

VISUAL ARTS

Yue Minjun gives Vancouver the last laugh

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Even if laughter yoga isn't your thing, this may be enough to prompt a sun salutation, or at least a hearty *Namaste* in Vancouver. Yue Minjun's wildly popular installation *A-maze-ing Laughter* will remain here, thanks to a donation by the founder of yoga wear giant Lululemon. Chip Wilson and his wife Shannon have given \$1.5-million to the Vancouver Biennale Open Air Museum, allowing the organization to gift the work to the city – where residents and tourists have fallen hard for the 14 painted bronze figures.

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“The response we got from the moment we started unveiling them, unwrapping them, with the cranes holding them, you knew there was something unique and special about them,” says Vancouver Biennale president and founder Barrie Mowatt, noting the installation has become an instantly recognizable symbol of the city. “It’s not quite the Eiffel Tower, but it’s certainly a work that commands attention.”

The work was installed near English Bay in Vancouver's West End nearly three years ago for the 2009-2011 Biennale – a non-profit event which exhibits works of contemporary public art in Metro Vancouver for about two years before they are sold. *A-maze-ing Laughter* became an instant tourist magnet, and has to be one of the most photographed attractions in the city. It graces the cover of a city map, has been used in real estate development ads to promote the Vancouver lifestyle, and has been the setting for at least one wedding, klezmer band and all. People climb on it, mimic its expressions, and the figures have been animated with everything from Santa hats (Christmas) to Canadian-themed scarves (2010 Olympics) to life preservers (a recent event to promote water safety).

“I think there's something about this sculpture that just captures the imagination of people,” says Miriam Blume, the Biennale's director of marketing and business development. “It taps into this sort of childlike inner imaginative spirit and gives us permission to have some fun.”

But while the Biennale has been able to donate some other works to the city, *A-maze-ing Laughter*, with its \$5-million (U.S.) price tag, was simply too expensive for a so-called legacy gift.

With the agreement between the Biennale and Yue running out on Dec. 31, 2011 and the work due to be removed, Yue agreed to drop the selling price to \$1.5-million – in an effort to keep the work in Vancouver. The Beijing-based artist offered the reduction after seeing photos of people interacting with the work.

“That energy alone inspired him to say, ‘Okay, let’s talk,’ ” says Mowatt, who met with Yue in China over the holidays. The stipulation was that the work remain in a public space. The deadline to find a buyer was pushed back to August, 2012.

The extraordinary price reduction prompted some media attention, and that caught the attention of the Wilsons. On a Friday morning in January over breakfast and the newspaper, the couple discussed getting involved.

“When we read about it in the paper that funds were needed in order to keep these public works ... in place, we felt that this was an area that we could support the city in,” says Shannon Wilson, whose children have interacted with the work.

Later that day, Chip Wilson gave Blume a call. “Where are you at with your fundraising?” Blume recalls him asking. “Because I think this is something that Shannon and I would like to do for our community.”

With the August deadline looming, and after months of negotiations and dealing with legal and bureaucratic issues – including winning approval from the city’s public art committee and the Vancouver Park Board to allow the work to stay – the deal has now been finalized. The donation is officially being announced on Tuesday.

“It’s really our donation to the people of Vancouver,” said Chip Wilson on Tuesday. “Just watching the total shift in people’s persona when they’re there with the art; I’ve never seen anything like that in my life before.”

This enjoyment is evident to anyone who spends any time near the work at Morton Park. “If I were to describe it, it’s social, I guess,” said Jason Wei, 18, after leaping up onto the back of one of the figures so a friend could take a photo. “I can interact with it. It’s really fun – like what I just did.”

The acquisition is particularly meaningful given the loss of another much-discussed Biennale work four years ago. Dennis Oppenheim’s *Device to Root Out Evil*, often colloquially called “the upside-down church”, was unceremoniously removed from a different waterfront park, and re-installed in Calgary – a loss Mowatt calls “a smudge on the city” which the Biennale was determined not to repeat.

“I think there was recognition throughout this entire process that whatever this process was and however long and laborious it was, we’re never going to lose a great piece of art again,” says Blume.

Some \$5,000 raised through individual donations for *A-maze-ing Laughter* has helped cover costs associated with the acquisition, including legal fees, according to the Biennale, which says it will attempt to contact those individual donors to thank them.

It's also planning an event Aug. 11 to mark the donation. There will be no speeches or ribbon cutting, Mowatt promises, but they are hoping for a "monster photograph" that could also bear witness to a Guinness World Record: for most people laughing in one spot at the same time. Yoga pants not required.

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