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WANDERING EYE

Laying a turd

HARBOURFRONT – A native chief and a cowboy, figurines in red and yellow plastic, gaze out over Lake Ontario from the concrete in front of the Power Plant Gallery entrance. Below their feet rise two cage-like towers of rusting metal rods, attached by a pipe with faucet handles and garish orange water tanks. At the foot of the one cage lies a manhole lid, held down by a dumbbell weight; on the other, what looks like a power box is the base for a silver plaque proclaiming the sculpture as the winning entry in the Ontario Young Artists competition; a City of Toronto logo, below the text, stamps its legitimacy of the enterprise.



Do they look official to you?

PHOTOGRAPHY: NATALIA LAVLINA

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It's a mundane Friday afternoon, July 15, at Harbourfront. Just 20 minutes ago, a rusting truck crawled out of a parking lot and slowly made its way along the boardwalk, pulling up directly before the Power Plant. A man and woman in hard hats and coveralls emerged from the truck and quickly began working. First item out was a welder, plugged into an outlet along the wall. "Do you know what they're doing?" ask two suspicious women at a nearby bench. Staff wearing Harbourfront Property t-shirts are less concerned as they wander by nonchalantly. In the meantime, the sculpture, in three separate pieces, is tugged and prodded out of the truck. The workers rapidly busy themselves welding the pieces together.

One of the women runs into the gallery. Within minutes, an employee comes out to inquire about the construction. Satisfied with their explanation, he returns inside. Another person watches through the window. Only when the installation is complete and the truck has safely made its getaway do a few bystanders come over to investigate the new sculpture, as does the young employee.

The gallery now senses it has been had. "It was a little suspect, they were in a hurry," the employee explains. "They said they were with this student show, but that was last weekend." Clearly not suspect enough, for the pair have disappeared and the gallery now has an audaciously ugly mass of metal to deal with.

A mass that Tex Kirkwood, the sculptor, fondly calls a turd. "I don't consider them sculptures," he says, "I consider them turds, in a class with all their cousins that have actually been paid for." Those cousins being public art (often derided as "plop art"). "A lot of times I'll drive by public art, especially the metal kind, and I have two thoughts – one, I could have made that, and two, it's really fucking ugly."

But art isn't all this is about. It's the convergence of authority and outfit which really intrigues Kirkwood – that a hard hat and coveralls equals instant anonymity. And legitimacy. Which is why, on Tuesday evening, as Kirkwood rummaged for supplies at a construction site, a police car drove by with nary a glance. "You're wearing a hard hat, so people assume that you're supposed to be doing what you're doing. When are you invisible?" he asks. "When do you just go below people's radar? 'Oh, I'm trucking through the mall, I don't care what that guy's doing with the power box, it's not of concern to me.'"

With that confidence and a lifelong love of pranksterism, he's already successfully hoodwinked Ottawa's City Hall (where one of his prank installations stayed up for three days). And while the logistics of an ambush on Toronto City Hall were beyond him, he's still immensely satisfied with this drop. "If nothing else, I got to do welding in a very public place."

A seemingly random bystander suddenly becomes an expert. "They were much smoother in Ottawa, with the security guards. But I think I like this sculpture of Mr. Kirkwood's better." Unfortunately for Toronto art lovers, by Saturday evening, the sculpture had been removed. **LEA**

ZELTSERMAN
