Professor Amazes England With "Sky Sculptures"

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The carpet glistened mysteriously through the air, rippling with wind. As the eyes of the spectators followed the undulating mass floating above them, the residents could almost imagine a turbaned Arabian guiding his billowy magic carpet to unknown worlds of treasure.

Such might have been the transaction of the residents in Coventry, England, as they watched "Sky Carpet," one of the designs of atmospheric sky sculpture created by Professor Howard Woody of USC. But something was different: his magic carpet was made of metalized mylar with six tunable pockets of helium.

Woody has recently returned from a six-week exhibition tour of Great Britain where he was invited to introduce his unique atmospheric sky sculpture. Beginning in May in Coventry, England, the tour consisted of 10 different events of 14 "flights" each.

The structures were constructed at his home in Cumbria and then sent separately to England. Professor Woody also took documentation and photographic map boards of previous flights. The exhibition opened at Herbert Art Gallery in Coventry.

According to Woody there was at first a misunderstanding about his atmospheric sky sculpture. It was thought that it could not be translated into helium balloons and there was worry about it being hit by a plane.

The launchings took place mainly in the parks and open country because of the heavy air traffic of the cities. The exhibition caused quite a commotion in Coventry. With the newspapers on strike, the residents were unprepared for the curiously-shaped, metallic objects seen flying above them. The police headquarters and the Coventry Airport were flooded with calls reporting the sighting of UFOs.

According to Woody, the reaction to the unusual flight sculpture in Great Britain was good. It was a new experience for them. The residents in the parks and on the streets were interested and eager to assist Woody in holding the sculptures until they were ready to be released.

Atmospheric sky sculpture is a general term for flight sculpture which is unique and is the first development of Woody. Referred to by Woody as "sky ballet," it is a type of sculpture to be flown in the sky. Each sculpture is assembled, flown one time, and then destroyed. The "lighter-than-air" sculpture is made of mylar, a plastic cellophane which is 0.005 of an inch thick. The seams of the sculpture are heat sealed and each unit has a helium-filled envelope which gives it lifting power. Once constructed, each unit is slid into a cloth-like storage tube until ready to be released.

The several units of the sculpture are tied together to form a particular design or "flight." In an abstract manner, each design has a system such as a linear or hanging system. Because Woody is concerned with motion not shape, he is more interested in simple shapes which will not detract from the motion of the sculpture. At the mercy of the wind, the flight sculpture uses all the conditions of the atmosphere.

The air pressure and temperature lets the helium expand which causes the envelope to burst. The sculpture floats upwards slowly as the helium escapes. After thirty minutes the upward flight, the sculpture levels out and begins to slowly descend.

His first exhibition used wire and balloons. Interested in what the design would be if it were loose and free, Professor Woody released his first sculpture and became "excited about the tranquil, natural, lyrical motion of the sculpture."

Woody refers to his atmospheric sky sculpture as an art "event" rather than an art "form." And it is quite an active event. After first informing aviation authorities and airport officials of his plans and receiving their permission, Woody then finds a clear open area to launch his flights. The launching requires the help of several assistants and it takes approximately an hour to prepare for the release. Each flight is tracked by a plane, with the aid of walkie-talkies, as a precaution to assist with the artist on the ground. The sculptures have flown more than 12,500 feet high and the longest flight covered 60 miles in approximately two hours. The longest flight of a sculpture made of balloons and mylar streamers was 400 miles less than 17 hours.

Woody began developing his sky sculpture in the late 1960's, launching his first flight in early 1970 in Kansas. He has launched flights from Washington state to Arizona and in this section of the country. In the Columbia area he has put on an exhibition for the Columbia Museum and at Bell Camp in October, 1973.

Born in Salisbury, Md. and raised in Rosanne, Va., Woody has been on the USC faculty since Fall, 1967. He came to USC from the University of North Carolina where he had been teaching since 1962.

"Originally, I was experimenting with casting my artistic sculpture in my studio, to see the effect of the sky and rain on the sky sculpture before it was to be used as an outdoor sky sculpture," Woody said.

"The availability of the sky sculpture to any interested viewer is limited. Stressing that the event is of limited duration, Woody explains, "Although I have both some new sculpture and some sculptured in museums." The answer, he finds, is one to be at the event. Although he has no specific dates for his next event, Woody is anticipating a flight as a demonstration for new students this fall.

Professor Howard Woody's "Sky Carpet" flies above Coventry, England. Woody introduced the new art form here recently.