

BILL THOMAS
Prime Time

A father's strength, fragments of memory become art

From a distance, it looks like it came from outer space, an alien gizmo or even one of ours that no one is talking about: the remains of a top-secret rocket, maybe, that went out of control and came down in the heart of Memphis.

Right now, it's standing on three steel legs in front of a parking lot on South Main Street. Jay Etkin, who runs a nearby art gallery, calls it a trolley-stopper because the first time the street-car driver spotted it, he simply shut down the car and sat there, trying to figure out what he was looking at.

Up close, it's more puzzling than ever. On the side of the rocket cylinder, or whatever it is, is an abstract figure with arms raised amid a network of bright, playful colors. There are bits of fur hanging from some external rods. And inside the cylinder is a jawbone with a row of teeth. There's also a pair of boxing gloves, a couple of fishing corks and a military ammunition box. At the very top is a glass ball that glows in the sunlight.

"The ball represents hope," said sculptor Roy Tamboli, who has had a longtime interest in the extraterrestrial and once was a card-carrying member of a UFO group. Although his work has a space-age feel to it, this piece is actually a labor of love

in behalf of Tamboli's 78-year-old father, who has had Alzheimer disease for eight years.

It's quite a story — literally, the story of dealing with the aging parents as an art form — so read on.

"I wanted to do some public art that would also be very personal," the sculptor said, "but this did not start out being about my father."

In the beginning, in fact, Tamboli, who is 49, started with nothing more than a vague idea and a steel tank which he got from his roofer. "We were talking and I found out he had this big tank he wanted cut in half for a barbecue. I told him I'd cut it if he would let me use the other part. I didn't know what I was going to do with it, but I hung it in the studio for a while to see what it wanted to be."

Four months ago, Tamboli began working on the piece, which he envisioned as part of a series of sculptures he calls "ancient satellite fragments." By then, gallery owner Etkin and an associate, Gary Garland, had informed Tamboli that they had a place for a sculpture if he had any ideas.

As it turned out, Tamboli had more ideas than even he himself was aware of. "My first challenge was to make the sculpture stand up, be strong, vandal-proof and still look esthetically pleasing. So I came up with these solid steel legs and I cut a hole in the cylinder and bolted them on. But while I was fooling with these nuts and bolts, something happened:

"They reminded me of my dad's shop where I used to play when I was a boy. He was an electrician at the Navy base for 40 years and he could do all kinds of things with his hands. I have lots of his tools that he can't use any more. So while I'm bolting on these legs, I'm thinking how strong he used to be and how that's changed."

Tamboli's voice is low but steady. "I began to realize I'm dealing with a lot of things — the sculpture and my feelings about my father — and that they're all flowing together. My mother (Rose) is taking care of my dad at their home in Sardis, Miss., and once a month we meet with an Alzheimer's support group. That helps a lot, but it's still hard. Anyway, I'm thinking about my dad and this sculpture and I can't compartmentalize these things. I realize how much of him is in me and I'm not going to fight it."

Tamboli's father, Mario, was

a Golden Gloves boxing champion in his younger days. "I had three brothers, and my dad would give us boxing gloves for Christmas," said Tamboli, who wanted this aspect of his father's life included in the sculpture. "I got on the phone and called around for some professional boxing gloves. Finally, I heard that Toys R Us had some, but I was really disappointed in them. They were purple and they had "Bam!" written on them. It was like a cartoon, and I said this won't work.

"But wait! Not only was my dad a great boxer, at this point in his life he enjoys toys. I take him nuts and bolts to fiddle with. It used to embarrass me, but that's the way it is. So these gloves work as part of the poetry of the sculpture and they are now part of it."

It's not the only artistic reference to his father's days as a fighter and electrician: "There's an image of a person with his fists closed and his arms up and what looks like lightning bolts coming out of his hands. This looks like the electrical workers logo, but it's not clear. There are lines going across the image, like a TV screen where you can't tell what's there and what's not. And that's the way I see him, now. Sometimes, he's there; sometimes he's not. I think that must be the way real-

ity looks to him now. It's there, but he can't name it anymore. It's like that blurred screen that comes and goes."

The more Tamboli worked on the sculpture, the more he thought about his father and their relationship. "He used to take us rabbit hunting and he taught us to skin rabbits and squirrels. So there's some rabbit fur hanging from the sculpture. He also took his sons fishing, and there are a couple of his fishing corks in there, too."

Tamboli said he didn't want the sculpture to be just pretty, so he placed the jawbone of a cow, complete with a row of yellow teeth, inside the cylinder. "Life is not just pretty," he said. "Also, I didn't want the sculpture to be all man-made. I wanted something that God made, and this is it; man cannot make a jawbone."

Tamboli's father was in the Navy during World War II, but he never talked about it. "He was on a mine sweeper and he was in the Battle of Coral Sea," Tamboli said. "I asked him about it, but he just said their boat was hit and they were sinking. I think some of his buddies were wounded, and he himself was shot in the leg. When I asked how he got out, he said the angels picked them up. I was a child, then, and I believed him. I could see the angels picking them out of the sea."

After the war, Mario Tamboli worked as a civil service employee at the naval base in Mil-



**Mario
Tamboli**

lington. "He used to bring me stuff from the base — a bayonet, a belt, a sailor's cap — and I loved it. He was a Navy guy all his life, and so I wanted something of that in the sculpture. I went to an

Army surplus store and bought a (Navy) ammunition box and welded it inside the cylinder."

The box contains a letter that Tamboli wrote to his father after the work was finished. He never made a copy of the letter and even if he had his father never would have been able to read it. "I told him I was sorry about what has happened to him," Tamboli said, "and I wished that we had talked more when we had the chance."

The sculpture is at 421 S. Main, which just might become a regular trolley stop.

