

*RUSS McCARTY:
PALEONTOLOGIST*

Interview by CINDY TULLY

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Q. When and why did you decide to choose your particular career path?

A. My present occupation in paleontology came almost from being at a particular place at a particular time. If I had not been in Florida in June of 1980, I would not have gotten involved in paleontology and preparation of fossils. . . and I would never have worked on Allan McCollum's fulgurite project.

Q. Is there an experience in your childhood that helped you make that decision?

A. When I was a kid, I looked for fossils and did my first science fair project in 1957 on Mississippian Epoch fossils from southern Indiana. So most of my consuming interest as a child was either archaeology or paleontology. I did flirt with as-

tronomy for several years and by the time I was a senior, I was sure that I wanted to build rockets for NASA. But the path to a career has many twists and turns. After a 2-year stint in the Army during the Vietnam War, I finished my education in archaeology and worked for a while in that field. When I moved away from Florida and returned a year later, I found a job in the paleontology collection at the Florida Museum of Natural History in Gainesville. Now 20 years later, I'm still a paleontologist, although my interest in archaeology still leads me in that direction whenever I can bend paleontology down that path.

Q. How do you view the marriage of art and science in McCollum's lightning project?

A. Art and science are both attempts to study and understand the environment around us. The artist, traditionally, has used such tools as intuition, the human eye and brain to achieve these ends. Science tries to extend the human senses and uses man-made tools and instruments to study the same thing. Creativity is used in both cases; beauty is observed. The view through an electron microscope as you go down into the world which



Russ McCarty paints on a layer of hardener to stabilize the fulgurite for moldmaking.



Russ McCarty in the lab.

lies below human vision, is as beautiful and surreal as any painting or photograph produced by an artist. Allan McCollum's project was conceived in the mind of an artist, himself, but needed science and scientists to make it a reality which the artist could portray.

Q. What was your part in the project?

A. The artist had come in with the perfect piece of fossilized lightning, a fulgurite, but it was broken and as fragile as a glass Christmas tree ornament. It seemed impossible to Allan that he could take this broken and fragile fulgurite and subject it to the trauma of moldmaking. Here is where my skills, experience

and knowledge of consolidating chemicals came to Allan's rescue and saved the fulgurite. I first removed the fulgurite from the 6 inch diameter, 4 foot long plastic tube in which it was made. It was still attached on the unbroken end to a piece of steel rod which had directed the lightning bolt into the target area, so my first task was to remove the fulgurite without causing further breakage. I accomplished this with a miniature saw which I ran at very low speed to lessen vibrations which could damage the specimen. Once the fulgurite was removed from the tube and the steel rod, I hardened the unbroken portion with very thin cyanoacrylate adhesives. The fragments from the broken end of the fulgurite were restored and glued to the fulgurite. A missing section was sculpted in with Epoxy putty mixed with zircon sand removed from the inside of the broken fulgurite. Using this sand ensured that the texture of the restored part would resemble the rest of the specimen and have the same color as well. When reconstruction was complete, I made a silicon rubber mold of the fulgurite and produced 20 copies for Allan's project.

Q. What satisfaction did you receive from working with the project?

A. My satisfaction came from seeing the completely restored fulgurite look as it did before it was broken, also in seeing the look of pleasure and satisfaction on the artist's face when he saw the specimen.

Q. What most satisfies you about your work.?

A. I am satisfied working in science and adding to our knowledge of our world. I feel somehow closer to all the answers to those questions that have haunted human beings from the time of their first thoughts a million years or more ago. I also am pleased to work with the past which was always my great love. But paradoxically, although I work in the past, I dream of the future. I have always loved science fiction and have a collection of 3,000 science books, many are 40 to 50 years old.

THE EVENT

PETRIFIED LIGHTNING FROM CENTRAL FLORIDA

A PROJECT BY ALLAN MCCOLLUM

CONTEMPORARY ART MUSEUM
UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH FLORIDA

MUSEUM OF SCIENCE AND INDUSTRY
TAMPA, FLORIDA