

Reflecting on Feats of Strength

By Colton Redtfeldt

Every college student wonders what they're doing in life sometimes. The Western Washington University Outdoor Sculpture Collection's Feats of Strength might help answer that question.

Created by artist Tom Otterness in 1999, Feats of Strength consists of five small bronze-cast people in various positions around Haskell Plaza in front of the Biology Building.

In the sculpture, one of the men is laying down on a rock, another man is sitting on a ledge holding another rock, two men are carrying a large stone together and a woman is holding up a large boulder over her head. Some think that this sculpture might be a reflection of the lives of students at Western.

When it comes to interaction the sculpture is a student favorite.

"In the winter time people will make scarves and things and dress them for the weather... People will post pictures [on Facebook] of them laying on the rocks next to the men mimicking it," said Paul Brower, the Western Gallery's Museum Preservation Specialist for the past 28 years.

Some interactions have been more malevolent than others. Brower recalled a time when a student took a large rock and repeatedly struck it against one of the men. The Western Gallery had to recast part of the sculpture to repair the damage. Brower said that this is the only time the gallery has had to repair this particular piece of art.

Controversy surrounded the sculpture's placement in Haskell Plaza. Canadian landscape architect Arthur Erickson designed the plaza to represent the nearby San Juan Islands and Bellingham Bay. The black bricks are beaches, the red bricks are water and the yellow bricks are the tide lines. The chair of the biology department at the time thought that Otterness' piece would go against the nature-focused style of the area and would be an insult to Erickson. Only after Erickson released a public announcement encouraging the installation of the sculpture was Otterness' piece allowed to be constructed in the area.

Sculptures like Feats of Strength are not exclusive to Western. Otterness has created similar looking sculptures all over the world since his first solo exhibition in 1983. Examples of similar work include Immigrant Family in Toronto, Canada; Life Underground in Brooklyn, New York; Die Überfrau in Münster, Germany; among others. In these sculptures, Otterness has explored themes of death, time, class struggles and the dichotomy between good and evil.

"On a whimsical level, Otterness' five small-scale bronze figures lifting and pushing rocks and/or sitting and lying on a ledge seem to be the faculty and students simply working and relaxing in this University setting," wrote the Western Gallery on their webpage for the sculpture.

Maybe Feats of Strength really does reflect Western students. The lady carrying the large stone could show the great responsibility students carry on their shoulder every day. The man laying on the rock could represent the short times they get a break. The men carrying the stone together can be a representation of teamwork and inclusivity – things encouraged at Western. For some students, their personal feat of strength can be the strength to take on each day and carry their responsibilities.

It's easy to see how people create theories on the meaning behind the piece. For many Western students, however, Feats of Strength isn't some complex commentary on the lives of college-goers. For many students this sculpture, and others in Western's collection, are a daily part of their lives. As students walk past them each day, the art becomes a part of their routine and a daily reminder of where they are and why they do the things they do.

"Sometimes when I walk through there I talk to them a little," Cynthia Wright, a sophomore at Western majoring in psychology, said. "It feels comforting sometimes, to just have them around."

Sculpting Our Way to the Future

By Laura Wendt

When walking onto Western Washington University's campus one may often notice the large, strategically placed sculptures. But few students stop to read the bronze plaques with the artist's name and the piece's title. Instead, viewers are often distracted by the size and colors of the sculptures which seem to hold students' secrets during golden hour.

The WWU sculptures have witnessed the breakdowns tucked just behind Arntzen Hall and the echoing laughter of students lying on the Old Main lawn in the dwindling sunlight. These sculptures have borne witness to the struggles and successes of thousands of students. And whether we notice it or not these sculptures are affecting our everyday lives in ways we may never recognize.

WWU has one of the most diverse sculpture collections in the nation. The Sculpture Collection began with James FitzGerald's Rain Forest, in 1960. Today, WWU is home to 32 sculptures, by artists ranging from Richard Serra to Mark di Suvero.

A popular piece, Wright's Triangle, by Richard Serra, is centered just past red square in the middle of the walkway. Serra is part of the minimalist movement which is when artists use only the base essentials. And is a reaction against abstract expressionism.

Wright's Triangle is one of the most emotion provoking pieces on campus. Students either love it or hate it. Which is precisely what Serra had in mind.

One student, Kerry Sanborn, states: "I hate that sculpture because I always have to walk around it and when I'm on my phone I don't see it sometimes and almost run into it." However, another student, Kylie De Jong, believes that "the sculpture is just a sculpture, I don't know anyone would care."

Serra placed the art in the middle of the walkway because he wanted to force viewers to interact with the art. Viewers are able to walk around or through the triangle, but the piece is unavoidable. And while passing the piece students have the time to ponder the concepts of enclosure, confrontation and higher-level intellect.

However, that piece is more than that. It's a hiding spot for when you spot your morning professor is walking toward you and you definitely told her you were at your grandfather's funeral, so you could get last night's reading done for that English class you really regret signing up for. Or it's the place where someone taped signs reading: "Abusers your time is up" and you know it's part of the "Me Too" movement which helped you tell your best friend what that creepy boy on the second floor of Omega did to you in 9th grade. These sculptures have helped sculpt our lives and that is something students should remember.

Mark Di Suvero's piece For Handel is also featured on WWU's campus. Di Suvero is well known for creating sculptures composed of high beams painted bright red. Di Suvero is part of the abstract expressionism movement, which gives the unconscious uninhibited expression.

Yet, not many students know that. Instead they refer to it as the big red sculpture where they met their particularly awful Tinder date before taking the bus to get coffee. Or where you and your friends stand waiting for the bus because you're the only girls and you don't want to stand too close.

For Handel is also one of the more favorable places to tag, which is part of why WWU has a \$30,000 budget for graffiti which the Museum Preservation Specialist, Paul Brower, fondly referred to as "pretend gang signs."

Some may choose to see the tagging as destructive and crude, but it can also be viewed as student involvement. Tagging is an expression of people connecting and bonding with the art in ways they can't with works hung in an art gallery.

Student involvement is a huge goal of WWU, but one thing that seem to get forgotten is that involvement isn't controllable. If they request students to be involved the response will not be uniformed club joining or support groups attendance. It will be radicalized too. An example of this is when a student asked Paul Brower "how much trouble he would get in if he made a stencil saying bike lane" and used it throughout campus. Because to student's art is something to respond to and sometimes that response is altering the original work.

Despite the difference between the sculptures on campus each and every piece has a purpose, to make a statement. And those pieces are from artists who want to invoke something within viewers. Which is why it's so vital that students choose to interact with the sculptures. They mold our lives just as much as we mold theirs. So, every now and again look up from your online study guides and electronic textbooks to realize how lucky we are to live in such a culturally rich and diverse environment.

Sources:

Mark Rayder: m.rayder@lwsd.org

Paul Brower: Paul.Brower@wwu.edu.

"Western Washington University." Western Gallery, westerngallery.wwu.edu/sculpture/handel.

"Western Washington University." Western Gallery, westerngallery.wwu.edu/sculpture/wrights-triangle.

Western Washington University's Sculpture Collection Still Reflects Student Life Nearly 60s Years After Being Started

By Katharine King

Whether on purpose, or by a happy coincidence, Western Washington University's acclaimed sculpture collection shares defining qualities with the school's students. The collection encapsulates the diversity, weirdness, sense of community, and stick-it-to-the-man attitude that the students at WWU are known for.

The collection's diversity is more about the artists than the sculptures themselves. Featuring many female artists and many artists from all over the world, the collection demonstrates a care for diversity. Native, black, Asian, Hispanic, and white ethnicities are represented at WWU and a student body that is 56.9 percent female; this is a care for diversity that WWU students share.

"When I was doing a sculpture tour for candidates for an art history position that was open," said Paul Brower, Preservation and Museum Specialist for Western Washington University's art gallery. "One of the candidates basically felt that this collection was not diverse at all. And I said, well, we just finished walking past seven female artists. We have Korean artists. We have British artists, Swiss artists. So, I said, you know, I don't think we're that American male dominated here. And then she had to back down a little."

Touring the campus, it's easy to see the sculptures themselves are also very weird. From the strange metal-work of Anthony Caro's India and Mark di Suvero's For Handel to the bizarre and almost alien-like etchings in the concrete of Alice Aycock's The Islands of the Rose Apple Tree Surrounded by the Oceans of the World for You, Oh My Darling, many of the sculptures have an out-of-the-box characteristic about them. Looking around at the students at WWU, you see that same quality celebrated by every group of friends making animal noises in Red Square or playing Humans vs. Zombies in the fall.

WWU's well known sense of community is evident in the student body's interactions with the collection. Many of the pieces, such as Bruce Nauman's Stadium Piece and George Trakas's Bay View Station, are architectural pieces that allow students to sit on and interact with the shape of their structures on a daily basis. Brower mentioned once seeing an entire string quartet performing on Bay View Station. Another example is Tom Otterness's Feats of Strength, which features tiny bronze men lounging and lifting, is interacted with by students through selfies that feature students mimicking the poses of the sculptures.

"Coming back from a late-night study sesh, I once stood in the middle of that huge triangle and just spun around in circles," said Chaya Gaberria, 18, freshman at Western Washington University.

That triangle is known as Wright's Triangle and it was added in 1978. "Richard Serra [the artist] wants his pieces to be confrontational. You're walking up the hill, you got to get by this [the triangle] one way or the other. But you can't get really through or over, you got to get around it. And that's the way he places many of his pieces," said Brower. If the confrontational "get-in-the-way" attitude of the piece doesn't represent the very active student body of WWU, nothing else does! The students at WWU pride themselves on their environmental and political activism. In this political day and age, the stick-it-to-the-man attitude from the '60s is still alive and well today on the WWU campus.

In a constantly changing world, it's rare for such a diverse collection started nearly 60 years ago to still be an apt reflection of the community surrounding it. That alone makes it worthy of preserving for future generations of WWU students and visitors. Despite that, the sculptures face constant vandalism and the minuscule budget to combat that is spent in full every year. Perhaps if all students knew how representative the sculptures were of themselves, they'd spend more time appreciating them and less time defacing them

Sources

Diversity Statistics of WWU <http://www.wvu.edu/diversity/stats.shtml>

Western Washington University's Gallery website <https://westerngallery.wvu.edu/>

Quotes from

Paul Brower (360) 650-3939

Chaya Gaberria (425) 737-6228

Work Enough for Two

By Andrew McClain

September 1989 was a time of change. "Doogie Howser, M.D." had just premiered on ABC, Living Colour won the sixth MTV Video Music Awards, and Paul Brower was just beginning a long and storied career as the Western Washington University museum preservation specialist.

"I get to install and light all the shows in the Western Gallery and maintain the collections of the university," says Brower as he leads a tour of students through campus. "However, over the years I've started to have quite a bit more interactions with students." The mood is light, despite a slight chill and some trickling rain, and Brower speckles the tour with unique and amusing anecdotes from his nearly three decades of experience with the gallery.

Granted, those three decades hardly make up the extent of Brower's career. Prior to taking his position at WWU, he worked in the Tacoma Art Museum, The Museum of Flight in Seattle, and The Museum of History and Industry in Seattle. Additionally, he's worked on numerous personal artistic projects, many of which revolve around his passion for photography, a hobby he's been cultivating since he received his first Kodak 127 Brownie camera at the age of 10.

He speaks highly of Virginia Wright of the Virginia Wright Fund, a patron of the arts responsible for much of the university's success with assembling such an impressive collection, considered to be a top 10 outdoor sculpture gallery in the country. Having been around for the installation of almost one-third of those outdoor pieces, Brower gives credit where it is due while playfully chiding a few individuals, without naming names, for trying to stymie the installation of some of those pieces.

What really shines during the tour is Brower's enthusiasm for the subject matter. During the exhibition of one piece, Scepter, the first piece in the collection by a WWU alumnus, Brower's hands move delicately over the coarsely cut steel, each scrap taken from the body of an old car and welded into the semblance of a royal scepter that stands nearly 15 feet tall. He points to patches away from the welds where the original paint colors can still be seen. "I love it," says Brower when asked how he feels about the piece, a truth that is reflected in his actions.

Of course, Brower's dedication doesn't stop at the office. Over the years he's personally paid to attend three art conventions in order to learn new tricks and techniques in order to bring them back to WWU. Of particular use was one cheap alternative for creating mannequins to display clothing, a task he probably would have found impossible given his budget had he not chosen to attend that convention at his own expense.

But with the experience and stories of three decades of curation comes the wear and weariness of three decades of hard work. Set to retire sometime this summer, Brower is excited to move on to the next phase of his life, but that means replacing him first, a task much more easily said than done.

"My boss and I have actually discussed the possibility of needing to hire two people to replace me," says Brower, who manages up to a dozen work-study positions as well as a handful of full-time staff on top of his other curating duties. "That's up to administration, but we've definitely discussed it."

If nothing else, they'll have need to hire two people to make up for the enthusiasm Brower has consistently brought to the job since before the dawn of the digital age. (02/02/2018)