

ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

Sunday, June 28, 2009

New sculpture park downtown gets it right

BY DAVID BONETTI

Citygarden, the new sculpture park downtown on two formerly forlorn blocks of the Gateway Mall, should be a delight to lovers of modern and contemporary sculpture and those who just want to hang out in an urbane public park.

The Gateway Foundation, which is fast becoming the dominant force in the city in the visual and urban arts, put about \$40 million into the project, including the \$25 million to 30 million necessary to build it and the estimated \$12 million to buy the sculpture. (The city, which owned the land, keeps the park's site improvements, but the foundation retains ownership of the art.)

Credit for the design's success goes to the Gateway Foundation, which had a vision for what makes a successful urban park with cultural amenities, and to Warren Byrd of Nelson Byrd Woltz Landscape Architects, who knew how to transform that vision into reality.

When I first saw Byrd's plans for the garden nearly two years ago I was concerned that it would prove too busy. Byrd seemed to want to cram everything into a mere two blocks. Not only 20-odd sculptures, some of them quite large, but three water features, a schematic re-creation of the local riverine topography superimposed on memories of the 19th century urban grid, a restaurant and a large screen for art videos. I feared an over-determined space where every step was programmed and freedom to discover and play stifled.

I guess that's why they leave design to the professionals. Byrd understood exactly how much could be comfortably incorporated into the 2.9 acres without crowding any single element of it.

AN URBAN OASIS

To be sure, this is an urban park, which means that it accepts and thrives in density. If you want to experience sculpture in a rural setting, we are lucky that we have Laumeier Sculpture Park in St. Louis County. Citygarden is what it says it is: a city garden.

As such it will function in all the ways urban parks do, from accommodating brown-baggers at lunchtime to providing a pleasantly verdant two blocks for joggers to letting children cool off on hot summer days in its spray fountain.

What makes it unique in an American city is the art installed among the trees and fountains. The Gateway Foundation prefers to see Citygarden as an urban oasis that happens to include sculpture, but let's make it clear: it is a sculpture park that has set a high aesthetic quality for itself.

There are no "statues" in Citygarden. Everything in Citygarden is real sculpture, art. Not everything here is a masterpiece, of course, and not everyone will love everything equally. There are a few pieces I could do without. Was it necessary to include two nearly identical Julian Opie LED reliefs, delightful as they are?

But it would be hard to imagine anyone who couldn't find something in it to like.

DIVERSE ARTWORK

The sculpture chosen for Citygarden is remarkably diverse. It features work by artists of several generations from Europe, America and Asia. There is figural and abstract work, and work of both great seriousness and whimsy. It has all been sited to its benefit. As you walk through the grounds, you get to see sculptures from more than one vantage point.

A test of the installation's success is that you don't necessarily notice the wide range of art you're experiencing. Thoughtful landscaping makes good neighbors of individual sculptures that in a museum or gallery might not be so happy together.

What you won't find in Citygarden is anything truly avant-garde, conceptual or site-specific. That is a shortcoming. Considering the challenges artists have made of sculpture in recent decades, this is a conservative, safe selection. There is no jolt of excitement on seeing another big red Mark di Suvero sculpture, not in 2009.

The foundation could have gone another way. It could have commissioned artists like Maya Lin or Andy Goldsworthy, who use the landscape as part of their work to make site-specific pieces. Or a sky-viewing pavilion by the visionary James Turrell. There is no Jeff Koons, Charles Ray or Chris Burden.

But it didn't, and within the limits of its chosen aesthetic, the foundation made some good choices. The Gateway Foundation's board selected the works. Composed of 10 members, four of them members of the Fischer family, whose patriarch and matriarch established the foundation, it also includes James Burke, former director of the St. Louis Art Museum; Paul Ha, director of the Contemporary Art Museum; and architect Gyo Obata.

Everyone will have his or her own favorites. I'll bet that those 10 and under will love Tom Claassen's two white bunnies. Here are a few of mine:



1. "Eros Bendato" (1999) by Igor Mitoraj (born 1944). This giant bronze head ("Eros Bandaged") has been sited at the Eighth and Market street corner of the garden. It rests on its side on a tilted granite disc over which a scrim of water quietly washes. I predict it will be the image of the park most fondly remembered.



2. "La Riviere" (1938-1943) by Aristide Maillol (1861-1944). If this looks familiar, it is because another version of it has been installed in the Museum of Modern Art's sculpture garden in New York City for years. The allegorical image of "The River" is a reclining full-fleshed woman washing her hair in the waters. Installed in the pool outside the Terrace View restaurant, it should become a local favorite.



3. "Four Rectangles Oblique IV" (1979) by George Rickey (1907-2002). Rickey's characteristic kinetic sculptures, a cross between Alexander Calder in their movement and David Smith in their polished steel surfaces, are always an urban delight, their multiple branches responding to the wind.



4. "Femmes au perroquet" (1952) by Fernand Leger (1881-1955). The great cubist painter also made a number of sculptural reliefs. This massive bronze of a densely packed composition of women with a parakeet looks at home on the wall of the Terrace View restaurant.



5. "This Is Bruce and Sarah Walking" (2007) by Julian Opie (2007). This standing LED machine shows the constantly moving image of two stylish young people taking a stroll. Placed at 10th Street at one of the garden's main entrances, it provides a subtle subliminal hint: Come on in and enjoy yourself.