



GIANTS IN THE FIELD

Photograph by Brennen Matthews

Route 66 is home to a great many reasons to slow down and pull off the tarmac. Many of these have been featured in books and magazines, on television shows and a plethora of online sites, but sometimes it is the more subtle, unexpected places that really delight us as they appear magically on the horizon without expectation. Down in quiet Calumet, a farming area in Western Oklahoma, about 45 miles west of Oklahoma City, stand a few characters who seem to rise out of the lonely dry fields as a welcome to the region.

As travelers placidly head along the old road, perhaps lost in the never-ending fields and immense blue sky, three figures — a whopping 18-foot-tall each — suddenly appear. Two-dimensional in stature, they are wooden cutouts, a tribute to muffler men giants that harken travelers back to the 1960s: Paul Bunyan, Uniroyal Gal, and a Gas Station Attendant doing the twist, each smile and wave, beaming in the warmth of the day, delighting passing motorists. And the crazy thing is that, while a little under the radar, they've been there since 2019.

Molded fiberglass sculptures — muffler men — were created chiefly between 1963 and 1972 by International Fiberglass, a company in Venice, California, and were intended to be roadside attractions that would catch the attention of motorists as they traveled here and there. They were a larger-than-life business card if you will. Most have since vanished, with the changing of time — there are currently fewer than 200 that are still standing — but one of them was thankfully seen by muralist and self-proclaimed “Giant Cut-Out Artist” John Cerney. The result? A brand-new Mother Road attraction in the most unlikely of places.

One day, in 2018, while traveling to Los Angeles on a mural assignment, Cerney unexpectedly passed by a giant: the Porsche Muffler Man (Previously “Golf Guy” and, as of 2020, “Porsche Drive Coach”) just outside the Porsche Experience Center in Carson, California. Having remembered the twenty-foot-tall figure carrying a golf club outside a previous business, Dominguez Hills Golf Course, back in 1983, Cerney was inspired to make one (or three) of his own. However, knowing that he would have trouble finding a benefactor — it can be an expensive process to construct a giant, of course — Cerney decided to develop and donate the project himself.

The artist quickly got to work developing this passion project. But this was not his first rodeo. Cerney, famed for his roadside art, got his start with wall murals before delving further into the field and is perhaps most famous for his awesome roadside cutouts of James Dean and Elizabeth Taylor down in Marfa, Texas, a tribute to the iconic film, *Giant*.

Aware that he would need some help, Cerney hired Scott Farmer of Sculpture Island to create 3D sculptures of the muffler men, which Cerney used as a reference to paint the cutouts. He chose Paul Bunyan because he was the original muffler man; he went with Uniroyal Gal to have some diversity in the group and not have them all be men; she was also modeled after Nitro Girl in New Jersey, and he selected

a gas station attendant, but as a nod to Chubby Checker and perhaps the times, the gent is smiling and doing the twist. The reason behind his dancing was to break away from the strict pose that the muffler men often have.

The art installation was completed on November 14, 2019, and only took Cerney about three weeks to complete, roughly one week per figure. With each cutout completed, it only became a matter of where to put them. But this wasn't an unusual task for Cerney. Once he creates his murals, part of the joy is deciding where to put them.

“I like them to be a surprise. Preferably at the edge of town, not in the middle of it. I want people to drive from point A to B, come across this thing I've made, and have it affect their day for a few minutes. The surprise is what makes it fun.”

He asked around and tried to find a great place to plant them. Strategically, he got help from Joel Baker of American Giants to scout for locations — American Giants is written on Bunyan's axe as a thank you — and in September 2019 he put out a call for suggestions on the Phlash Phelps Sirius XM Show. Lucky for him, Mary Beth Babcock, owner of Buck Atom's Cosmic Curios on Route 66, in Tulsa, was listening to the show and attempted to aid him in finding a location. From there, she contacted Rhys Martin, President of the Oklahoma Route 66 Association, who called Lt. Governor Matt Pinnell, who had a friend, David Von Tungeln, who agreed to host the cutouts on his farm, and even helped dig the holes via his farm tractor. It all came down to knowing a guy who knows a guy who knows a guy. After that, it was just a matter of getting the cutouts from Salinas, California, to Calumet, Oklahoma, and installing them with a six-person team.

After a three-day drive from much warmer California, the installation took two days. The team worked in 18-degree weather and 40-mile-per-hour winds on the first day. It warmed to a blistering 30 degrees on the second day. And the total cost, well, that came to around \$18,000, but Cerney wasn't in it for the money. He was simply excited to create the wonderful cutouts and offer his simple but effective tribute to muffler men giants and Route 66.

“I make my living with commissions from businesses and private citizens, but I constantly get the itch to create my own projects that no one is asking for, but that I think deserve a place to be seen. I didn't have much of a connection with Route 66, other than stretches in California growing up, but it was the romantic images of travel, the TV show from the 1960s, and the Nat King Cole song that left the idea of Route 66 on my mind.”

As a result of all of the hard work, the trio are there now, a perfect addition to an everchanging highway. If you think about it, the entire process was as Route 66 as can be. A motorist happened upon a muffler man giant — a beacon from almost 50 years before — and was so taken by its unique allure that he is driven to recreate its magic and add his own stamp upon a road that has always welcomed change. A road that continues to attract visitors on the hunt for the perfect quirky roadside attraction.