

Thomas Edison death mask visits FSW

CHARLES RUNNELLS, CRUNNELLS@NEWS-PRESS.COM 5:47 p.m. EST December 3, 2015



(Photo: Special to The News-Press)

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Thomas Edison returns to Fort Myers this Saturday. And he's looking mighty pale these days.

A plaster "death mask" of the famous inventor will greet visitors to a new Edison-themed art installation at Florida SouthWestern State College. The serene-looking face peers, eyes closed, from a display box outside Bob Rauschenberg Gallery.

The exhibit marks the first time the mask has been displayed anywhere in the United States, said gallery director Jade Dellinger. It's one of only two complete replicas of Edison's original, "full-head" death mask.

The mask goes hand-in-hand with New York artist Keith Edmier's ambitious "Edison Impluvium" exhibit, which recreates Thomas Edison's concrete swimming pool inside the gallery space — steps, metal railings and all. The original 1910 pool still exists on the grounds of Edison's former home, now the Edison & Ford Winter Estates historic site in Fort Myers.

The mask resembles a sculptural bust more than a literal face mask, since it also includes the back of Edison's head. It was made by famous sculptor James Earle Fraser, who was working on a sculpture of Edison when the inventor died in 1931. The mask was created using an impression of the dead Edison's face as a mold.

Edmier borrowed the mask from California collector Ron Rohrenbacher, who says many historians weren't aware of the mask until a colleague found it in the late 1990s.

"It had been totally forgotten," Rohrenbacher said. "Nobody knew about it — or very few people."

For the art exhibit, the death mask will be paired with "life masks" created from Edmier's own face, plus the faces of family members and many actors Edmier worked with during his 1980s career as a Hollywood make-up and special effects artist.

Are death masks cool or creepy?

Cool

Creepy

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Those 48 plaster masks include David Bowie, Keanu Reeves, Kiefer Sutherland, Michael Jackson, Farrah Fawcett and Charlie Sheen. Edmier saved the original molds for the masks after doing makeup effects for movies such as "Captain Eo," "The Lost Boys," "The Fly" and "Barton Fink."

"Some of the people aren't alive anymore, but they were when the casts were made," Edmier says. "It's kind of a collective self-portrait."

The artist dreamed up the swimming pool idea partly as a tribute to Edison and Fort Myers. "I really wanted to find a way I could connect with the community," he said.

Edmier, Dellinger and a team of about five other workers have been working long days to transform part of Rauschenberg Gallery into the full-size replica of Edison's swimming pool.

They've used wood, Styrofoam and about 3,000 pounds of cement and cement-like material, Dellinger said. "We've spent the last two weeks working around the clock spraying and troweling and all of that."

To see the new exhibit, visitors walk past Edison's white, ghostly face and through the gallery doorway — now transformed into a hole in the wall of the 7 1/2-foot-deep pool.

"You're essentially underwater," said Edmier, 48. "You're going in through a broken wall in the pool, and that's the exhibition space."



New York artist Keith Edmier takes a break while recreating Thomas Edison's Fort Myers swimming pool at Rauschenberg Gallery. (Photo: Special to The News-Press)

Edmier meant for the inside of the pool to resemble an impluvium, the sunken part of an atrium where ancient Romans displayed similar masks of their ancestors. Other thoughts went into the exhibit, too, including the idea of a swimming pool as a vessel or — in other words — a mold.

"I started putting all of this stuff together," Edmier said, "and it reemerged as a kind of ancient Roman ruin in this American context."

The internationally known artist originally went searching for a life mask of Edison to accompany his exhibit, and that's when he learned about the death mask and borrowed it from Rohrenbacher.

Rohrenbacher is a longtime collector of Edison memorabilia. He's also a technology buff who works as an electronics and special-effects technician at DisneyLand in Anaheim, California.

A fellow Edison collector found Edison's original death mask in a San Francisco mannequin collection, he said. That colleague eventually allowed only two copies of the full mask to be made. The other copy was purchased by a Japanese museum. An additional 23 copies were made of just the face, he said, but not the entire head.

The mask is part of an extensive personal collection that includes old Edison cylinder phonograph machines and Edison electric lamps dating back to 1890.

"It just kept growing and growing," Rohrenbacher said. "I never intended for this to happen."

Edmier and Dellinger worked closely with the Edison & Ford Winter Estates staff to get swimming pool technical specifications, historical photos and other information for the project.

Chris Pendleton, president and CEO of the Estates, said she was aware of the existing Edison masks before working on the project, but she's excited that one of them is coming to Fort Myers for everyone to see.

She said she's also thrilled that an well-known artist such as Edmier has taken on the art project — the biggest sculptural project of his career.

"It really is amazing," she said. "It's carrying the Edison legacy forward."

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If you go

What: Thomas Edison's death mask and Keith Edmier exhibit "Edison Impluvium"

When: Reception from 7-9 p.m. Saturday (with a 6 p.m. lecture by Edmier). The exhibit continues through Feb. 6.

Where: Bob Rauschenberg Gallery at Florida SouthWestern State College, 8099 College Parkway, Fort Myers

Gallery hours: 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Monday through Friday, 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. Saturday

Info: 489-9313 or RauschenbergGallery.com