

Seattle Post-Intelligencer

Seasonal sculptures have locals hog-wild for ... bringin' home the bacon

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P-I REPORTER

Critics who say citywide fiberglass installations -- in Seattle, those would be pigs, nutcrackers and carousel ponies -- don't count as public art agree there's at least one saving grace: they're not around long.

They think the statues come and go, their ubiquity a temporary blemish on the urban palette.

They are wrong.

Years after 170 pigs infiltrated Seattle sidewalks, some still can be found in residents' gardens, in the lobby of Antioch University, in front of a police precinct station and even bolted to a Lake Washington boat dock.

After they've been sold at auctions benefiting local charities, some of their comrades-in-art grace corners in homes overlooking Puget Sound and porches in Phinney Ridge. A row of five nutcrackers on a roof overlooking East Marginal Way makes for an eye-catching commuter distraction, while other nutcrackers greet shoppers at Pacific Place.

"We do these things so often, we lose sight these are really works of art," said Anita Woo, spokeswoman for the Downtown Seattle Association.

In a slap to the face of most art critics who consider the statues to be the lowest of lowbrow, people snap up the figures with gusto, prompted by philanthropic urges and/or the need to prolong a sense of wonder.



GRANT M. HALLER / P-I

Pete Buck shields "In a Pig's I-5" from the rain on his dock on Lake Washington.

This year's recipient of auction returns for the third consecutive year is the Northwest Center, a non-profit that provides services for developmentally disabled children and adults. Along with the Downtown Seattle Association and Pacific Northwest Ballet, the Northwest Center is poised to unveil today the latest platoon of 60 nutcrackers, the next incarnation of Seattle's love affair with seasonal art.

Beginning with fiberglass cows in Chicago in 1999, U.S. cities have in turn appropriated similar themes. Same pattern every time: take an animal or object, use it as a blank canvas and let the artists go amok. Soon, crabs skittered around Baltimore, geckos twitched around Orlando, horses lapped the city of Lexington, Ky., and big apples took the bite off New York for a little while.

Seattle's affair began with the Pike Place Market Foundation-driven "Pigs on Parade" in 2001, which raked in more than \$400,000 in auction proceeds. Since then, ponies and nutcrackers have found their way off the public sidewalks and entryways they once inhabited into private homes, while some remain in the public domain.

Peter Buck fell in love with the pigs early on. His law firm, Buck & Gordon, was a sponsor of a pig with hog-themed watercolor renditions of well-known classic and modern art plastered on its generous body.

Boaters passing Buck's dock on Lake Washington slow down to gawk at a big pink smiling pig, impervious to the elements.

Buck bought "In a Pig's I-5" at a fundraiser and bolted it to his dock, the weathered maps on its body fading and cracking under the brilliant summer sun and the winds that whip off the lake.

"I totally believe in whimsy and serendipitous things," Buck said. "People love to come by and look at it. They love to be photographed with it."

The I-5 pig wasn't in the online or live auctions, having had its nose broken in the line of duty. It resurfaced at the fundraiser Buck attended in the spring of 2002. He bought another pig there that stays in his backyard.

While some swine left the state, others stayed closer to home. A black-and-white pig aptly named "Copper" -- a switch turns on a spinning light on its head -- sits in front of the West Precinct, a gift to the Seattle Police Department from attorney Anne Bremner, a former prosecutor whose clientele includes police officers.



MERYL SCHENKER / P-I

Anne Bremner, a former prosecutor whose clientele includes police officers, donated "Copper" to the Seattle Police Department's West Precinct. A switch turns on a spinning light on its head.

She snapped up "Copper" on an online auction -- her only serious competition was a police sergeant. He backed off when he found out she was buying it for the department. For Bremner, it was important that the pig remain public art.

"I think that's why I did it. The thought of that pig being at someone's house as opposed to being in its rightful place with the Seattle police didn't sit right with me," Bremner said. "I hope they have "Copper" for a long, long time."

"Miss Coco" -- short for Commitment to Community -- lights up Antioch University. Originally named "The Pig of the Future" during the parade, it was renamed after an alumni contest.

"We're serving a greater good than our own and this is about having something to share with the community," said Michele Norris, director of development at Antioch.

But for others, the public art has become the focus of their private collections.

The "Nutcracker March," which debuted last year, found instant fans in Mike and Renee Bang and their two daughters. It helped that the couple collected Steinbach and Ulbricht nutcrackers, a love they've shared since they first started dating 18 years ago. The Bangs will have their own version of a Nutcracker march in their home when they take their 40-odd collectible nutcrackers out of storage for holiday decorations.

The Burien family made a trip to Seattle to see the statues, taking pictures that would end up in one of their scrapbooks and photo albums.

"Museums and galleries, you can do those at any time, but this is a one-shot deal. It's unique," Renee Bang said. "It brings tongue-in-cheek to the city, a little bit of whimsy and adds a lot of color. What I like about these unique installations is that they're here and gone, like nature."

Except that for her and her family, they're not quite gone.

Mike Bang treated himself to one of the nutcrackers for his 50th birthday -- "Mono" by Courtnee Papastathis. It caught the family's eye because of the hand-cut black-and-white tiles that happen to blend perfectly with their home interior. Renee is campaigning for it to be the family's Christmas tree this year.

Over in Queen Anne, another couple fused their enthusiasm for a hobby to their art collection.

The "Crosswords Pig" was a natural fit for puzzle enthusiasts Heather Andersen and Leslie Christian, who bonded with the pig after seeing it in front of Benaroya Hall.

They put the pig in their house at first, decided its girth was too much and moved it to the deck, then the garden.

"It's perfect. It's kind of the centerpiece of the back garden," Andersen said. "It makes me smile when I come in the house. I think it gets people talking. They're aware that art isn't just something that hangs on the wall in the museum, it's something you interact with and it's part of our everyday experience."

Next year, the pigs make a comeback to Seattle in conjunction with Pike Place Market's centennial celebration and the Chinese Year of the Pig.

READER PIX

We have snapped photos of just a couple of fiberglass animals and nutcrackers we found around town -- years after they made their parade debut. We know there are a lot more out there living second lives somewhere else! If you've stumbled across one in a place other than its original spot, send your pictures to readerphotos@seattlepi.com.

COMING UP

- Forty of the works in Pacific Northwest Ballet's "Nutcracker March" will be unveiled from 5:30 to 8 tonight in the lobby of Benaroya Hall. The event is free and open to the public. Artists will be on hand to talk about their original work on the statues, which will then be marched off to downtown locations, where they will be displayed Nov. 24 to Jan. 2.
- The eBay online auction of the nutcrackers will run from Nov. 29 to Dec. 20. They ship in January, or later, if there's any damage that needs to be repaired from their time on the street.
- For more information: nutcrackermarch.org, tinyurl.com/y4xc7o, downtownseattle.com



GRANT M. HALLER / P-I

Michael Violette works on a Nutcracker in a storage area for a last minute touch up at the Northwest Center before the Nutcracker March 2006 auction begins. Sixty creatively designed nutcrackers by local artists will go up for bid on eBay during November and December.

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