Exhibit by Award-Winning Contemporary Sculptor James Surls to Open at Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art at OU on Oct. 2

NORMAN, OKLA. – In the surreal world of contemporary sculptor James Surls, thorny vines walk, molecules spin in space and eyes adorn flowers like petals. The Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art at the University of Oklahoma opens a new exhibition of works by the award-winning artist Friday, Oct. 2.

Nature figures prominently in Surls’ sculptures and drawings. Over the course of four decades, he has developed evocative, hybrid forms in wood, steel and bronze inspired by flowers, the human body and rock formations. His recent work explores his previous inspirations as well as the microcosmic worlds of neurons and molecules. He has received numerous honors for his work, including the Texas Medal of Arts Awards in the Visual Arts from the Texas Cultural Trust in 2013, and he was named Artist of the Year by the American Institute of Architecture – Houston in 2012.

Selected from recent drawings and sculptures, Distinguished Visiting Artist: James Surls showcases the artist’s investigation into the natural world. As the guest artist in the university’s Jerome M. Westheimer Sr. and Wanda Otey Westheimer Distinguished Visiting Artist Chair program, Surls will visit the Norman campus and meet with students prior to the exhibition opening. In addition to works on display inside the museum’s Nancy Johnston Records Gallery, three of Surls’ sculptures are permanently installed on OU’s Norman and Health Sciences Center campuses, and the exhibition includes the temporary installation of another three outdoor works.
“Mr. Surls has earned a national and international reputation for an intriguing body of work that spans over four decades,” said Mark White, the museum’s Wylodean and Bill Saxon Director and Eugene B. Adkins Curator. “I extend our utmost appreciation to Mrs. Wanda Otey Westheimer for continued support of the Distinguished Visiting Artist Chair program.

“This program provides the opportunity for the museum to exhibit the work of an artist of significant merit and for the students of the OU School of Art and Art History to gain professional insights. This year, we are extremely pleased to host James Surls as the guest artist,” White said.

Born in East Texas in 1943, Surls drew inspiration from the woods of his boyhood home, not only in his choice of materials, but also in his imaginative interpretation of nature. After earning his Master of Fine Arts from Cranbrook Academy of Art in 1968, he began to develop fantastical sculptures which, when considered together with his whimsical, sometimes cryptic titles, have led numerous critics to associate Surls with Surrealism. Yet he expresses some discomfort with the suggestion.

“Although he often abandons logic and reason in favor of paradox, like many of the Surrealists,” White said, “Mr. Surls disclaims any direct influence and prefers to see his project as the creation of new and sometimes contradictory realities with overt metaphysical implications. “

Surls’ drawings and sculptures, in their imaginative exploration of the natural world, represent the artist’s escape through a metaphysical “crack” of perception, White said. In recent years, this altered perception has led him to perceive everything as fundamentally interconnected, and he has drawn formal associations between the seemingly disparate structures of neurons, molecules and plants as evidence of this interrelation, he noted. This exhibition stands as a testament to Surls’ reality, White said.

In addition to major exhibitions throughout the United States, Surls’ large works have been commissioned in Singapore, Houston, New York and Hollywood.

The two sculptures permanently installed on the OU Norman campus are located on the Stuart Walk, a path in honor of OU Regent Jon Stuart and his wife, Dee Dee Stuart, for their dedication in planting trees on the campus. *Big Walking Eye Flower I* (2000), a gift of OU First Lady Molly Shi Boren and OU President David L. Boren, is located near the museum’s entrance. Also nearby is *Needle Woman with Two Flowers* (2000), which was a gift to the museum from the estate of Mark Landrum and is located in front of the Jan Marie and Richard J. Crawford Music Practice Wing. At the entrance of the Stephenson Cancer Center at the OU Health Sciences Center is *Ten Big Standing Bronze Flowers*.

The exhibition includes the temporary installation of three outdoor works on the northern end of OU’s Norman campus. Located on the north oval, *Walking Through the Thorn Vine* (2014) is a looping rope of stainless steel with radiating bronze thorns and a series of stylized eyes. Surls’ title suggests the experience of
walking through brambles, yet the opening in the center of the sculpture invites the viewer to pass through the form visually, as though entering a portal to another reality.

*Three and Ten Flowers* (2014), located in the green space north of Boyd Street, depicts an array of 10 blossoms, each sporting three petals, organized around an octagonal frame. The result is a monumental, abstracted blossom, but with a geometry that seems vaguely molecular in character.

The largest of the outdoor sculptures, *Three Worlds Seven Rings* (2014), is installed on the western lawn of the museum. Surls constructed seven interlocking rings of stainless steel, each of which includes three orbital bodies or worlds. A steel arc extends from every world, creating another sequence of three bodies that decrease in circumference. *Three Worlds Seven Rings* refers at once to the rotation of galaxies and solar systems and to the microcosmic world of molecules and atoms.

Beginning at 10 a.m. Tuesday, Sept. 29, Surls will create a wall drawing in the museum’s Sandy Bell Gallery. The event is open to the public, and admission is complementary.

*Distinguished Visiting Artist: James Surls* is on display through Jan. 3, 2016, in the museum’s Nancy Johnston Records Gallery. A side gallery included in the exhibition allows children and families to further explore Surls’ world through artwork components they can touch and a gallery guide with instructions for an impromptu scavenger hunt through the exhibition. A gallery talk presented by Robert Bailey, assistant professor of art history at the OU School of Art and Art History, is scheduled for Tuesday, Oct. 6.

More information about the exhibition and programs is available on the museum’s website at www.ou.edu/fjjma.

The Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art is located in the OU Arts District on the corner of Elm Avenue and Boyd Street, at 555 Elm Ave., on the OU Norman campus. Admission to the museum is complimentary to all visitors, thanks to the generosity of the OU Office of the President and the OU Athletics Department. The museum is closed on Mondays. Information and accommodations on the basis of disability are available by calling (405) 325-4938 or visiting www.ou.edu/fjjma.

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**IMAGE CREDIT**

Contemporary sculptor James Surls is the subject of a new exhibition of his recent works at the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art at the University of Oklahoma. *Distinguished Visiting Artist: James Surls* opens Friday, Oct. 2, and includes drawings and sculptures, such as this 2014 work, *Walking Through the Thorn Vine*, which towers more than 11 feet tall.
James Surls (U.S., b. 1943)
*Walking Through the Thorn Vine*, 2014
Bronze and stainless steel, 135 x 133 x 64 in.