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RAFAEL FRANCISCO SALAS

Tom Otterness' "Immigrant Family," in the 800 block of E. Wisconsin Ave., sheds light on a current issue.

BOULEVARD OF SCULPTED DREAMS

Wisconsin Avenue project redefines
Milwaukee as an art destination

RAFAEL FRANCISCO SALAS SPECIAL TO THE JOURNAL SENTINEL

Human beings are monument makers. Our cities have contained statues, memorials and sculpture since antiquity. They stand as testimony to our shared consciousness and ideals, literally cementing our identities with messages etched in stone and figures cast in precious metal.

In June, Wisconsin Ave. became the locus for 22 sculptures by internationally acclaimed artists. Sculpture Milwaukee is a feat of ambition and aspiration that redefines this city as an arts destination.

The project was brought to life by Stephen Marcus, chairman of the Marcus Corp., and Russell Bowman, the former director of the Milwaukee Art Museum. Together, with additional curators, art galleries, city planners and multiple city departments, the sculptures were acquired from around the world and installed on Wisconsin Ave. between O'Donnell Park and N. 6th St.

A broad spectrum of approaches, from minimalism to tra-

ditional figuration to conceptual and text-based work, are exhibited side by side. It is a significant civic achievement shared with the community at large.

On the street, the artwork must contend with its surroundings. Buildings, noise, trash and traffic surround the sculptures at all times. I was fascinated with this interaction.

Tom Otterness contributed a large, bronze work of an "Immigrant Family" at 875 E. Wisconsin Ave. that fits neatly in a valley between two office buildings, creating a visual

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RAFAEL FRANCISCO SALAS

Santiago Calatrava's "S2," in front of 111 E. Wisconsin Ave. building, gives a sense of motion in steel and aluminum.

Avenue

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frame for this family grouping of father, mother and infant. Otterness' cartoonishly rounded, whimsical figures communicate sophisticated social interactions. Here, the father in top hat and three-piece suit holds two suitcases and looks anxiously at his wife, who in turn gazes down at her child.

The sculpture remarks on the history of immigration in Milwaukee and speaks incisively about immigration as a current issue. Surrounded by buildings housing industry and commerce, this family enters a new world with hope and trepidation.

Utilizing quotidian materials in her work, Jessica Stockholder creates a seamless contrast between the everyday and the elevation of art-as-object. At the edge of a parking lot at N. 4th St. and W. Wisconsin Ave., "Angled Tangle" guides the viewer with industrial bollards in blue and yellow from the sidewalk to her fanciful assemblage. There, viewers find a grouping of antique street lamps hung in haphazard fashion overhead from a red, metal armature. When lit it creates a separated, playful space in an outdoor setting.

Santiago Calatrava, who brought worldwide recognition of his architecture to Milwaukee with his addition to the Milwaukee Art Museum, has also contributed to this exhibit. In front of the 111 E. Wisconsin Ave. building, his spiraling and barbed circular sculpture "S2" unfurls from a bed of flowers. In gray aluminum and stainless steel, it is juxtaposed against the geometric rectangles of the modernist bank building.

Calatrava's signature gesture of transforming inert metal into dynamic motion is certainly evident here, as the sculpture appears to whip and uncoil from its axis. That said, whereas the artist's rendition of motion at

MAM evokes birds, boats and fish in elegant, abstracted ways, this sculpture reminded me of tribal tattoos from the 1990s or the album art of a heavy metal band.

This reflection leads to an issue regarding public art in general, that of controversy. Artwork in the public realm is under scrutiny from all sides, and it is rarely loved universally. Debates surrounding some of Milwaukee's most popular (and infamous) outdoor sculptures in recent memory are numerous and heated.

However, Sculpture Milwaukee has created a model for interaction with the community that may circumvent these hard feelings. The sculptures are only on display for six months. In that time, viewers can interact with them and respond positively or negatively, engaging in vital dialogue and critique, knowing that in a few months the artwork will move on. This can allow communities in Milwaukee to create open dialogues about the sculptures without the risk that they will permanently define a particular street corner.

Sculpture Milwaukee was also thoughtful in creating strategies that enrich the viewer's experience. The group teamed up with the Milwaukee Art Museum to provide docent-led as well as self-guided tours that visitors can access from their phones.

The sculptures also provide succinct text nearby that gives visitors interpretive keys to what the artists were thinking. Curator Marilu Knode, who wrote the text, communicated her goal of guiding visitors toward meaning without distracting from the artwork or turning people off with too much explanation. Considerations like these make this project more powerful and useful for viewers from all communities.

Milwaukee artists

Three Milwaukee artists are

included in this exhibit: Michelle Grabner, Jason Yi and Paul Druecke. Their presence demonstrates that Milwaukee harbors artists of equal standing in national and international art arenas.

Yi's "Legend of the White Snake" was built on site from PVC tubing. The artist remarked that erecting the sculpture on the street allowed passers-by to engage with his artistic process, ask questions about the work, his process and goals.

Druecke's work inhabits O'Donnell Park, looking out over the Milwaukee Art Museum and Lake Michigan itself. "Shoreline Repast" looks like a Wisconsin Historical Marker created by the Wisconsin Historical Society.

Familiar in brown wood with raised golden lettering, the marker is partially sunk into the ground. On it is written a description of how people have joined together on the shores of Lake Michigan to share a meal. On the other side a poetic reflection of a particular breakfast is described. Viewers see the lake through a circle that has been cut out from the sign. From the other side Wisconsin Ave. is precisely framed.

The artwork speaks to our persistent instinct to record the events of our times, our successes, our sadness, our stories and longings. Druecke asks the viewer to reflect on that instinct.

Sculpture Milwaukee plans to continue to realize its vision as a destination to view relevant and vital outdoor sculpture in the future. As an inaugural event, it is a substantive achievement for the city, for all Milwaukeeans and for those who come to see these artworks.

The artworks in "Sculpture Milwaukee" are on view through Oct. 22. For more information visit Sculpture Milwaukee at www.sculpturemilwaukee.com/.

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