

SANDSCULPT

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carve once a year and they do it here. This is really the cream of the crop, the best of the best. The finished piece may look like stone, especially with our white sand, but it is fragile and will not stand the test of time or the elements."

The Fort Myers Beach event is one of five sandsculpting competitions in the United States to qualify participants for the World Championship of Sand Sculpting in Federal Way, Wash., next Labor Day weekend. The top five will also win cash prizes (\$1,500 for first place).

"If you win in Fort Myers, you're automatically in the World Championships," said Doc Reiss, chairman of the World Championship.

Florida Weekly spoke with two of the sculptors last week about what it takes to be the best. Karen Fralich, 40, hailing from Ontario, Canada, is billed as the most decorated female sand sculptor in the world. Carl Jara, 36, from Cleveland Heights, Ohio, is the reigning solo world champion of sandsculpting.

On Friday morning, on a stretch of beach north and south of the Holiday Inn Beach Resort, each sculptor will approach a pile of sand weighing upwards of 10 tons. The next four hours or so will be spent shoveling it into molds used to form the sculpture's basic shape.

"Honestly, it's brutal work and you're trying to (shovel) it as fast as possible so you can have your lunch break and switch gears so you can start carving," Mr. Jara said.

After preparing the sand, often shaping it or stacking it in plastic or wooden molds, the competitors utilize any number of tools: garden hoes, pocket-knives, horsehair brushes and drinking straws used to blow tiny particles out of delicate crevices.

"I use pretty much anything," Ms. Fralich said. "Drywall trowels, kitchen utensils, spoons, shovels, stuff from the garden. The cool thing about sand is you can carve it with anything."

Some competitors may start at a relaxed pace. But by Sunday mid-morning, for many, it is a dash to the finish.

"The creativity is on a time scale," Mr. Jara said. "That's probably one of the most important things here as well. You are forced into a time frame with your creativity. You are forced to turn that on and accept it. You hope those things all line up in the end. Once that final buzzer sounds, you're done."

That will happen at 1 p.m. Sunday, Nov. 8. Mr. Jara explained that the buzzer, "is generally something loud and annoying, one of those airhorns. Nobody has more time than anybody else, unless one of the competitors sleeps in or something."

Strengths and weaknesses

Over the course of the competition, each sculptor will face his or her own unique challenges and try to play to individual strengths. For instance, Mr. Jara is physically prepared to shovel sand as fast as anyone.

"I'm always doing something hard and physical," he said. "I live in the snow belt in Cleveland so I'm shoveling 6 feet of snow all winter. I'm so used to shoveling."

And although he doesn't do sandsculpting professionally, year-round like Ms. Fralich — his day job involves building exhibits for the Cleveland Museum of Natural History — Mr. Jara is a professional woodworker.

One of his weaknesses, however, could be the sand itself. In previous competitions, he has been more accustomed to using imported sand, which generally has rougher edges that bond together more securely than the natural wind-worn sugar sand on Fort Myers Beach.

"Beach sand is temperamental," he said. "Only having been to Fort Myers twice, the last time I was there I did this piece that was really crazy daring and it fell down the day after the contest. I just pushed it too far."

Mr. Jara's weakness may be Ms. Fralich's strength: she's more familiar with Fort Myers Beach sand.

"I think this is my sixth trip to Fort Myers," she said. "Strength wise, (the sand) is incredible. It's some of the best natural carving sand I've ever seen. It's very, very fine, almost like powder. It also has silt in it. A lot of beach sands don't have any silt (which helps it bond more firmly). The only challenge is also one of its greatest qualities. It's pure white. It's beautiful. It's so white that sometimes it's hard to get shadows and details to show up on your carvings."

Getting impressive shadows and details is one key to winning the event, Mr. Jara said.

"Depth of cut is probably the single biggest indicator of somebody's achievement," he said. "Do they have shadows (in their sculpture) or is it just kind of a scratch in the surface? Have they really separated entities? Do you have this beautiful contrast of light and dark and fulfillment of form? If you can squint your eyes and see the form they used, it's a pretty good indication they haven't achieved that level (of master sculptor) yet."

How the works are judged

As soon as the clock runs out Sunday at 1 p.m., the 16 participants, probably worn out and dirty, go about judging each other's work.

"After we're all finished, they give us a few minutes to get ourselves together because you're a little tired," Ms. Fralich said. "You're looking first and foremost at the 'wow' factor. After you look at it, then you walk around it and analyze it technically and look for some risky ideas or something new and fresh or just an incredible sculpture from all sides. There are many, many criteria. And because it's art, it's very subjective. After you've looked at all the sculptures, you decide who you think are the top five."

Playing in the sand

This may be playing in the sand at its most extreme, a combination of art and sport that tests the body, mind and spirit — the Greek ideal of man. But World's event chair Mr. Reiss suggested that it's still just playing in the sand.

"I don't know if it's primordial or what," Mr. Reiss said. "People get around sand and water and they typically play."

And in spite of all the talk of competition, sand sculptors are generally a close-knit group.

"The sandsculpting community isn't very big so we bump into each other all the time," Ms. Fralich said. "It's always like a mini reunion when we get together."

She doesn't know the exact number of people worldwide who are considered master sand sculptors. But she travels around the globe regularly because of her work as a professional sand sculptor for hire.

if you go

>> **What:** 23rd annual American Sandsculpting Championship Festival.

>> **When:** Nov. 3 – 8

>> **Where:** In front of the Holiday Inn to the south and in front of Gullwing Beach Resort or Point Estero Beach Resort a few hundred yards north. The Master Carve Competition starts Friday at 9 a.m. and ends Sunday at 1 p.m.

>> **Cost:** \$3 for children and seniors, \$5 adults, maximum charge of \$10 for families.

>> **Details:** Event organizers recommend using Bonita Beach Road instead of Matanzas Pass Bridge, or one of the trolleys departing from Lovers Key State Park or Summerlin Square Plaza to avoid long lines.

>> **For more information:** Call (239) 334-7001 or go to www.sandsculptingfestival.com

"I'm going to say there are 30 people (in the world) that do this professionally and compete all the time," she said. "And maybe 300 that have real jobs and do this at a master's level occasionally."

Artistry aplenty

Once he has shoveled furiously, Mr. Jara often stops all motion, allowing the clock to keep ticking as he waits — and waits — for inspiration to unveil itself. Such *savoir faire* can unnerve his competitors. "Great art doesn't come from an artist's mind," he said. "I think it come from an ethereal nothingness that's out there. I never would have come up with that piece that won (at the World Championship). I'm not smart enough to do that. I always get complaints by my fellow competitors because they say 'you don't do anything for three hours, and you just walk around your piece.' I can't come up with something beforehand because I don't have any connection to it. Once you're out there shoveling the sand, things start happening in your head, you begin to focus on maybe one idea, and as you work, the lines begin to develop. It expands and takes on its own nature and the idea of the artist is to follow that nature."

Not one to rest on his laurels, Mr. Jara will aim high at this year's event. "I'm up against people I feel, many times, are far superior," he said. "And their ideas keep expanding and so I have to keep expanding so I can stay ahead of them."

"I want something that could be put in a museum. I want something that will inspire people when they walk up to it. An art teacher told me once, 'Good art is something that's beautiful enough to look at long enough to figure it out.' It has to be beautiful in some respect. It can be ugly, but it has to be intentionally ugly. In that ugliness, it has to be beautiful. It has to say something. It can't just be nothing. For me, sandsculpting is a way to figure out conflicts in my own head or express an emotion or to express something about the human condition."

Sadly, or so it seems, that expression will fade back into the beach in the weeks to come. But Mr. Jara isn't bothered by the temporary nature of his work. The true artistry of sandsculpting, he says, is in the performance. And anyway, he doesn't have to worry about succumbing to the same fate as one of his favorite artists, Vincent Van Gogh, who is

reported to have sold a single painting in his lifetime, a few months before he died at age 37.

"I always find that really disturbing that someone could create something so freaking amazing and nobody would buy it," Mr. Jara said. "Whereas with sand, it's absolutely beautiful because I'm not selling them my piece of art, I'm selling them on my talents while I'm there, like a plumber."

To him, witnessing the creation is more exciting than the finished product.

"Van Gogh didn't sit down and say 'I'm going to paint a picture of a swirly sky.' He developed it as he went," Mr. Jara said. "With sand sculpture, anybody can come out and watch us work. They can see that moment, that creation occurring right before them. It's very much like a dance or a symphony. It's meant to be experienced in its entirety. You'd be amazed: you put a piece in the mall and you work on a mundane little detail and people will sit there for hours watching. But when it's finished, it's just finished. When it's being worked on, it's magic."

Ms. Fralich sees sandsculpting as "a sport and an art."

"I hope my style will grow and expand," she said. "I think my style (leans) towards the whimsical, the cute, the fantasy fairy-tale dragon realm. Everywhere, anything and everything can inspire me to do a sculpture."

Competition timeline

Thursday morning is a good time to meet the sculptors, who will be working on a group project. "There's a lot to see that day," Ms. Corning said. "It's not part of the competition so it's kind of casual. It's a great time for people who actually want to talk to the sculptors. We're more than willing to put our tools down, sign autographs."

The master's competition begins Friday at 9 a.m. The first four or five hours, called the "pound up" or "pounding up" — when tons of sand are shoveled into molds and mixed with water — includes some of the most physically intense labor. The day ends at 6 p.m.

By Saturday the carving is well under way.

"For people who appreciate the performance art and really appreciate the techniques, Saturday's a good day," Ms. Corning said.

And for those who want "the most visual bang for their buck," Sunday is a must-see. It starts at 8 a.m.

"The last hour, there's a real energy in the air because you've got all these artists trying to finish on time and the site crews cleaning up," Ms. Corning said. At 1 p.m., the show is over. The crowd will get to see the sculptors finish, and even vote on them for a "people's choice award" open until 4 p.m. Voting for your favorite sculptor costs 25 cents and you can vote as many times as you want.

On Sunday evening at 6 p.m. at the Holiday Inn, there will be an awards ceremony. First place prize is \$1,500; second, \$1,250; third, \$1,000; fourth, \$750; and fifth, \$500.

There is also a smaller group of sculptors working below the master level, the Florida State Championship Competition, which starts Saturday. Their competition ends Sunday at 2 p.m. There will also be amateur sand sculptors at the event. ■



COURTESY PHOTO
Carl Jara with his winning sculpture from the latest World Championship of Sandsculpting in 2008, "What Lies Beneath."