

Corporate Calgary embracing public art installations

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Artist Christian Eckart, right, tours Oxford Properties vice-president David Routledge past his art installation at Centennial Place in downtown Calgary.

Photograph by: [Gavin Young, Calgary Herald](#)

Over a career spanning more than a quarter of a century, Ric Kokotovich has worn the hats of filmmaker, sculptor and photographer. It's his latest role, though, that has created the biggest buzz to date - that of mixed media artist.

A series of his large-scale abstract artworks, recently installed in The Bow office tower downtown, is featured on 24 separate floors of the building.

The private commission from Cenovus Energy, awarded to Kokotovich two years ago, is the kind of boost an artist dreams of.

"It helped me buy my house in Mexico," is all he will say about the deal. "But about half the money went into creating the work."

Its status as art paid for by the corporate sector doesn't dilute its quality, says Jarvis Hall. "It's a type of work I can't reference anywhere else," says Hall, owner of Jarvis Hall Fine Art (617 11th Ave. S.W., lower level) of the colourful collages of drawings and photographs that are turned into fractured images on a computer. Hall's gallery is currently showing Kokotovich's newest works, titled *Wired Islands*, until April 13. "It's art that demands to be witnessed."

Such collaborations, both of these longtime Calgary art insiders say, aren't just good for the individual artist getting the commission.

"I think corporate leaders are becoming more aware of the value of the creative consciousness," says Kokotovich, who has done private commissions for other firms such as Newalta. "Having more art in the community is good for all artists and for the public."

While Kokotovich's collages don't tidily fit into the category of full-on public art - The Bow tower images are available for viewing by the building's inhabitants and its guests - a visit to The Bow's outdoor plaza provides all with one of the most celebrated new public art pieces of our city.

Wonderland, a 12-metre bent wire sculpture of a girl's head installed earlier this year, is the creation of Jaume Plensa of Spain. His works in cities like Chicago (Millennium Park's Crown Fountain) have established him as one of the world's foremost sculptors. A second sculpture by Plensa, titled *Alberta's Dream*, will soon find its home on the northwest podium of the plaza.

These examples of new art in the community aren't the only ones in Calgary this year. In fact, the past few weeks have seen a flurry of deals between artists and the private sector coming to the fore.

Last week, developers Qualex-Landmark announced a project with Douglas Coupland. It's the first large-scale Alberta work for the West Coast-based author and artist, famed for his seminal 1991 novel *Generation X*. Named *An Interpretation of Calgary in the 21st Century*, the colourful 4.9-metre high by 4.1-metre wide installation will find its eventual home in the lobby of the still-under-construction Mark on 10th condo building in the city's Beltline district.

On Thursday, one of Calgary's most renowned art exports to the United States, Christian Eckart, came back to his hometown for the unveiling of his new project in the concourse between the east and west towers of Centennial Place. Entitled *Dichroic Glass Hexagonal Perturbation Triptych - Hat Trick 20102013*, the wall-mounted sculpture, commissioned by Oxford Properties, is constructed of 1,500 handmade parts, including 140 pieces of dichroic laminated glass triangles framed by extruded aluminum.

Eckart, who has exhibited worldwide in more than 200 solo and group shows and is represented in Calgary by TrepanierBaer gallery, is no stranger to the private art commission: He has created artworks for buildings and public spaces across North America and internationally.

This latest one, though, has him feeling more optimistic than ever about the artistic landscape of the city in which he grew up.

"Calgary is absolutely going through a Renaissance in public art," says Eckart, who notes that his current home, Houston, Texas, is five times bigger than Calgary but with one-10th the public art. "I think it's a very big deal."

The past year has indeed seen a flowering of privately funded, publicly accessible art. Last year, the Calgary Stampede unveiled *By the Banks of The Bow*, a bronze sculpture series by southern Alberta artists Richard Roenisch and Bob Spaith. The ambitious work - made possible by a \$2-million donation to the Stampede Foundation by an anonymous donor - features 15 horses and two riders and is considered one of the largest outdoor bronze sculptures in North America.

The Calgary Municipal Land Corp. is also proving to be a major player on the public art scene. The wholly owned subsidiary of the City of Calgary - it makes its art decisions through a jury process - has brought our city some of the most exciting new public art over the past year.

Last spring, it unveiled its first public commission, the 7.3-metre high LED sculpture *Promenade*. Created by internationally acclaimed British artist Julian Opie, the work was joined in November by Calgary artist Ron Moppett's mosaic tile mural titled *THESAMEWAYBETTER/ READER*. The East Village work, featuring 950,000 mosaic tiles and stretching 33 metres across the pedestrian-only Riverfront Lane, is the largest free-standing mosaic mural in Canada.

This new wave of public art by corporate Calgary and the CMLC has been accompanied by scores of new publicly funded projects by the City of Calgary. Just under a decade ago, Calgary joined 130 other municipalities across North America, by adopting the one-per-cent-for-art program, which stipulates that one per cent must be aside for public art for any capital project over \$1 million. It was a belated coming-to-the-party: Cities like Philadelphia, which has more than 300 public art commissions under its belt, have been using such a model for nearly half a century.

Since 2004, the city's public art program has supported 37 projects totalling \$12.2 million. Last year, it announced two new artist commissions: Berlin-based sculpture team *inges idee* won a \$471,000 commission for the Airport Trail extension over Nose Creek, while Iowa artist David Dahlquist received \$474,000 for his mixed media mural, called *Confluence*, now installed at the northeast LRT line's new Martindale station.

The final phase of its most expensive individual project to date, the \$2-million commission to artist Beverly Pepper for the large-scale, land art sculpture *Hill Calgary Sentinels* at the Ralph Klein Park in the city's far southeast, is nearing completion.

The city's one per cent program joins a longtime bonus density program, in which developers can add extra height, width or density to their projects in exchange for such public features as art. Both programs have over time run into controversy: The bonus

density program was blamed for the highly contentious White Trees on Stephen Avenue Walk outside Bankers Hall, which are more of a wind break than anything resembling art, as anyone in the art world will quickly point out.

The one per cent program came under fire last year when it was discovered that past city staff had neglected to work the one per cent formula into the \$1.4-billion budget for the southwest LRT extension, an issue compounded by the project going \$35 million over budget. Since then, some on council have proposed such tweaks as a sliding scale for projects that surpass the half-billion mark - an approach taken by cities like New York - although no new directives have yet to been given to the city department that administers the program.

Things also can, and have, gone sideways when the private sector takes on the cause of public art. In 2010, in the midst of several projects, developer John Torode sought court protection from personal bankruptcy.

A \$1-million commission to Winnipeg-born artist Micah Lexier, a massive sculpture titled Half K slated for Torode's Arriva condo development, was put on ice. It was reported that Lexier had already done \$20,000 worth of detailed work on the project when he got the news that he'd been added to the list of creditors.

Still, those who make the visual arts their vocation say that despite the flaws and growing pains, a combination of private and public support is vital to the continued overall growth of our city.

"Calgary is coming of age as a cultural capital," says Nancy Tousley, who adds that the increasing number of public art installations has greatly contributed to our evolving status. "It is showing a growing sophistication."

Tousley, an art critic and curator who received a 2011 Governor General's Award in Visual and Media Arts, agrees with Jarvis Hall that private commissions don't necessarily translate into compromised art. In fact, she thinks it's important to have the blend in order to attract the best artists, and artworks, to our city.

"You don't have to deal with the neighbourhood associations, the so-called stakeholders, in quite the same way," says Tousley.

"That means in the private sector you can rely more heavily on expert opinion."

In her more than three decades living in Calgary, much of that spent as an arts writer for the Herald, Tousley says she hasn't seen anything like the activity of the past few years, something she credits to past and present local champions of public art.

"One thing to mention is John Torode's brave effort as a developer, and as a private person, to bring significant art to Calgary," she says, noting that it was Torode who, with the help of Jeffrey Spalding, then-president and CEO of the Glenbow and current artistic director of MOCA, brought artist Dennis Oppenheim's inverted church installation, titled Device to

Root Out Evil, to the city's Ramsay area on an extended loan. "I still regret that the Lexier project was not, in the end, one that was realized."

Tousley says that while Calgary is still woefully lacking its own public art gallery - a critique echoed by her contemporaries - the movement in the world of public art is encouraging for the city's cultural health.

"They become focal points, they change your vision not only of the object but of everything around it," she says of publicly accessible art, something that is available to all and free of charge. "A city shows its ambitions in the quality of its public art."

Gord Ferguson also credits the Oppenheim installation, along with last year's opening of the Peace Bridge designed by Spanish architect Santiago Calatrava, with helping to further our city's reputation as an emerging force on the world's art scene.

"The Oppenheim church was the first work of international stature to come here," says Ferguson, noting that while not an art piece per se, Calatrava's controversial bridge design had much of the qualities of one, both in its creation and the public response. The bridge was recently ranked as one of the world's top 10 public spaces of 2012 by leading architectural online publication designboom. com.

Ferguson, a sculptor who has taught at the Alberta College of Art and Design for more than three decades, has no problem with seeing some of the higher profile commissions, both private and public, being awarded to international artists.

"You need to have that to be a cosmopolitan city, he says, adding that it's thanks to the growing vibrancy of our public art that he's seeing more of his students choosing to stay in Calgary after graduation. "We need to see work from all over the world, from the best artists."

Like Eckart, Ferguson isn't afraid to use the word Renaissance when it comes to our public art scene. "Calgary never had public art high on their list of things we needed to have before," he says. "But it really does energize the city and make it into a more memorable place."

For Eckart, who was part of the exodus after graduation from the then-named Alberta College of Art back in 1984, returning to the city of his birth in the midst of such a transformation is nothing short of remarkable.

"What's really exciting is that what is going on in Calgary now is a tacit acknowledgment that art is critical to society, that it's something we all need," he says. "I'm really thrilled to be a tiny part of that."

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