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Vancouver biennale works go under the hammer in New York

By MARSHA LEDERMAN

Many will be sold at auction, but founder hoping a local buyer will help keep Yue Minjun's bronze figures at English Bay

A few weeks ago, Zhan Wang's *Artificial Rock #143* was removed from the corner of Granville and Georgia Streets in downtown Vancouver, where the crunched up ball of silvery contemporary art has been attracting climbing children and curious adults since the run-up to the Vancouver Olympics. It now resides at a Park Avenue address in New York (albeit temporarily), where on Tuesday it goes on the auction block along with several other offerings from the Vancouver Biennale, as well as works by in-demand emerging artists and superstar pop artists such as Keith Haring, Frank Stella and Andy Warhol.

The auction, at Phillips de Pury & Company, is a first for the Biennale, now wrapping up its second exhibition, and, according to Biennale founder and president Barrie Mowatt, a major step for the organization.

"It puts us on the world stage instantly," said Mowatt at the Biennale's Vancouver offices. "No matter who we talk to or how many people we touch, when they're on site and in situ, we can't possibly reach 7000 - 15,000 of the top collectors and institutions in the world, as these guys can."

The auctioneers have partnered with the Biennale to sell 19 works - mostly maquettes of the larger installations which were created by the artists as a way for the Biennale to generate revenue, but there are some big ticket items as well, including three of Magdalena Abakanowicz's ominous Walking Figures, with an estimate of \$90,000 - \$120,000 (U.S.) each; and of course Wang's shiny work - with its \$300,000 to \$500,000 (U.S.) estimate - which graces the inside cover of the glossy Phillips catalogue for its sale of Contemporary Art Part II.

The auction is the last official 2009-2011 Vancouver Biennale event, and marks if not the beginning of the end (some works have already been removed, including Jaume Plensa's popular *We*, 2008, which went to Asia), certainly a major milestone in the wrapping-up process. Three of the four works installed in Richmond are to be removed over the next few days. Most of the other works will be removed by December 31.

But it's easier to sell them when they're still installed in public rather than sitting in a warehouse somewhere, and with that in mind, Mowatt is seeking extensions for a few of them, including Ren Jun's *Freezing Water #7*, Wang Shugang's *The Meeting*, and Yue Minjun's *A-maze-ing Laughter*, a tourist magnet at English Bay, which Mowatt is anxious to sell - preferably to someone who will keep the work in Vancouver.

"This is huge and important," he says. "Unless we're able to sell or find a buyer for Yue Minjun, which is the big ticket item, we're going to have challenges with our numbers." (About 70 per cent of the works from the first Biennale sold.)

A-maze-ing Laughter - 14 painted bronze figures, weighing 250 kg each - carries a \$5-million price tag. But it has been enormously popular - and not just with the visual arts elite.

"I had a trucker in here this morning and he says to me: 'Barrie, of all the works I've installed for you over 10 years or so in the various projects, this has got to be the most winning piece. Everybody loves it. You've got to keep it here.'"

So far, no dice. He has had some interest from a consortium of developers in Calgary, though.

"That's something I guess I get to follow up on relatively soon, but wouldn't it be tragic for Vancouver if once again the most popular installation in the Biennale ends up in Calgary," says Mowatt, referring to the removal of Dennis Oppenheim's Device to Root Out Evil (colloquially known as The Upside-Down Church) to Calgary in 2008.

There are some changes coming to the Biennale: It won't go completely dark between exhibitions this time, but will continue with its education component and stage a Tour de Biennale - a cycling event for serious riders that incorporates public art. And for the 2013-2015 Biennale, Mowatt is hoping to include artists from each province and territory, and to kick things off with a major launch. He wants to make a big, far-reaching splash.

"We have the ability, given how we've positioned ourselves with connections we have internationally, to really step up and become a significant player on the world stage," says Mowatt. "We're not just some podunk out on the street."

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