Olympic art at 25

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LAKE PLACID — With the first snowfall last week, Lake Placid has officially entered the 1980 Olympic Winter Games’ silver jubilee season.

Most of the 25th Anniversary activities will take place in February, commemorating the Games themselves.

But another anniversary is passing even as you read this story: the anniversary of the installation of several pieces of public art around the Olympic Village in conjunction with the impending Winter Games.

Art programs had long been a part of the modern Olympic Games, taking their cue from Olympic founder Baron de Coubertin.

“The Olympic movement,” wrote de Coubertin, “is intended to bring together into a radiant union all the qualities of mankind that guide him to perfection.”

“Conceiving art and sport, creative and physical striving as complementary activities, he saw their union as a necessary precondition for achieving his ideal of the ‘total man’,” read the introduction to the 1980 art program’s guidebook, “Art at the Olympics.”

Much of the art commissioned for the 1980 Winter Games was nonrepresentational. Its concept may have had a clear connection to the Olympic ideal and to winter sport, but it was difficult for many Placidians to connect with the abstract, physical form of much of that art.

“Lake Placid’s Reaction to Modern Art: Frigid,” read the headline on the New York Times story of Nov. 30, 1979, about the reception locals were giving to the Olympic art program.

According to the Times article, art program director Carolyn Hopkins had concluded that most members of the Lake Placid Olympic Organizing Committee couldn’t have cared less about cutting-edge, modern art.

“When we were discussing the performing arts portion of the program,” Hopkins was quoted as saying, “one committee member said, ‘If you put on a tutu and run across the stage, that should take care of it.’ “

According to Hopkins, the Placid taste in art would have been satisfied with “a nice representational statue of Jack Shea.”

What the village got, however, was several pieces of some of the most modern sculpture then available, created especially to complement the 1980 Olympic Winter Games.

Some of those sculptures were deliberately temporary — Lloyd Hamrol’s sculpture in snow at the Holiday Inn, for instance, or the various arrangements of fences framing pieces of landscape all around Lake Placid.

Five pieces of sculpture, however, were left standing after the Games as permanent artistic memories of the 1980 Olympics.

We’ve done a little digging into the history files and, with the help of Birgit Schulte’s excellent photography, we’ve created this tour of those sculptures so that, in this Olympic Silver Anniversary season, you can reexperience those works of art for yourself.

1) ‘Vans for Ruth’

To start the tour, park your car near the Olympic Center on Main Street and walk up to the box office. In the park area across the driveway, adjacent to Main Street, stands James Buchman’s steel and granite sculpture, cryptically titled “Vans for Ruth.”

“Buchman’s enigmatic totem seems to record a tension between the power of its upward thrust and the erosion of its forms,” interprets the 1980 art guidebook. “The granite section in particular, scored in a manner that recalls brickwork, evokes the qualities of a ruin. This effect is underscored by the spikey, splayed piece of iron that attaches itself to the granite.

“Buchman appears to address a certain history of building, or more
generally a reference to history, the tension between man’s will and the inevitable destruction of time.”

According to a description of similar works by Buchman “planted” in the sculpture garden of the Arvada, Colo., Center for the Arts and Humanities, “James Buchman first discovered granite in 1972 when he was living and working in Vermont, where it was plentiful. The power of his ‘homemade’ sculpture is evident.”

A Tennessee native educated at Dartmouth College, Buchman now maintains a studio in suburban Ulster County, in the hamlet of Cottekill.

2) Sonja Henie Ice Fountain

The Sonja Henie Ice Fountain, designed by Norwegian artist Carl Nesjar, was an Olympic gift from the people of Norway to the people of North Elba township for the 1980 Winter Games. It stands on the front lawn of the Olympic Center.

The aluminum sculpture consists of five globes — three are 5 feet across, two are 4 feet in diameter — representing the linked circles of the Olympic symbol. Each globe originally had a water nozzle attached at the top, “so that a continuous spray of fine drops of water creates different effects according to the weather,” the 1980 guide says.

“In temperatures above freezing, the droplets roll slowly downward, creating the impression that the spheres are rotating about their own axes. In temperatures below freezing, ice accumulates.”

Because we were not able to determine before press time the condition of the nozzles on the Sonja Henie Ice Fountain, we are not certain if the sculpture still functions as a fountain.

3) ‘High Peaks’

The next stop on our 1980 Olympic art tour is in Peacock Park, on the western (village) shore of Mirror Lake. To get there from the Olympic Center, cross Main Street; go up to the Post Office; turn right down Parkside Drive. Peacock Park is on your left.

Joel Perlman’s black metal sculpture, “High Peaks,” is easy to find. It stands between the toboggan chute and the village beach house. A tree that had grown up next to it in the years after the 1980 Olympics, compromising the sculpture’s space, has recently been removed.

According to the Olympic art guidebook, “Perlman’s ‘High Peaks’ deals with the idea of ‘the monument’ by activating its surroundings through indirect reference and contrast. Of welded steel ... its verticality reflects the trees around it; small welded-on sections curve outward as if in imitation of the character of branches.

“The vertical elements of Perlman’s sculpture converge and are tied together at base and midsection by more straightforwardly geometric elements. Here the work assumes a stronger architectonic quality. It refers obliquely to ‘dwelling,’ as well as to the horizontal planes of the ground and the lake.

“This work thus explores the resonances and tensions,” the guidebook says, “between the natural and the manmade, between man’s empathy with the natural environment and his estrangement from it.”

Perlman, 61, a Cornell alum (1965), today is an instructor in fine arts at the School of Visual Arts in Manhattan. He continues to make welded-steel sculptures, something he started doing in the early 1970s. His geometric works are part of the permanent collections of the Hirshhorn Gallery in Washington, D.C., and the Whitney Museum in Manhattan.

4) ‘Maya’

The next stop on our tour will require a little driving. Head up Main Street from the Olympic Center, following the curve left onto Saranac Avenue. Across from the Howard
Johnson’s, turn left toward the Lake Placid Center for the Arts. You will see Linda Howard’s “Maya,” a sculpture framed with parallel metal bars, in the middle of the remote parking lot on your right.

“Linda Howard’s ‘Maya,’” the guidebook explains, “attempts to use physical structure as a means of probing levels of consciousness and meditative states. The state defined by this work might be called orderly distortion, for it hovers between simplicity and complexity.

“An incremental serial function determines the rate of its rotation and expansion. The basic frame is fairly simple, yet the resultant shape, with its reverse warp and topological tensions of convexity and concavity, resists any simple perceptual grasp.”

Linda Howard, 70, now lives in Florida.

Before you leave the Lake Placid Center for the Arts for the next stop on our 1980 Olympic art tour, drop in on the LPCA’s two galleries. The Fine Arts Gallery, located in the main floor of the LPCA itself, is open throughout the winter from 1 to 5 p.m. on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays, and on from 1 to 9 p.m. on Fridays.

The North Gallery, located in the adjacent Adirondack Crafts Center building, is open 7 days a week from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.

5) ‘30 Below’

Our final stop is on the corner of New John Brown Road and Old Military Road. To get there from the LPCA, go back out to Saranac Avenue and turn left. Go past the Price Chopper plaza on your left to Carolyn Avenue, and turn left. When Carolyn “T”s into Old Military Road, turn left again. Go about 2.6 miles. New John Brown Road is the first road on the right after Bear Cub Road.

Nancy Holt’s “30 Below” is a 30-foot-high, circular brick tower standing in the vacant lot directly across Old Military Road from the cemetery. The lot is owned by Cornell University. Earthen ramps have been built on either side of the open tower so that visitors can look into it from the outside. Arches lead into the tower itself from ground level.

According to the 1980 Olympic art guide, the idea of Holt’s tower “is to focus the entire universe on this particular spot in Lake Placid — or, conversely, to identify this particular location in terms of its cosmological coordinates. Sited according to the points of the compass, its arches aligned with the North Star, it appears as a purely conceptual, axiomatic marker of place.

“The viewer is ... encouraged to enter the tower. As we pass from an open, limitless condition to one of containment, enclosure, the scale shifts radically, from cosmic and expansive to subjective and intimate. Inside, we observe nature is if through the wrong end of a telescope: the sky above appears detached; clouds pass as if on film.

“When occupied,” the guidebook says, “the tower is converted into an observatory from which natural phenomena are contemplated as images, their own representations.”

Nancy Holt, 66, born in Worcester, Mass., now works and lives in tiny Galisteo, New Mexico, in the mountains outside Santa Fe. Widow of site-specific environmental sculptor Robert Smithson, Holt has become probably the best-known of the 1980 Olympic artists. She has created work as diverse as her “Sun Tunnels” in the Utah desert (mid-1970s) and “Sky Mound,” a combination park and artwork built to reclaim a 57-acre landfill in New Jersey, which is still under construction.