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Why are you laughing? \$1.5M secures Vancouver's beloved smiling statues, but what do they really mean?



BRIAN HUTCHINSON | 10/08/12 | Last Updated: 10/08/12 8:52 PM ET

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Known collectively as A-maze-ing Laughter, the 14 pieces were installed beside Vancouver's scenic English Bay three years ago, as part of a public sculpture initiative. Les Bazso/Postmedia News
They became an instant hit. But do they actually mean what people think they mean?

A-maze-ing Laughter: \$1.5M secures Vancouver's beloved smiling statues

They are crowd pleasers, to be sure. Fourteen figures, larger-than-life self-portraits by a renowned Chinese artist who conceived and crafted them from bronze. Grinning from ear to ear, every one. That's Yue Minjun's trademark, after all. He applies it to all of his work.

Known collectively as "A-maze-ing Laughter," the 14 pieces were installed beside Vancouver's scenic English Bay three years ago, as part of a public sculpture initiative. They became an instant hit. Children love them. Grown-ups, too.

But they were always intended as a temporary installation. All 14 pieces — each weighing 250 kilograms — were to be returned to artist Yue last year. The deadline for their removal was extended to the end of this month. They would have to go, unless someone could meet Mr. Yue's \$5-million asking price, buy the work, and keep it in town.

That seemed a dim prospect until Mr. Yue kindly agreed to a fire sale. Thanks to a generous US\$1.5-million donation last month from Vancouver billionaire Chip Wilson and his wife Shannon, the 14 figures will remain in place. A “public celebration of laughter” is being held at the English Bay site on Saturday, to recognize the Wilsons’ gift.

“I don’t think we could stand for them to end up in another part of the world,” says Mr. Wilson, founder and chairman of Lululemon Athletica Inc., which manufactures and sells activewear. The couple hopes to meet the artist when they travel to China later this year.

They might ask him this: What’s all that grinning about, really? Could the joke be on us?

Mr. Yue, after all, is often associated with a contemporary Chinese art movement called “cynical realism,” which emerged from a tumultuous, confusing period of communist rule, student protest and, eventually, unbridled consumerism.

The artist found his own creative expression from the 1989 Tiananmen Square demonstrations in Beijing. “My mood changed at that time,” he told *The New York Times* five years ago. “I was very down.” He conceived of the exaggerated, yet cryptic, grin, a symbol of China’s shifting culture and a nod to the stereotype of Chinese inscrutability. “A smile doesn’t necessarily mean happiness,” he explained. “It could be something else.”

Art critics have stared deeply at his laughing self-portraits—rendered on both canvas and in metal—and have come to some rather sombre conclusions. “The acidic tones and commercialized vacuity of his works are used to underscore the insincerity of his figures’ mirth,” reads a doleful analysis of Yue’s work, published by the cutting-edge Saatchi Gallery in London, which exhibited Mr. Yue’s work a few years ago.

“The smile has been variously interpreted as a sort of joke at the absurdity of it all, or the illusion of happiness in lives inevitably heading toward extinction,” wrote critic Richard Bernstein, in the *New York Times*. “Karen Smith, a Beijing expert on Chinese art, suggests that Mr. Yue’s grin is a mask for real feelings of helplessness.”

The Vancouver Biennale, the organization that brought Mr. Yue’s figures to town, describes him as “one of the first artists to translate this new ironic view of contemporary life, one that is expressed in the nihilistic hilarity at a time when little was funny.”



Vicky Van/Postmedia News Files



The laughing statues at English bay in Vancouver

Jason Payne/Postmedia News/Files

So those 14 figures may not be such a barrel of laughs, after all. Biennale spokesman Miriam Blume says the artist actually had something “quite Bhuddist” in mind when he agreed to install the work in Vancouver. The original title, she notes, was “Positive God.”

“We talked to him about that and said it might not translate to our audience,” says Ms. Blume. He agreed to change things up.

None of this seems to matter, at least not to the local hoi polloi who find themselves drawn to the grinning figures like bees to flowers. A-maze-ing Laughter is wildly popular, interactive public art. A rare and valuable thing, in other words.

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 **Teddy Mcd** · a year ago
Art like this is charmingly inscrutable - causes one to stop and ponder. And is that not art's raison d'être?
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 **Patrick** · a year ago
"Mr. Yue kindly agreed to a fire sale" It sounds like Mr. Yue had a good business strategy and a favorable contract from the city.
5 ^ | 1 ▾ Share ›

 **Barry O_Regan** · a year ago
Yue Minjun is certainly an amazing talent and his artistic works are worth every penny!
4 ^ | 1 ▾ Share ›

 **jomamas** · a year ago
What they 'mean' is the end of a prevailing culture in Canada, the total eradication of Western culture from Vancouver as it is displaced by Asians, and the displacement of the rest of Canada by other, various ethnicities.

They 'mean' an end to Canadian identity, and the new definition of Canada as a legal entity.

'Canadian' is not what you 'are' rather, 'Canadian' is merely what is says on that particular passport, of which you probably have many, suitably interchangeable depending on your economic needs.

'Oh Canada, our Large Shopping Malls full of Big Bland American Box Stores, Standing on Guard for Thee' ...

Those are the lyrics, right? I mean, it's not like anyone knows the words ...

19 ^ | 18 ▾ Share ›

 **QueerAvenger** → jomamas · a year ago
It's not an "end" to anything. It's an evolution. What about the prevailing culture before your people showed up? The Chinese have been in BC for centuries. Take your hatred and your xenophobia and move to the US.
12 ^ | 9 ▾ Share ›

 **andrewjames** → QueerAvenger · a year ago
An evolution? Is that what you call it? You do realize that Canada was founded by European Immigrants. These hardworking people built Canada for their progeny. Your next statement is also lacking in intellect. When the European arrived in Canada, there WAS NOTHING. You make it sound like the Indians had cities, electricity and healthcare. The Indians had not even discovered the wheel yet! They were constantly at war with each other. Google, "Ice Age Columbus" THEN you can see who was here first and wiped out by the Indians.
6 ^ | 5 ▾ Share ›

 **Joey Jack** → andrewjames · a year ago
Still waiting for your response at the Kamloops Daily News.

Ice Age Columbus has very little factual content and I want to say that you know that. but I doubt it.

Talk to me about the white race..when people from India are considered Caucasian.

1 ^ | 2 ▾ Share ›

 **andrewjames** → Joey Jack · a year ago
You ignore the obvious. Google "solutreans the first americans" There are plenty of studies that prove who was here first. People from India ARE NOT white. India is an example of why the Multi-Cult will fail. Before it

was filled with Indians, it HAD white people. They were bred out of existence by the new comers. A mixed race person IS NOT white. You need to learn a little bit more before you debate with me. Google "solutreans the first americans"

Everybody says there is this RACE problem. Everybody says this RACE problem will be solved when the third world pours into EVERY white country and ONLY into white countries.

The Netherlands and Belgium are just as crowded as Japan or Taiwan, but nobody says Japan or Taiwan will solve this RACE problem by bringing in millions of third worlders and quote assimilating unquote with them.

Everybody says the final solution to this RACE problem is for EVERY white country and ONLY white countries to "assimilate," i.e., intermarry, with all those non-whites.

What if I said there was this RACE problem and this RACE problem would be solved only if hundreds of millions of non-blacks were brought into EVERY black country and ONLY into black countries?

How long would it take anyone to realize I'm not talking about a RACE problem. I am talking about the final solution to the BLACK problem?

And how long would it take any sane black man to notice this and what kind of psycho black man wouldn't object to this?

But if I tell that obvious truth about the ongoing program of genocide against my race, the white race, Liberals and respectable conservatives agree that I am a nazihowantstokillsixmillionjews.

They say they are anti-racist. What they are is anti-white.

Anti-racist is a code word for anti-white.

1 ^ | v Share ›



SlamDunk → jomamas · a year ago

That's right, people are choosing what they like based on preference rather than imaginary borders full of so-called "native born", 3rd generation citizens.

Shall we resurrect walls to preserve the current culture we have of citizens with ancestry in foreign countries? What dates should we decide our "culture" started on? Too far back and it's aboriginals, not far enough and your culture is full of 1st and 2nd generation immigrants.

And the Canadian National Anthem's lyrics have been revised twice, most recently in 1980. Our flag is a 20th century creation, and our currency is mostly covered with a picture of a Monarch that has no practical jurisdiction over our democracy.

What is this culture that you lament the passing of? I'll take the expression of an oppressed artist over the countenance of a glorified heiress.

8 ^ | 5 v Share ›



jimmer → jomamas · a year ago

If we're lucky maybe they'll let us live out our days in communities on small parcels of land to preserve our culture. Wouldn't that be agreeable and benevolent on our new overlords' part?

2 ^ | v Share ›

Avatar

jringjring · a year ago

This is what a Vancouverite feels like with no sunshine and real estate that is far too expensive. What can you do but laugh? Take some comfort, my fellow citizens, that not everyone lives with such painful irony: many places have good weather, affordable real estate and no traffic. The world is not flat.

5 ^ | 2 v Share ›

Avatar

ivanhoe5 · a year ago



I will tell you what the statues mean, that My Yue is now a millionaire and Vancouver has 3500 kilograms of bronze. It all makes sense when you put it into context with the Olympic Games, China gets the gold and silver, Canada gets the bronze.

6 ^ | 4 v Share >



QueerAvenger · a year ago

It's not Bhuddist, it's Buddhist. Get an editor.

8 ^ | 7 v Share >



QueerAvenger → QueerAvenger · a year ago

I really don't understand how people can give a thumbs down for a factual spelling error....

1 ^ | 7 v Share >



jimmer → QueerAvenger · a year ago

pettiness

3 ^ | 1 v Share >



QueerAvenger → jimmer · a year ago

Ok, Cristhian.

^ | 2 v Share >



jimmer → QueerAvenger · a year ago

...on their part.

1 ^ | v Share >



rattler · a year ago

Pretty Am-Azing artist !! Getting someone, not taxpayers, to pay for a product that laughs at its purchaser.

3 ^ | 1 v Share >



panther01 · a year ago

It's the 'Last Laugh' of Mr. Yue Munjun on the naivete of vancouverites.

I have visited the sight quite a few times & found it quite distasteful & out of the place. At the fine it's a mockery, what's an 'art' if a common person doesn't understands it, mind it it's a display at public place not any art gallery for arrogant nouveau riche. At the best we could say they were installed to make local chinese residents happy & give them a felling of 'at home'. The hidden message: 'It's more political than art'.

Sometime ago I heard a tourist watching these statues remarked "Vancouver certainly lacks a sense of art". And look now Mr.Yue Minjun is having the last laugh at the foolishness of vancouverites who paid him 1.5 million dollars for this abominable piece of art which no other city ever cared to buy.

A piece of genuine Native Art would have been more appropriate to depict Canadian Art & Culture in Vancouver.

8 ^ | 9 v Share >



Jimmer → panther01 · a year ago

Nonsense.

2 ^ | 3 v Share >



kat → panther01 · a year ago

Do you complain this much when you come across a Richard Serra piece?

^ | 1 v Share >



DavidAyer · a year ago

Bravo for getting the 'h' in there and not spelling it Boedist, however it's 'Buddhist' not 'Bhuddist' yo gabhine

 Bravo for getting the m in there and not spelling it BOOUIST - however it's BUDDHIST NOT BUDDDUIST ya genius
4 ^ | 3 v Share >

 **I_reckon** · a year ago
These statues are a blight on Vancouver's beachside landscape. No imagination went into these statues. Each one has exactly the same stupid expression. Hardly creative.
7 ^ | 9 v Share >

 ivanhoe5 → I_reckon · a year ago
I have seen a lot of good art in my lifetime, and to be frank these bronzes do not fall into that category. They remind me of cartoon caricatures in a low budget Japanese animation.
2 ^ | 3 v Share >

 Harv · a year ago
Why are you people so miserable and negative? Close your eyes when you drive by Davie and Denman, and feel free to STFU!
1 ^ | v Share >

 Mike_Veracity · a year ago
Why was the offer made in \$U.S ? Wasn't this a Canadian spending money in Canada? Or was it made in Canadian dollars but for some unknown reason translated into \$U.S. to further U.S. hegemony (no pun intended)
3 ^ | 5 v Share >

 NoSir → Mike_Veracity · a year ago
It's an international, private trade between a Chinese artist based in Beijing, and a Canadian billionaire. The Chinese guy wanted American dollars because that's the standard.

It's a rather logical, common reason to trade in \$US.
6 ^ | 5 v Share >

 jimmer → Mike_Veracity · a year ago
Foreign currency is often used in the international marketplace. Seller dictates terms. Get over it.
2 ^ | 3 v Share >

 Guest · a year ago
What an a-maze-ingly condescending, catty review. Sounds like someone (Brian Hutchinson) needs a trip to the statues. But you're right, Brian, I am sure if the people of Vancouver knew the true high art intention of these pieces they would be in an uproar and all the little children would flee in despair.

^ | 2 v Share >

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