

## Meet the artist behind the A-maze-ing Laughter figures

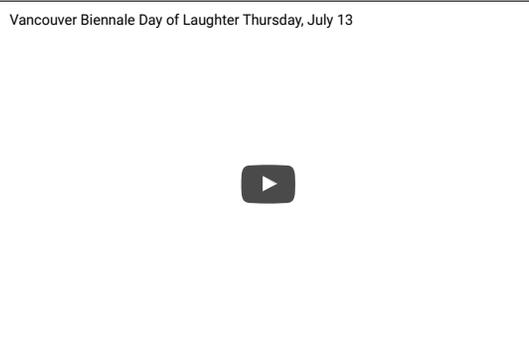
Yue Minjun, who's based in China, hadn't seen the installation in person until this week

[Jessica Kerr](#) / Vancouver Courier

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A-maze-ing Laughter is made up of 14 giant smiling bronze men, all featuring artist Yue Minjun's smiling face. Minjun, who's based in China, visited the sculptures for the first time in person this week. Photo Jennifer Gauthier  
Yue Minjun smiles as he talks about the public's reaction to his sculpture, A-maze-ing Laughter, which has become something of a local landmark, drawing residents and visitors alike to English Bay's Morton Park.



"I didn't really expect it would be so popular," he said through an interpreter. "I'm really happy it had this sort of outcome."

Based in Beijing, China, Minjun arrived in Vancouver for the first time this week. He's never seen A-maze-ing Laughter in person. He has, however, seen some of the many photos people have taken with the installation of 14 large bronze figures. The faces, self-portraits, are all frozen in the same expression in different poses.

In all types of weather, year round, people are drawn to the installation — posing with, and on, the figures, sometimes adorning the bronze statues with different accessories.

"He didn't expect that people would interact with it so freely," said interpreter Katherine Tong. "He feels really good about that."



A-maze-ing Laughter is made up of 14 giant smiling bronze men, all featuring artist Yue Minjun's smiling face. Photo Jennifer Gauthier

The installation was part of the 2009-2011 Vancouver Biennale exhibition. The non-profit aims to make public art accessible and engaging, and Ammar Mahimwalla, director of public projects, said with each exhibition the group tries to keep a legacy piece.

To make that happen, in 2012 Minjun dropped the price of the piece from \$5 million to \$1.5 million and the group was able to purchase the installation with a donation from Lululemon founder Chip Wilson and his wife Shannon.

In 2013, the piece was the only work of art nominated in the Canadian Institute of Planners' Great Places in Canada Contest. It also helped the West End neighbourhood win the Great Place in Canada — Great Neighbourhood award in 2015.

Minjun, a leading figure of China's post-Tiananmen generation of artists, is famous for his oil paintings, and says he thought it would be interesting to put some of his works into a 3D format.



Chinese artist Yue Minjun with his A-maze-ing Laughter sculptures. Photo Jennifer Gauthier

His style is described as "cynical realism," a term coined to represent the disillusioned artist movement that emerged in China after the 1989 student demonstration in Tiananmen Square. Humour, cynicism, repetition and an emphasis on the individual are hallmarks of cynical realism works.

"It started out with a very traditional, monument type of concept," Minjun said of the piece.

He explained that in China, when an emperor died, a sculpture would be erected to protect the tomb. His inspiration for the work was how visitors to the tombs would interact with those sculptures.

Minjun's visit to Vancouver has been in the works for a couple of months, said Barrie Mowatt, Vancouver Biennale president.

"It's exceptionally exciting," he said of hosting an artist of Minjun's caliber.

Vancouver Biennale organized the Day of Laughter event, which takes place Thursday at Morton Park, in honour of Minjun's visit to the city. The free public event will include Mayor Gregor Robertson officially proclaiming the Day of Laughter and a laughing yoga class. The event starts at 10 a.m. with the laughing yoga session taking place at noon.

Vancouver Biennale is encouraging people attending Thursday's event to take photos and share them on social media using the hashtags #VanBiennale and #VBDayofLaughter.

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