

Art gun disappears from college campus

By Mark Wheeler
Hi-Desert Star

JOSHUA TREE — Under cover of darkness, thieves recently removed an anti-aircraft gun from its emplacement on the Copper Mountain College campus; except, the gun was actually an outdoor art piece and the only craft the sculpture was really intended to shoot at was whatever craft of thinking might be going on within the mind of the observer.

Installed March 8 by Sacramento artist Geoff Tuttle for the March 9 opening of the school's "Evidence 11" Earth Works invitational art show, the 250-pound welded metal piece was stolen sometime over the night of March 12.

Show curator Spelman Evans Downer, an art instructor at the school, first learned of the sculpture's disappearance on the morning of March 13, when a colleague asked, "What happened to the gun?"

Downer isn't sure why anyone would steal the art piece. He speculates it might have been a prank or just a basic act of wayward theft. He also considers it might have been stolen in protest.

Recalling that since its installation the college has received several letters criticizing the piece, he qualified the protest theory with some doubt, noting that about half the letters accused the college of mounting a pro-war exhibit while the other half considered the piece to be anti-military.

According to Tuttle's own statement about the sculpture, he intended it to provoke critical thought. Describing it in the summary as an item "built to look like a prop from TV or a film," the artist made it clear he hoped the piece would remind observers that they are responsible for speaking their minds for or against important social and political trends, drifts and movements.

Although the sculpture is valued at \$5,000, like any art, its sale for that amount would realistically be dependent on finding a suitable collector. Otherwise, the item shouldn't command much of a price, either for its materials, or for its mere curiosity value. As a purely economic enterprise, the theft doesn't real-



This sculpture by Geoff Tuttle of a military weapon was stolen recently from the Copper Mountain College campus. Part of the Evidence 11 Earth Works art exhibit, the piece weighed 250 pounds and was stolen over the night of March 12.

ly pencil out, which leaves Downer in question about motive.

So far, the police investigation hasn't produced any leads. The department wasn't called in until about 10 days after discovery of the disappearance because, by Downer's account, the college wanted to conduct its own internal investigation and write a report. Downer did take ample and detailed photos of the site on the morning of discovery. Shoe soles and wheel tracks from a two-wheeled apparatus are clearly shown.

Artists who display items outdoors at the college agree not to hold it responsible for theft. The school will not, therefore, be required to pay for the lost art piece.

Downer is still very concerned, nonetheless, since he and the college do have a long-term investment in promoting artistic displays on the campus.

The Evidence 11 exhibit, for example, is the third installment of the Earth Works Invitational program started in 2002 by Downer and supported by him and the college since then as a popular venue for high-profile artists working in the earthworks genre.

All three shows have brought the college welcome media exposure, given it something of a reputation as a center for progressive art, and helped identify the Hi-Desert as a destination for art-related tourism.

"This theft could be a problem for future outdoor installations," Downer spec-

Earth Works

THE "EVIDENCE 11" earthworks exhibit will be installed at Copper Mountain College through May 11. Visitors can obtain an exhibit map at the school's cafeteria and take their own self-guided tours. Copper Mountain College is at 6162 Rotary Way in Joshua Tree.

ulated, suggesting some artists may be reluctant to leave their work with the college if it has a history of theft. Of course, one such incident does not constitute a trend, but Downer is eager for the investigation to prove fruitful.

He would like Tuttle to have his sculpture back, and very much like to prove that theft from the college will be eventually overtaken and prosecuted.

Anyone with information about the stolen art can call 366-3791, Ext. 0228, or e-mail Downer at sdowner@cmccd.edu.