

Outdoor Art for the Avid Indoorsman

OUR INTREPID CRITIC MAKES PUBLIC ART INTERACTIVE WITHOUT ONCE GETTING CAUGHT BY BLAKE ANDREWS

Local art lovers should make a beeline to see Ai Weiwei's *Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads* now on display at the Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art. It's not often that an internationally renowned project lands in Eugene, and access couldn't be easier. Entrance through the museum's north gate is free and open to the public.

Tucked along the museum's belly, the mammoth heads feel somewhat congested — this is a campus courtyard after all, not Beijing's Imperial Retreat. Despite the cramped environs, the installation is remarkable. Mounted high on thick knobby posts, the bronze busts dominate the central space below, the faces knit with recessed holds.

On a recent visit I found the impulse to climb almost irresistible. Perhaps thinking the same, JSMA has installed a sea of "Do Not Touch" alerts at ground level. In the end my curiosity got the best of me — a light rap of the knuckles confirmed the pieces are hollow — before I left them undisturbed.

Circle of Animals is here until June, but the local area remains rife with other public sculptures. Unlike Ai Weiwei's, they're here indefinitely. Most are open and viewable 24/7, and the newer ones haven't yet mossed over.

Here's a quick survey of a few installed this millennium, with a focus on accessibility.

Built in 2016, Springfield's "**Gateway Flame**" is one of the freshest on the scene. With its large metal basket perched high atop steel scaffolding, the flame shares the rough morphology of a Weiwei animal totem. But the resemblance stops there. Portland sculptor Devin Laurence Field's piece is inspired less by the zodiac than its vernacular surroundings: a tall forest of signposts advertising various chain hotels, gas stations and restaurants.

The "Gateway Flame" is roughly the same height as the commercial signs — 62 feet — and a visitor might be forgiven for initially lumping it with the other businesses: McDonald's, Chevron, "Gateway Flame" ... etc.

But a visit to the site quashes this notion. The concrete pedestal is set in a weedy patch of gravel, hemmed in by unruly bushes and concrete berms. Cars and noise buzz by in all directions. From below the "Flame" is mostly occluded by its huge red supports looming skyward. A seatwell and plaza are scheduled for development here, but for now this is perhaps the loneliest, least inviting plot in the Gateway area.

Just up the highway from "Gateway Flame" sits a new sculpture better scaled for humans. Lillian Pitt's "**River**" incorporates Native American themes, etchings and river features in a blunt sweep of concrete and steel at the edge of the Willamette River. Unfortunately its location, dead center in I-5, prevents any clear viewing. In the passing lane at moderate speeds a driver has a couple seconds to see it whiz by. If in the far lane, at full speed, or — the case with most traffic — not looking for local art, forget it. And don't bother with a walking approach. Access is barred by iron fencing.

The pedestal beneath "River" is supposedly inscribed with the names of nine local native tribes, but after multiple trips on this section of interstate the most I can gather is a single word: "Kalapuya," the native tribe now largely displaced. The Kalapuya word *Whilamut* — "place where the water ripples and runs fast" — was the precursor to *Willamette*. Cars run fast here too.

Other nearby structures are more accessible.

Large camas basket sculptures at either end of the bridge by Rhiza A+D and D.L. Field (the "Flame") offer limited pedestrian access, but both are tall and set back far enough to provide a good vantage to drivers. A lottery billboard and electrical towers in the background serve as unintended readymades.

Back at the UO campus, Jud Turner's "**Great Blue Heron**" gives me a chuckle whenever I walk down 13th Avenue. The assemblage of bike parts and metal beams into a near-perfect likeness of nature is uncanny. That warped steel rear crest — pure magic! The frame's loose spacing

seems suitable for climbing, but I've never tried. As it's near the university, I'm guessing the heron's been scaled during an early morning escapade or two. In daylight hours it marks the entrance to the small commercial strip adjoining campus, a subtle visual cue to eastbound travelers.

Pete Helzer's "**The Storyteller**" (aka **Ken Kesey Memorial**) is perhaps the most inviting public sculpture in Eugene. At all times of day I see people engaged with this piece. They sit or stand on it, or lie prone nearby with a blanket of wares, or bliss out on Kesey Square in some other inscrutable way.

The contrast with other downtown sculptures is glaring. I have never seen any person interact with Robert Maki's "**Trapezoid E**," Jan Zach's "**Three Standing Forms**" or Chris Bruch's "**Shortest Distance**" (the giant mirrored pencil shaving at the base of the Wayne Morse Federal Courthouse).

Whether by location, scale or design, "The Storyteller" exudes an inanimate charisma these others lack. Helzer's LTD bus mall "**Rosa Parks**" has it too, as does Jim Carpenter's "**Eugene Skinner**" statue across the street. Together these three anchor the public space of downtown Eugene.

A short bike ride across the river brings you to Larry Kirkland's "**Game Plan**," installed in 2004 on the north side of Autzen shortly after its most recent renovation. Playbook Xs and Os face each other across an imaginary line of scrimmage, yin and yang caught in the eternal duality of the gridiron.

And these figures cycle through a double life. During home games they're a hive of activity, with people mugging, leaning, climbing, poking and otherwise enjoying the stone forms. Any other day of the year "Game Plan" is deserted.

My favorite recent public sculpture is not technically public, and it might not be a sculpture. But it's uplifting nonetheless. I'm talking about the strange cluster of yellow birds installed last year outside the Kaiser-Permanente office at 13th Avenue and Olive Street.

The metal figures are strung from the ceiling in various postures and directions. Any real flock like this would get nowhere, and the curse applies to passersby as some linger below longer than planned, looking up in wonder.

Who made these birds? Who paid for them? How did they wind up here? Like real birds it's hard to read the intention. I've searched the nearby walls for information and even asked inside. No one seems to know.

Oh well. With a short hop you can reach a few and set them swinging. ■

Blake Andrews is a photographer in Eugene; see his blog, B, at blakeandrews.blogspot.com.

'GATEWAY FLAME' IN SPRINGFIELD

