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## **I can do that!**

by Butch Elrod

Did the “I can do that!” epiphany cause you to carve your first chainsaw bear? It did me. But it wasn’t the first time that particular epiphany moved me to create shapes...

While living in Copenhagen, Denmark I was earning my living as a street performer by juggling, doing the occasional magic trick and twisting balloon animals. I was also studying Danish at the Copenhagen Intensive Language School evening classes. Then



**8' Flamingo made with 600 balloons**

one evening my Danish instructor brought in the American magazine “Balloons Today”. This magazine was filled with photos of animals, vehicles and even human figures constructed from hundreds and sometimes thousands of balloons!

My immediate reaction was “I can do that!” One trans-Atlantic phone call later I had the names of balloon distributors and a subscription to this amazing magazine. Within the week, I’d purchased hundreds of balloons and an electric inflator. After two days of practice, the apartment complex manager came to tell me the neighbors were complaining that we were running the vacuum cleaner far too much.

I invited him in to see a larger than life balloon Christmas tree decorated with balloon animals, a balloon palm tree that reached to the ceiling, and a heart made from more than 100 tiny balloons. He left a bit stunned with the knowledge that I didn’t even own a vacuum cleaner. Just a balloon inflation machine. I went back to work designing more balloon sculptures and planning my first promotion.

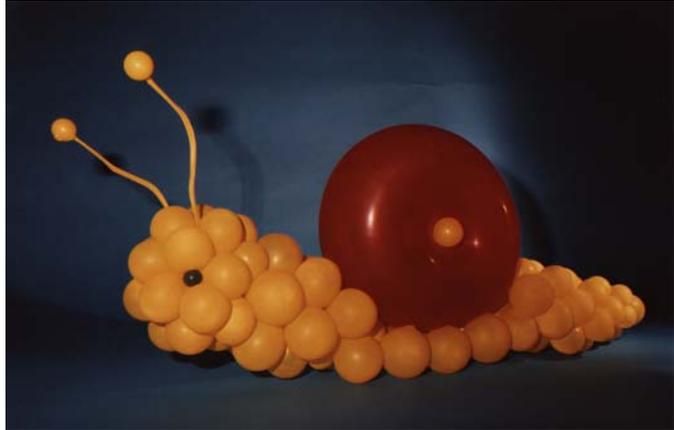
My first balloon sculpture sale was to a professional photographer. We designed and built a complete holiday themed balloon environment to be used for holiday family photos. When the photos hit the papers, it became obvious that I was the only balloon sculptor in Scandinavia. No longer was there time for twisting wiener dogs on street corners. There was a business to run.

Corporate parties and shopping mall promotions were my primary clients with movie premiers following closely. But one cannot hold on to a monopoly like this for long. When asked by balloon distributors, I started teaching classes and weekend seminars on

the mechanics of creating balloon structures, specifics of building a particular figure, and the process of sculpture design. It was loads of fun, kept me on friendly terms with all of my business competitors, and I learned a lot by teaching my craft to others.

When NABAS was formed [National Association of Balloon Artists and Suppliers] as a European organization, I taught at their conventions in England and Germany. At the 1991 convention in London, we decorated the Pioneer Balloon booth with a balloon sculpture airplane complete with rotating propeller and helium filled clouds. While on lunch break from demonstrating Pioneer's animal twist balloons, my son dashed into the cafe saying, "We won, we won! They want you on stage right now." I was clueless since I hadn't done the paperwork for any of the competitions.

Sure enough, the airplane we designed had been awarded the top prize of Best Sculpture! The prize was fewer balloons than were used in the sculpture but the publicity was priceless. I'd had my 15



**Little Snail made with 78 balloons**

minutes of fame and then some but did not realize that it was all coming to an end. My magazine articles on balloon sculpture design were published in three magazines and distributed across Europe but business declined for everyone. The war in Kuwait was affecting even the Scandinavian economy. As if that weren't enough, I started developing a latex allergy... Can you imagine something worse? It's like a chainsaw sculptor becoming allergic to wood.

Not long after throwing in the towel and moving back to the good old USA, I watched a carver from the Puyallup, WA area carving a bear. He was fascinating to watch and the bear was a real work of art. We talked about other figures he had carved and I showed him my portfolio of balloon sculptures. Then he said, "You could do this."

Photos of my chainsaw sculptures are at [www.WoodHacker.com](http://www.WoodHacker.com)

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