

Quirky New Totem Pole Raises Environmental Awareness



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A Vancouver-based artist is creating conversational buzz with his 33 foot, 25,000 pound sculpture, located at Quebec Street and Milross Avenue, of five recycled, smashed cars stacked upon each other and perched on an old growth cedar tree.

The playful Trans Am Totem is the work of local artist Marcus Bowcott, who spent part of his career towing logs along the Fraser River and around False Creek. His hope for the installation was to provide a commentary on the evolving identity and history of the area, in relation to the ascendance of “throw-away consumer culture” in Vancouver.

Trans Am Totem serves to remind us of our ongoing contributions to global warming and environmental degradation, as well as attempt to inspire some union of action to help provide a better outcome for the future generations of our planet.

The sculpture has a collection of five scrap cars—bigger and bigger models stacked one atop the other—with a Trans Am at the peak and a real old-growth cedar stump at the bottom, brought over from southern Vancouver Island. This piece of artwork, no doubt, reminds observers of the dramatic transformation of False Creek and Vancouver since before the '80s.



Credit: Roaming the Planet

The artist, Marcus Bowcott, with the giant old-growth cedar tree.

Before the introduction of heavy industry, this site was a shoreline of tidal flats and a massive forest with old growth cedars and Douglas Firs. It was also in the vicinity of Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh Nations. The tree references the pre-industry site as well as False Creek's logging and industrial past. The "totem" theme is an allusion to Vancouver's First Nations legacy. Now, the site's present incarnation boasts a major hub of movement—crawling with constant interconnections from the light rail, viaducts and major roads, with the number one choice of transportation being cars.

Bowcott said Trans Am Totem questions the cycle of production and consumption, but the car in particular holds a unique position in our culture.

"The automobile is a manufactured want and symbol of extremes; practicality and luxury, necessity and waste," said Bowcott in a news release. "We can see this in the muscular Trans Am, the comfortable BMW and the workhorse Civic."

The sculpture is stacked high above the roadway and draws the attention of commuters all around, especially from the SkyTrain.

It took two full years for the artist and his wife Helene to prepare the pieces for installation. Preparation involved meticulously stripping out the interiors of scrap cars (to

minimize weight), repainting the vehicles in vibrant colours, mounting them on a steel column and welding them all together. The head and tail lights were also wired to be illuminated by solar power.



Credit: Marcus Bowcott

The total cost of this project was \$40,000 which came mostly from the Bowcotts pockets, apart from generous online donations and a big contribution from the Vancouver Biennale of \$10,000. Trans Am Totem is the latest installation for the 2014-2016 Vancouver Biennale, the city's biannual public art exhibition.

"The wood and the cars of Trans Am Totem speak to the identity of Vancouver: Where we were, where we are, and where we are going to be," Bowcott said on the Trans Am

Totem Indiegogo campaign webpage. "I don't claim to have answers, but I'm interested in the conversation."