



Art is All

*“Art washes away from the soul,
the dust of everyday life.”*

Picasso

*Neuhaus Fountain by
artist Guyonn Murrill
in Sam Houston Park.
Photo by Julie Coan*



Around Us

by Julie Coan

That statement is particularly true of public art because of its placement and accessibility. Houstonians are very fortunate to have numerous opportunities to see and appreciate art in public spaces. In downtown Houston alone, there are over seventy pieces of public art.

So many of us pass by these pieces every day, but know so little about the artists or the effort that went into creating the work. Last year I had the pleasure of producing a documentary for HoustonPBS called, "Art is All Around Us: Downtown." The goal of the show was to celebrate public art in Houston, to help people realize how public art enriches our civic life and encourage people to go downtown and discover the treasures that are in our own backyard. We interviewed local artists and art experts to get the history of several prominent and not-so-prominent works.



Floyd Newsum
Photo: Fujio Watanabe



"The Art Guys" Jack Massing (left) and Michael Galbreth
Photograph: Fujio Watanabe

With The Art Guys, Jack Massing and Michael Galbreth, as our guides, our first stop was Main Street Square where we talked with Floyd Newsum, a professor of art at the University of Houston Downtown and the creator of *Planter and Stems*. The planter sits across from Foley's where the old Lamar Hotel used to stand. Newsum says the colorful and brightly painted stainless steel planter represents people like Jesse Jones, the Worthams, and the Abercrombies, who were instrumental in Houston's development. Newsum did some research of his own and found that there were other, lesser-known entrepreneurs who had an impact on their communities; people like O.P. DeWalt, a civil rights leader and owner of the Lincoln Theater, the first black theater in Houston, and restaurateur and philanthropist, Felix Tijerina, owner of Felix's Mexican Restaurant.



The Planter in Main Street Square by Floyd Newsum

Photograph: Julie Coan

A Stem by Floyd Newsum

Photograph: Julie Coan



ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Julie Coan has been a producer with HoustonPBS since 1996, and has received over 30 national, regional, and local awards for journalistic excellence, including seven Emmy Awards. Since 2002, she has served as Managing Producer, overseeing local productions at Channel 8 including their prime-time community affairs program, 'the connection'. Julie serves on the board of directors for a number of local and statewide organizations including the Lone Star Emmy Chapter for which she serves as the Regional Vice-President of the Houston Area.



The Disappearing Gnomes
by Paul Kittelson in the
Courtyard between One
and Two Allen Center

Photograph: Julie Coan



Paul Kittelson

Photo: Fujio
Watanabe

Nestled between two towering buildings that make up Allen Center reside seven dwarf-like creatures that are known to dwell in the Earth. What are these creatures lurking about? They are referred to as the *Disappearing Gnomes* and they are not your ordinary garden variety, either. Artist and University of Houston Professor Paul Kittelson has created a magical scene amidst the hustle and bustle of the work place with his fairy-tale styled *Disappearing Gnomes*. These whimsical creatures are molded statues that appear to be coming up out of the ground greeting patrons from a hard day's work. According to Kittelson, they are a bit of a self portrait, with large noses and Nordic features. While some Houstonians may find them a bit strange, others say that they add a spice to downtown.

Back in the early 1980s, when local artist David Adickes created *Virtuoso*, the soaring cement cello player located in front of the Lyric Center, he had no idea what a commotion it would create. Commissioned by the Lyric Center's then owner, Joe Russo, Adickes was asked to create a sculpture that represented the arts. He designed a number of pieces that represented different aspects of the arts but Russo thought the cello player was the best of the bunch.

After its debut in 1983, people loved it and appreciated its whimsical and playful nature. Critics, on the other hand, hated it. Russo was so concerned about the criticism that he hired a company to poll Houstonians to get their reaction. The pollster went around with pictures of several prominent pieces that had been recently added to the downtown landscape including pieces like the colorful triangle at the Chase Tower by renowned Spanish artist Joan Miro and the multi-colored resin sculpture in front of the Louisiana building by French artist Jean Dubuffet. Turns out 67 percent of those surveyed liked *Virtuoso* the most and the Miro, the most expensive piece, was liked the least. Russo was satisfied with the results, and since then *Virtuoso* has become the face of downtown on a number of marketing brochures used by the Greater Houston Convention and Visitor's Bureau.



David Adickes



The back side of *Virtuoso* by David Adickes

Photograph: Katy Oliveira



Personage and Birds at the JP Morgan Chase Tower by Joan Miro

Photograph: Julie Coan

Monument to the Phantom at the Louisiana Building by Jean Dubuffet

Photograph: Julie Coan



The *Seven Wonders*, like the artist who created them, are fascinating and complex. From a distance, Mel Chin's seven stainless steel towers seem like a series of lanterns dotting the western wall of the Wortham Center. Upon closer inspection, you quickly realize that each tower is an intricate collection of 150 children's drawings stenciled in stainless steel.

Chin had been asked to create seven monumental structures that convey heroic ideas of manufacturing, technology, philanthropy and other areas that the founding fathers had been involved in that made Houston a great city. The piece was part of the Sesquicentennial Park project—a project that was years behind schedule. Many saw this as a public relations problem for the park and the city. Much to Mel Chin's credit, he used this as opportunity. One of the areas he felt was missing from the original list that made Houston a great city was education. At the same time, he started thinking back on his own childhood and recalled his involvement in the Houston Livestock and Rodeo Art Exhibition. He says it was that exhibition that made him feel less isolated and more engaged in the world of art. With that notion, he decided to use this opportunity as a platform to give voice to those children who had been born in the year of the sesquicentennial.

All HISD children who had been born in 1986 were asked to submit illustrations of those original concepts. Since they received thousands of submissions, Chin says one of the most difficult parts of the project was selecting which illustrations would be included in the *Seven Wonders*. In his unbridled enthusiasm for the themes, one child came up with the idea for an invention he would like to see in the future. There was a lot of discussion about how this invention would fit into the project. It finally made the cut. In the technology tower, you will find "The Butt Warmer," complete with an on and off switch.

For Chin, the most important aspect of the *Seven Wonders* was the confirmation that he, as an artist, is not alone. Through this project, he was able to give a platform for the voice of others to share their vision of what makes Houston a great city, butt warmer and all.



Seven Wonders in Sesquicentennial Park by Mel Chin

Photograph: Julie Coan

Sometimes there's a piece of public art that comes along and challenges our perception of what those two words really represent. Dean Ruck's *Big Bubble* is one of those pieces. When you think of public art, you imagine an artist creating something and the public reacting to that vision. With the *Big Bubble*, its very existence is dependent on the participation of the individual. So what does that all mean?

Behind the Wortham Center, hidden in one of the alcoves on the Preston Street Bridge, is a red button. There's no label, no markings saying what happens when you press the button. The very fact that it's red starts your mind questioning whether it should be pressed at all. Those brave enough to disregard that "don't do it" voice in their heads are treated to one of the most clever and engaging pieces of public art in all of Houston. Pressing the button releases a burst of air into the bayou creating an enormous bubble that explodes out of the water. Like David Adicke's *Virtuoso*, the *Big Bubble* has taken on a life of its own and become part of Houston folklore. Ruck, an artist who works as a project manager at the University of Houston, says he's heard all kinds of stories about what people think is lurking below. He's heard everything from old military hardware and bombs going off to sharks in the bayou. He's even seen fishermen running up the banks to drop a line hoping to catch Moby Dick.

I should warn you, pressing the red button can be highly addictive, especially if you choose to hit it just as an unsuspecting pedestrian is making his way along the promenade. It's cruel, but very funny to watch! That's the joy of this piece. Who doesn't like a good scare every now and then, right?



Big Bubble in Buffalo Bayou by Dean Ruck

Photograph: Julie Coan



Dean Ruck
Photograph:
Fujio Watanabe



Fountain at Prairie and Travis by Elena Cusi Wortham Photograph: Julie Coan



Elena Cusi
Wortham

Photograph:
Fujio Watanabe

One of the amazing things public art can do is transport us to other times and places. The *Seven Wonders* reminds us of the past and Elena Cusi Wortham's fountain at the corner of Travis and Prairie is a beautiful reminder of the natural world. Part of the Cotswold Project, an initiative intended to introduce a new type of environment in downtown that was more intimately scaled, Cusi Wortham's fountain brings color and vitality to what would otherwise be a blank, concrete garage wall. Instead, the fountain is a rich, sensuous swirl of color and water. The fountain is really best enjoyed at night. The way the fountain's light reflects the shimmering water as it gently trickles down the beautifully crafted ceramic swirling tiles provides a much needed oasis in the middle of an urban landscape.

Our last stop on the tour is Market Square Park, the former site of City Hall and the Market House, where Houstonians once came to buy their fruits, vegetables and meats. It was really the hub of activity for the city in the early days. But by the early 1990s, the market was long gone and city hall had moved to its current location after the original building was destroyed in a fire. What once had been a center of activity was now a vacant patch of land.

Caroline Huber and Michael Peranteau, co-directors at DiverseWorks, had their office right around the corner from the park and decided the space needed some help. Through private donations and grants, they collaborated with several artists to revitalize the park.

Artist Richard Turner, with the help of many people, collected fragments of buildings that were being torn down around the city and arranged them in patterns throughout the sidewalks.



Photograph: Julie Coan

On the perimeter of the park, Malou Faló, a Texas artist, added color and vibrancy with benches made of painted ceramic tiles that depict flowers and displays of fruit. These pieces help us imagine what Market House was like. The fountains in front of the benches were added later as part of the Cotswold Project.

Inside the park, on benches designed by Richard Turner, photographers Paul Hester and his wife Lisa Hardaway arranged photographs, some old and some new, into four different themes. One collection documents the history of the site and the buildings that were there. Another shows businesses in Houston and another the architectural history of the city. The last theme shows ordinary Houstonians throughout the years. Hardaway and Hester went to the Metropolitan Research Center at the Houston Public Library to find photographs that showed the diversity of the city. They didn't want this just to be the mayors and the CEOs but wanted everyday people represented. So there are pictures of people at barbecues, picnics and birthday parties. It's an incredible window into a side of our city's history that we don't often get to see.

The centerpiece of the park is *Points of View*, by artist James Surls. Surls felt the piece would bring people's eyes up and lead them into the city and be a hopeful and visionary piece.

There are hundreds of pieces of public art spread out all around the city, each with its own story. We hope that "Art is All Around Us" will continue to spotlight the efforts of the very talented artists in our community and that you'll get out there and explore these treasures in our own backyard! 📷



Malou Faló's benches and fountain in Market Square Park

Photograph: Julie Coan



Paul Hester

Photograph:
Fujio Watanabe

Photographs in Market Square Park

Photograph: Julie Coan

James Surls
Photograph:
www.jamessurls.com



James Surls'
Points of View
in Market
Square Park

Photograph:
Julie Coan



For more information on Public Art, including maps and tour information, you can visit our website at www.houstonpnh.org/publicart. If you'd like to order a copy of Art is All Around Us: Downtown you can call 713-743-1811.