

Fred Lee's Person of Interest: Barrie Mowatt took his passion for art and made it public

Avid cyclist leads Tour de Biennale fundraiser Aug. 19

[Fred Lee](#) / Vancouver Courier

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Barrie Mowatt, founder of the Vancouver Biennale, poses with the A-maze-ing Laughter bronze sculptures in Morton Park at Davie and Denman streets where a day of laughter is being held Aug. 11. Photograph by: Joshua McVeity

Barrie Mowatt, founder of the Vancouver Biennale, poses with the A-maze-ing Laughter bronze sculptures in Morton Park at Davie and Denman streets where a day of laughter is being held Aug. 11. Photograph by: Joshua McVeity

As founder and president of Vancouver's Biennale, Barrie Mowatt has been painting the town with art. Held every two years, the biennale a public Open Air Museum for contemporary art has become an important part of the city's artistic and physical landscape. Highlighting art in public spaces, Mowatt has been inviting Vancouverites to experience the world's best talents where they live, work, play and take transit. The last biennial which ran from 2009-2011 featured 38 installations from around the world. No work delighted the public more than Chinese artist Yue Minjun's A-maze-ing Laughter bronze sculptures in Morton Park at Davie and Denman.

Integrating art into everyday life to encourage exploration, inspire learning and provoke the imagination has not been without its controversy for the 67-year-old Rossland native and former art dealer from the cost of public art to the pieces themselves. Who can forget the debate of Miss Mao Trying to Poise on Lenin's Head by the Gao Brothers? Nevertheless, Mowatt, who recently closed his prominent West Georgia Street gallery, dedicates his time and energy to ensure art accessibility for all. Mowatt, an avid cyclist, fronts Vancouver Biennale's second annual Tour de Biennale, a cycling fundraiser Aug. 19 in support of the next biennale in 2013.

How do you find and transport the works to the city?

Endless travels, introductions, visions, discussions, inspirations, reality checks, fundraising pleas, negotiations, meltdowns and moments of pure joy with curators, artists, bureaucrats, sponsors, media, my team and guys with big cranes.

Is the hope that the curated piece stays in the city?

The hope is that the biennale through sales and philanthropy is able to acquire minimally one work per biennale over two years and for it to remain in the public domain for all citizens to enjoy in perpetuity. Imagine Metro Vancouver and its neighbourhoods as a freely accessible Louvre, Tate or MOMA.

What were your thoughts when you learned A-maze-ing Laughter was going to remain in Vancouver?

We achieved one of our goals and that there are citizens in Vancouver who can and will sponsor great art and the vision of the biennale. (The Biennale will celebrate the sculpture's acquisition at Morton Park on Aug. 11 dubbed A Day of Laughter.)

Why do you think Yue's work resonates with people?

It gives us permission to be playful.

Why is public art important?

It defines a city.

Biggest success?

Having city parks administration act relatively expeditiously to secure an agreement with the biennale to ensure the benefactors wishes.

Biggest setback?

Losing Device To Root Out Evil by now deceased artist Dennis Oppenheim because mechanisms werent set up within the city to expedite these potential gifts.

What does success look like?

Having philanthropists and citizens who believe in the vision and support us with tax credits that will ensure our freedom in future planning, for Metro Vancouver to become an Open Air Museum freely accessible to all.

What do you hope is Vancouver Biennales legacy?

It has only begun. For the biennale to become the defining arts and culture event that the city, region and nation are recognized for around the world; where accessibility to great art and creative experiences are celebrated, encouraged and recognized as a defining identity of our city. Where people of all ages are able to participate in the artistic and creative experience, be it dance, performance, literary or the visual arts, freely and openly where they live, work, play and transit. The biennales legacy will be to have opened doors where they have been closed and to open minds where they have been fearful of expression and to have citizens, institutions and government acknowledge and celebrate that the future of our nation and world are dependent upon the encouragement of creative and innovative thinking embodied in the arts.

Best life lesson youve learned?

What a difference a day makes.

One lesson youd love to give others?

Be true to yourself.

One thing you could change about the world?

Religious fanaticism.

One thing you hate most about the world?

Ethnic cleansing.

One thing you wish Vancouverites would stop whining about?

Bike lanes.

Three words to live by

Pass it forward.

Most thankful for

A cancer victory; the man in my life.

A talent you possess that many are not aware of?

Im a nurturer, motivator, and advocate.

One thing you cant live without?

Peace of mind.

Last \$20 to your name, how would you spend it?

I wouldnt.

Favourite restaurant?

Fraiche in West Vancouver

Biggest indulgence?

Sleeping in getting at least seven hours sleep.

Last book read?

Last enjoyable one was Three Cups of Tea by Gregg Mortenson.

All-time favourite movie?

To Kill a Mockingbird, One Flew Over the Cuckoos Nest and Blade Runner.

Favourite pastime?

Just being with my partner.

Favourite sport?

Cycling, Tour de France and Giro dItalia.

Last place travelled?

Copenhagen, Berlin, India.

Best thing about this city?

The spirit and its belief in itself as a model for urbane living.

Worst thing about this city?

Cultural cliques who view collaboration as a threat to their existence!

Your favourite neighbourhood?

Cedar Cottage, Trout Lake and SFU Gastown.

What would the perfect day in Vancouver look like for you?

Cycling the North Shore with buddies in the morning, yoga in the afternoon with a quiet picnic on the beach at Crab Park at dusk overlooking the mountains and harbour with my partner of 15 years.

Community event, festival or gala you look forward to every year?

There are several: Vancouver International Film Festival, PuSh Performing Arts Festival, and Biennale installations.

The one place you take out-of-town visitors to show off our city?

Spanish Banks

Who inspires you?

Anyone with a vision and chutzpah to pursue it, preferably for the betterment of mankind and the universe no matter how small it may be.

Who bugs you?

Fence sitters.

Local person you most admire?

Gastroenterologist Dr. Nazira Chatur

Most memorable celebrity encounter?

A private lunch with David Hockney

If you could be any celebrity?

Id rather not

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