



"Truth, lies and public art"

by Julianna Thibodeaux

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If you're not looking, you'll probably miss it. Along the guard rail flanking the curve of Massachusetts Avenue as it turns into Bellefontaine, the end of the line, so to speak, for Indianapolis' Mass Ave Cultural District, a couple dozen slightly oversized cardinals perch on the rail, almost as uniform as a company of redcoats. The sculpture, entitled "Cardinal" and created by Brian McCutcheon, is one of four new installments (one not yet complete) in the outdoor rotating sculpture "gallery" begun by the Arts Council of Indianapolis in 2003.

This round represents an extended reach for the Arts Council, which partnered with Riley Area Development and the Mass Ave Streetscape Arts and Programming Committee to, according to the press release, "rethink the goals of and strategies for administering the portion of their public art program that allows for temporary art installations on the Avenue." Artists from Michigan, Ohio, Kentucky and Illinois were invited to submit designs this time, in addition to those from Indiana. Artists were promised a \$5,000 stipend for installing the work. As it turns out, only Indiana artists made the cut, including McCutcheon and his plastic cardinals. I finally found those cardinals after scanning the area first by car and then on foot.

Once I spotted them, at no time was I fooled that they were real. It could be the artist never intended us to believe in them as trompe l'oeil sculpture. Rather, they're a whimsical exercise, introducing the suggestion of fauna in an area largely devoid of greenscape or animal life, as pleasant as the avenue is. But is whimsy what the avenue needs? Its artist-interpreted tires fit that bill already, and these continue to stop pedestrians with their smile-inspiring light-heartedness up and down the avenue for several blocks. One could argue the effort the Arts Council and its partners are making should inspire something more profound, or at least more provocative.

Closer to that aim, Jamie Pawlus' "Truth/Lies" is thought-provoking whimsy. A pair of "suggestion boxes," one orange (Truths) and the other blue (Lies), the sculptures are installed next to newspaper boxes. You don't have to look hard to see these; although I think audiences "get it" without the context of the other boxes. Their location outside the Starbucks says enough.

Finally, "Circle Canoe," by James Darr, comes closest to fulfilling the aims of good public art: It doesn't overwhelm its surroundings and yet it stands out and invites viewers in. The donut-shaped "canoe," placed at the corner of Massachusetts Avenue and East Street, appears to be floating on air, suspended on stilts so that the viewer can contemplate the canoe as if from under water. The canoe suggests stasis: A circular sailing vessel isn't likely to go anywhere. Let's hope the Arts Council's collaborative efforts do.

The sculptures, once complete, will remain on view for 18 to 24 months. (The fourth sculpture, "Knotted Lamp," by Andrew Hunter, is not yet installed.) Call the Arts Council at 317-631-3301 or visit www.indyarts.org for more information.

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