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art

Park sculpture faces diversity head on

By Kyle MacMillan
Denver Post Fine Arts Critic

Public art too often is bland and utterly forgettable. The reasons are varied, but most have to do with committees and the desire to avoid controversy.

Such work is usually chosen by groups of art experts and concerned citizens, and they inevitably seek consensus by moving to the middle and rejecting anything that is in some way offbeat or remarkable.

At the same time, cities and counties have enough problems just keeping potholes filled, and they certainly don't want their electorate in an uproar over some piece of art in a median.

Considering all that, "Meeting of the Minds" - a sculpture to be dedicated at 3 p.m. today near East 26th Avenue and York Street in City Park - certainly stands out.

This piece by Douglas Kornfeld, a Denver native who resides in Cambridge, Mass., in no way changes the face of contemporary art history. But it does dare, at least in a mild way, to engage a sociopolitical issue or two - diversity being the most important.

The \$52,000 work was funded through Denver's 1 percent-for-art ordinance, which requires that 1 percent of city-funded construction budgets be set aside for art - in this case, the renovation of the



Post / Andy Cross

"Meeting of Minds" by Douglas Kornfeld, funded through the city's 1 percent-for-art program, avoids the blandness of many such public projects.

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A February press release about the sculpture from Denver's Office of Cultural Affairs created a minor stir, because it ascribed several provocative connotations to this piece, including some racial and gender dichotomies.

Much of that rhetoric has proven unfounded. Not only has Kornfeld disavowed many of the seemingly exaggerated assertions, the piece itself does not bear them out.

To its credit, "Meeting of the Minds" is relatively simple and straightforward in concept. It consists of two giant, flat profiles of heads built of red metal mesh rimmed with heavy, dark-brown borders.

To make them more easily seen by motorists on York Street, the two sections are mounted at a 90-degree angle on a concrete base. One points northwest, the other southwest.

The upright head, which stands 16 feet tall and looks to the side, is shaped in the profile of an African-American woman as a tribute to the nearby neighborhood, which is predominantly African-American.

Inset in the red mesh is a circle with dozens of cut-out male and female symbols, akin to the ones found on restroom doors. Instead of the usual standardized icons, these vary considerably in size and shape, symbolizing human differences.

The other head, which is partially submerged and thus sticks up only 7 feet, has a more generic profile of a man. Inset in it is a circular cut-out of male and female symbols, all rigidly the same.

By placing the first head with the variegated icons in the dominant position and showing the other one sinking, Kornfeld suggests society is growing more enlightened and more open to the notion of diversity.

Despite assertions that the submerged figure is Caucasian, there is nothing about the piece to suggest this, and Kornfeld said it was never his intention. It is painted in the same color as the other head and is, if anything, racially ambiguous.

It is possible to see some gender conflict in his placement of the female head in a more prominent position, but Kornfeld said he meant the second head to be vague and was not trying suggest that one sex was superior to the other.

Important as the content is to a full understanding of the piece, the symbolism can only be fully appreciated by people who visit the piece on foot, since the cut-outs are too small to be perceived by passing cars.

With that in mind, Kornfeld gave this piece a large enough scale and made it visually engaging enough to be enjoyed by motorists in purely formal terms.

"Meeting of the Minds" is not likely to become one of Denver's signature artworks, but it is a worthy addition to the city's public art collection, especially the fine sculptures already in City Park.

Fine arts critic Kyle MacMillan can be reached at 303-820-1675 or kmacmillan@denverpost.com.

"Meeting of the Minds"

3 p.m. today|Dedication of a public sculpture|City Park, near East 26th Avenue and York Street|Free and open to the public|303-640-6950

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-Kyle MacMillan

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