

Vancouver International Sculpture Biennale

Alison Appelbe

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If Vancouver gallery owner Barrie Mowatt was looking for attention—and almost certainly he was—he got it in American Sculptor Dennis Oppenheim's life-size upended church, titled *Device to Root Out Evil*. Suspended—upside-down, its traditional spire stuck in the grass—over a public plaza surrounded by apartment towers in Vancouver's Coal Harbour, the topsy-turvy church is generating the level of controversy that many gallery owners covet.

In April, Oppenheim's New York publicity firm issued a press release saying that the 7.6-metre tall sculpture—but for its positioning, looking every bit a traditional, rural or small-town house of worship—had been purchased by a private foundation for \$300,000 US, and would be permanently installed at this downtown location.

Whoa, said the Vancouver Park Board. As reported in the *Vancouver Sun*, a spokeswoman for the board that runs the parks where most of the thirty or so works in the Vancouver International Sculpture Biennale will be located, said the purchase and siting were not a done deal. In fact, it will be late 2006 before any sale is complete and the city decides whether this or any other sculpture will get a permanent home in a city park.

Device to Root Out Evil is not new to controversy. A few years ago, California's Stanford University accepted the sculpture, then withdrew the offer over concern for

the "emotional impact" it might have on the surrounding San Francisco area community. The same controversy has followed the sculpture to Vancouver. The park board's Susan Gordon told the *Sun*: "There's been a fair amount of offence taken as it being a somewhat cynical look at Christianity."

Oppenheim rejected this suggestion of blasphemy, claiming instead that critics are censoring the work with their own projections. He sees the piece, he said, as "enlarging the amplitude of religious convictions by showing the church as an aggressive instrument against what lies below the ground—the devil." Oppenheim's other piece at the biennale, rising over the English Bay waterfront, is no less imposing. And *Engagement Rings*, appearing to be two conventional diamond rings of uninspired design, might be seen as mocking an irrepressible cultural obsession.

But while few works so far assembled for the biennale, which runs until the end of 2006, feature obvious triggers, almost all are notable for their sheer size.

Mowatt, who operates the Buschlen Mowatt Galleries in Vancouver and Palm Springs, concedes that his goal with this third outdoor sculpture project (and the first not-for-profit), is to attract attention by displaying major works of art — by "the best of the best in their nations"—outside of what he sees as an often tired museum culture.

Mowatt hopes the biennale will especially appeal to unlikely museum-goers—a passer-by who might comment: "What's this piece

of shit?" or "Take my photograph (in front of it)." A plan, underway in spring, was to equip each sculpture with new cell-phone technology by which viewers can hear commentary ("via interactive dialogues between celebrities") and contribute to text and picture messaging. But above all, Mowatt wants the biennale to be inclusive.

One artist that achieves this goal is Vietnam's Khang Pham-New, whose two pieces, *Realm of Passion* and *Curvilinearity*, get maximum exposure at a high-traffic location in Kitsilano Beach Park. At once elegant and animated, they invite touching—even clambering through by children small enough to negotiate, in the case of *Curvilinearity*, an opening created by the stone swirl. Mowatt, while a little uneasily with the conventionality of these pieces, conceded that a visiting film crew loved their photographic potential.

On Harbour Green in Coal Harbour, New York sculptor John Clement's *Kini's Playground* is an open knot of metal spans that positively invite climbers and crawlers. This child-friendly piece is every bit the kind of "hands-on" art that Mowatt is after.

And nothing pays homage to size like American sculptor John Henry's *Jaguar*, sited in Devonian Park on busy Georgia Street, at the entrance to Stanley Park. This bright-red 26-metre-high steel sculpture is all about towering force and strong angles in a park fronted with impressive glass-curtained high-rises.

More figurative, and possibly easier to relate to, is Sorel Etrog's *King and Queen*, also located on Harbour Green. This piece depicts two stylised figures rigidly ensconced in a position that suggests an imposing throne-room. Given that the subjects are supposedly human, the piece appears outlandishly large. Etrog is a Romanian-born Canadian living in Toronto.

But if accessibility is the ultimate virtue of the biennale, nothing may beat the pieces by French sculptor Bernard Venet. They include two massive sculptures in his steel "arc" series, deliberately sited on opposite shores of the boating channel that connects English Bay with False Creek.

In the north, on Sunset

Beach, is Venet's single cluster, titled *217.5 arc x 13*, emitting a suitably industrial look in this former industrial area. On the south side, three loose clusters, called *3 arcs x 5*, have settled into the grass in Vanier Park. Both, with their warm colour and sinuosity, almost demand photography. If a peoples' choice award were made today, the arcs would likely take the prize.

Three much smaller welded-steel pieces by German artist Markus Schaller are sited among trees and paths on a picturesque grass slope above Sunset Beach. In each of these pieces, titled *Figure in a Circle*, a stick-like human is embraced in a hoop that looks as though it's about to roll into the sea. They display a delicacy or fragility exceptional in the biennale, and are arguably the most "art-like" of all the works so far installed. Etched into their "metallic skin" are brief passages of German text or poetry.

By summer, when the biennale is in full swing, these and other pieces will be joined by Polish artist Magdalena Abakanowicz's twelve headless figures, titled *Vancouver Ancestors Shadow*, and a brick installation by American Sol LeWitt to be assembled by Jewish youth attending of the 2006 Maccabi Games in Vancouver.

And three billboards from Yoko Ono are promised. How these qualify as sculpture remains unclear—but they will certainly advance the biennale goal of generating publicity. ←

Alison APPELBE is a Vancouver-based freelance writer and photographer with a leaning to art, architecture, culture (in the broadest sense) and, when possible, European travel.

Dennis OPPENHEIM, *Device to Root Out Evil*, Vancouver International Sculpture Biennale. Photo: Alison Appelbe

Bernard VENET, *3 arcs x 5*, Vancouver International Sculpture Biennale. Photo: Alison Appelbe

Sorel ETROG, *King and Queen*, Vancouver International Sculpture Biennale. Photo: Alison Appelbe

