to ASRC.

The artist originally planned to make a 12-foot sculpture with a seal skin strung between the bones. But company officials worried that children might try to swing on the steel ropes if it was that low to the ground. Oomittuk extended the height by 3 feet.

Taking on a sizable commission for a piece of art in an unfamiliar medium was a big risk for Oomittuk. (He doesn't want to publicly reveal how much he was paid, although it was enough for the average person to live on for a couple of years.) But he said the process of creating the sculpture went smoothly.

"Doing this piece was fun," he

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