

Ready to Install

A herd of mammoth sculptures settles into the city's grounds

BY LIA GRAINGER PUBLISHED JUL 1, 2009

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Carl Wiens

"I've based it all on a drop of water." Chinese sculptor Ren Jun is using his beverage to describe a monumental piece of public art. He's trying to convince a dubious Barrie Mowatt, in the offices of the Vancouver Biennale near the Olympic Village, to approve his proposal for the international outdoor art festival that begins in September.

"Ren, if you want to install a 150-foot sculpture in the middle of the city, I need to see it," says Mowatt.

Jun, a small man of boundless energy, looks playful. "It's about water! Like this!" Dipping his hand in the glass he's been sipping from, Jun splashes water across the polished wooden surface of the conference table. It spills on some papers, but he doesn't notice.

At first Mowatt seems confused, but then his eyes crinkle and he smiles. "I see the forms," he says, as Jun drags his fingers through the pool of water that is slowly evaporating. "It could be a bird taking off, or waves," he adds, and Jun nods. "It has that amorphous sense, but not so amorphous that you can't identify

with it. It will be fluid in seven tons of metal."

To hear Mowatt describe it, the 22-month celebration of international art could rival the Olympics. The owner of Buschlen Mowatt Galleries and president of the privately funded outdoor art festival, he'll oversee the installation of more than 20 monumental sculptures in prominent locations starting this month. The biennale will also include major new-media installations in six Canada Line stations and more than 40 bus shelter installations. Several city buses will be completely wrapped in art.

"We want this to be so big," says Mowatt, "that international art-where it is, what it is-becomes a topic of dinner conversations. We want it to be just as talked about as the Olympics."

The first biennale, from October 2005 to April 2007, saw works by major international artists-including Sorel Etrog, John Clement, Albert Paley, Bill Reid, and Dennis Oppenheim-installed along waterfront walkways and in neighbourhoods around the city. It was a litmus test of public reaction to massive contemporary art. And it ignited a controversy that still clings to the word "biennale" in Vancouver.

Those who saw Oppenheim's Device to Root Out Evil won't soon forget the 25-foot church, turned on its head and balanced on the tip of a cherry-red steeple. On June 4, 2008, Device was removed by crane from a small patch of grass among the sparkling condos of Coal Harbour. It had stood there for 18 months, to the general delight and occasional dismay of onlookers, and was removed after an extended and highly publicized negotiation between the biennale and the parks board. The objection to the multimillion-dollar work was aesthetic: local residents and developers complained that it obstructed the view. The incident created a dispute among art aficionados, developers, and citizens, all debating the same question: does challenging contemporary art have a place in Vancouver's pristine urban landscape?

The term "biennale" brings a certain cachet to a city struggling to become as much a cultural destination as it is a recreational playground; art festivals have become de rigueur for burgeoning creative capitals. The controversy surrounding the removal of Device has made some wonder if Vancouverites are ready to reconcile scenery with culture.

"Vancouver is all about being outdoors," says Mowatt. "When you're out walking, biking, sailing, you see people actually engaging with the sculptures; they become an active part of our environment." He thinks the city's natural landscape provides an opportunity to throw art into high relief through juxtaposition. "I've never seen that kind of interaction in Toronto," he says. "There, the work fades into the background. I've stood in front of pieces and watched to see if people respond to them, and the people are just shoo, shoo, shoo, racing by."

Artists themselves are keenly aware of the attitude that Vancouver residents and politicians have taken toward public art. Douglas Coupland may be the city's most recognized creative mind but you have to leave Vancouver to find his public sculptures. Many are in Toronto (several occupy the eight-acre park he recently co-designed). "Toronto has really terrific pieces all over the city, and big or small, they give the place a richness," he says. "But Toronto has more public works because they've simply been doing it longer. I think their expectation of any piece is that it will probably be good, if not great, and they will enjoy it. Vancouverites seem to have come to expect public art to be something that will make them angry."

For now, Mowatt isn't concerned with potential revolts from philistines. He's busy coordinating the installation of the biggest, highest-impact works of the biennale, due to go up in late July-pieces like the massive stainless-steel sculpture Jun described by spilling his water. "We're still deciding where to put it," says Mowatt. On the table he sets out photographs of three familiar Lower Mainland landscapes-English Bay, West Vancouver's beaches, and a stretch of open grass along the highway to the airport-each with Jun's undulating metal structure Photoshopped into the foreground. The sculpture looks striking in each location, its rippling metal flowing out now 90 feet in opposite directions from a central fulcrum, the only point where the seven-ton structure is anchored to the ground. So where will it go?

"You'll have to wait until it's installed," says Mowatt. "But don't worry. You won't miss it."