Artist selects salt for Akzo abstract

By David Williams
Staff Writer

AVERY ISLAND - American sculptor Richard Erdman ventured 1,300 feet down an Avery Island mine shaft Thursday morning in pursuit of art.

Erdman, along with help from Akzo Salt Company officials, is extracting two blocks of rock salt with a combined weight of about 24 tons.

In four months, the blocks will be shipped by boat to Erdman's Carrara, Italy, studio, where he'll spend the rest of the year carving out a one-ton abstract impression that will later stand in the Akzo Salt's headquarters in Clarks Summit, Pa.

Primarily a stone and bronze sculptor, Erdman, 40, says creating a solid image from the more granular rock salt crystals "is very challenging" which was a factor in his agreeing to the Akzo commission.

"I've had no prior experience in sculpting salt - I've done across the board stone works - and this upcoming sculpture will indeed be a very delicate creation," Erdman says.

Prior to his mine descent, Erdman suited up in protective mining garb which included a hard hat, light, battery pack, safety glasses and an emergency oxygen supply.

He carried along a hammer and a stone sculpting tool which he used to sample potential selections inside the dark and immense salt structure.

After evaluating salt formations at 900, 1,000 and 1,100 feet down, Erdman was satisfied with crystal quality at the 1,300-foot level.

"This sculpture is going to be an abstract way of showing strength and growth within the salt crystals," Erdman says.

He chose the salt material at the deeper mine levels since it exhibited more of a "solid mass" quality than the more loosely formed crystals closer to the surface.

Erdman was escorted throughout the Akzo mine by Plant Manager Harry Anderson, who assisted the sculptor in his selection.

Erdman, who lives in Vermont, says the laborious task of shipping the salt blocks back to his Italian studio is essential since all of the highly specialized stone cutters and high-tech machinery for large stone artwork is located in Carrara.

"I really learned the sculpting art there. Carrara is the capital of the stone trade," Erdman says.

After transporting the blocks to Italy, Erdman says he plans to spend the next 10 months to a year sculpting a multi-tiered abstract conception.

The finished work will be entitled "Stanza" and will stand about 10 feet high and three feet wide.

The sculpture will sit on a base of African black granite, Erdman says.

When completed, the work will weigh about 2,500 pounds.

Mary Kay Warner, an Akzo public relations supervisor in the Pennsylvania headquarters, said the community has a large art following.

"This area is extremely generous to the arts," Warner added.

Erdman's upcoming work will be displayed with several other artworks at the Akzo corporate offices.