

Art You Can Feel: The Vancouver Sculpture Biennale

by Tara Wohlberg

I am riding a bicycle for the first time in 20 years, and “my” city has opened up to me like a jack-in-the-box. I am making a tour of 24 sculptures from 11 countries, which have been nestled in Vancouver’s public landscape for 18 months. There are no Do Not Touch signs. This cultural “invasion” was actually the inaugural Vancouver Sculpture Biennale, and each work begged to be touched and scrutinized—on foot or roller blades, by bicycle or wheelchair, 24/7. Although Vancouver prides itself on its natural beauty, the concept of free public art has only recently taken root here.

Dennis Oppenheim’s *Device to Root out Evil* (1997) is a New-England-style church with its steeple thrust into the ground. It not only puts Christianity on its head, but also invites viewers to put their own spin on the glow of the red roof tiles. Although the Stanford University Board

of Regents approved the purchase of *Device*, it was ultimately vetoed by the university president as being “inappropriate for campus.” Vancouverites, however, have embraced the demonic irony and have actively blogged about it. *Device*, which has been purchased by the Vancouver-based Benfic Foundation, is now permanently installed at Harbour Green Park.

Bernar Venet’s ethereal arcs, 217.5 ARCS X 13, were perched on a lip of sand at Sunset Beach. It is not so much the Cor-ten steel “ribs” that one sees, but how the arcs sculpt their immediate surroundings: here, gritty blue ocean, thin high clouds, and a toddler crawling on the piece, drizzling sand between arcs. The physics of space seem to dance between the strength and resistance of each steely piece, the romance of the aesthetic outweighing the intellectual conceptualism of the mathematics.



Instead of roping art off and holding it at arms’ length, the Vancouver Sculpture Biennale focused on engagement, education, and interaction with an estimated 20 million viewers; the interactive elements of this unique biennial were far removed from staid museum exhibitions. There was a telephone number and a three-digit code on each plaque. With a free call, you could learn more about each piece any time, day or night. You could also text your comments, download a podcast to take the tour with your own MP3 player, or blog or post your

own photos on the Biennale Web site.

I wondered if it was OK to sit or stand on Michel Goulet’s *Echoes* (2003), a set of 10 stainless steel chairs sunk into the sand of English Bay. Should I call and ask someone? I climbed onto a chair and slalomed up and down the row with bad-girl delight. It felt decadent to “feel” the art underneath me, alive. Goulet, who represented Canada in the 1988 Venice Biennale and won Quebec’s Paul-Emile Bourduas prize, is one of Canada’s foremost sculptors. The French and English texts stamped onto the seats, such as “je me sauve salvation you said” or “false pretence true story,” relay Goulet’s message that the utilitarian function of an everyday object can be redefined.

Another Oppenheim work, *Engagement*, brought reflection on recent Canadian legal history: same sex marriage. Two steel engagement rings, nearly 30 feet tall, lean away from each other, as if in a post-argument sulk. The sculpture reminds us that any marriage requires a balancing and that there is always the risk of separation. This version (there are three prior versions) was created specifically for Vancouver. Although the site, on English Bay in the gay-friendly



West End, is rather subversive, the Plexiglas diamonds will last forever, twinkling like the wink of an outrageous flirt.

One of the city’s main tourist attractions, Stanley Park, is a 1,000-acre evergreen oasis of majestic cedar, hemlock, and fir trees neighboring downtown. John Henry’s crimson *Jaguar* guarded the entrance to the park, acting as a beacon luring people out of their cubicles and cars into nature. Created specifically for the show, the 85-foot assemblage of painted steel is an example of public constructivism gone right. The stark

color and outreaching form counterbalanced the high-rise architecture and green-blue backdrop of water and parkland. Voted the most popular sculpture, it propelled the viewer onward to Ju Ming’s abstracted bronze figure, *Tai-Chi Single Whip*. Stretching out into Coal Harbour, Ming’s work was often surrounded by people engaging in meditative practice on the surrounding lawns. The “Tai Chi” series is the most famous body of work by this Taiwanese artist, who is often referred to as the father of modern sculpture in China.

Getting bodies out to experience public art was child’s play for the show’s organizers. With educational materials like a K–12 multi-disciplinary curriculum, post-secondary multimedia competitions, and an intra-school Biennale Great Race, students and teachers were just a click away from art interactions. There was also a lecture series with artists like Betty Gold, John Henry, and Albert Paley. But these were only a few of the 16 community-based programs aimed at a fresh audience for contemporary art, and for sculpture in particular. In partnership with Christie’s, a gala

auction raised money to fund future shows and create a legacy of permanent installations throughout the city. Without relying on public or government funding, the Board of Governors took public art to the streets—literally and figuratively.

The figurative nuts, bolts, and rivets of Sorel Etrog’s work garnered him the Vancouver Sculpture Biennale’s inaugural Lifetime Achievement Award. Oppenheim was also honored with the award, which will bear Etrog’s name in the future. Etrog, a sculptor, painter, film producer, writer, and philosopher, is the most internationally decorated Canadian artist. His prolific career, launched at the 1966 Venice Biennale, led him into collaborations with Eugene Ionesco, Samuel Beckett, John Cage, and Marshall McLuhan and a lifelong exploration of man and machinery. His bronze *King & Queen* held court in Harbour Green, erect and proud, a simple and direct bridge between the individual and industrialism.

An award-winning guerrilla street campaign, “Art You Can Feel” kidnapped Jane Blog from her banal commute and dropped her into the art world quicker than Alice in Wonderland fell down the rabbit hole. And that is just the way founder and artistic director Barrie Mowatt wants it: “This is the only Biennale that focuses on public art installations. We want to engage everyone.” Don’t tell my husband, but I think I’m engaged.

The next Vancouver Sculpture Biennale launches in September 2009, just prior to the Vancouver 2010 Winter Olympics. Featured artists include Jaume Plensa, Arnaldo Pomodoro, and Yvonne Domenge. More information is available at <www.vancouverbiennale.com>.

Above: Sorel Etrog, *King & Queen*. Bronze, 305 x 183 x 287 cm. Below: Dennis Oppenheim, *Engagement*. Glass, steel, and aluminum, 853 and 640 cm. high.



Above: Bernar Venet, 217.5 ARCS X 13. Steel, 353 x 447 x 330 cm. Below: Ju Ming, *Tai Chi Single Whip*. Bronze, 213 x 276 x 109 cm.

