



Everything New Orleans

Giant silver 'EvacuSpots' stick men point to hurricane evacuation sites in New Orleans

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"I didn't want to create something threatening or anxiety producing" -- Douglas Kornfeld

Fifteen giant stainless steel stick men will appear in public locations dubbed "EvacuSpots" scattered across New Orleans in the next few weeks, from Palmer Park in the Carrollton neighborhood to the Municipal Auditorium in Armstrong Park to Mary Queen of Vietnam Church in eastern New Orleans. In the event of a hurricane evacuation, the 14-foot sculptures will mark gathering spots for those seeking bus rides to safety.

The \$200,000 public art project was paid for by the [Arts Council of New Orleans](#), the city's official art agency, and [Evacuteer.org](#), a post-Katrina philanthropic organization founded to help support the New Orleans Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Preparedness. Installation of the silver stick men should be under way by the start of hurricane season on June 1 and, if all goes well, be finished by the end of June. Considering the logistical chaos that followed Hurricane Katrina and the levee failures, well-marked evacuation sites could be a blessing.

This morning (May 7) I visited the silver men, who are stacked in the warehouse of a metal shop hidden away in an industrial stretch of Perdido Street. Aesthetically speaking, they are utterly simple, nothing more than supersized cousins of the stiff silhouette figures that populate crosswalk signs. The important part is the gesture, explained their maker, Cambridge, Mass., artist Douglas Kornfeld.

"The figures are posed in the gesture of hailing a cab," he said, "which everybody instinctively knows how to do -- no one teaches you how to hail a cab. This was the result of the purpose of the project, which was to provide a symbol that people would understand; that this is a place where you go, if you need transportation out of the city."

That upstretched arm, Kornfeld said, is a universal sign for flagging down a vehicle. It's not something you have to be taught, he said, everyone knows it. Eighty artists from across the country competed to win the commission to design the evacuation beacons. Morgana King, the Arts Council's director of public art, said that the competition was opened to artists from across the country because the 2005 storm and flood were viewed as a countrywide event.

Kornfeld did not attempt to incorporate Crescent City symbolism into the design. For good or ill, there were no upturned trumpets or fleurs-de-lis to be found in his sketches of the proposed sculptures. The simple hail-a-cab posture, Kornfeld said, was the only message the silver men were meant to convey. Kornfeld believes it was the

upstretched arm gesture that won him the job, but not, perhaps, for the reason he expected.

"During the middle of my pitch to the jury," Kornfeld recalled, "when I was presenting my design, someone interrupted me and said, 'Well, that gesture of hailing a cab is the same gesture people do when they want someone to throw them beads from floats during Mardi Gras.'"

And thus, a serendipitous secondary meaning was born.

"That was the moment I went, 'I won the competition,'" Kornfeld said, "because it's quintessentially New Orleans, but it's also universal to everybody."

Kornfeld's been told that the upstretched arm could become a target for Mardi Gras bead tossers. Some of the new sculptures that appeared along Poydras Street in February 2012 received beads during the St. Patrick's Day celebration. Kornfeld plans to attend an upcoming Carnival to see if the prediction comes to pass.

The sturdy silver men should last for 100 years, Kornfeld said. They are made to resist rust and will be deeply anchored with concrete pads to prevent toppling. The leg of each man is marked with a plaque that outlines the rules of evacuation: one small bag, no alcohol, no weapons, dogs on leashes, etc. The silver men have a velvety sandblasted sheen. Kornfeld said that at some time during the building, a workman had scratched eyes and a mouth onto one of the designs. The features were later ground off, but Kornfeld was pleased with the gesture anyway, because it seemed to him that the fabricator had adopted the figure as his own.

Similarly, Kornfeld hopes that in time his sculptures will be adopted as Crescent City symbols themselves. He is aware that there's a natural disdain among some onlookers for any new sculpture that may appear on the city streets. But, in time, he believes his silver men will be accepted.

"Change is difficult for people," he said. "People get used to things the way they are and when something new comes along, it takes awhile."

Kornfeld's silver men are a public symbol that could have easily struck the wrong tone, glossing over the seriousness of their purpose or unnecessarily dredging up old memories. But I don't think they have. At first look, the silver stick men seem a bit generic for a city with the singularity of New Orleans. And maybe they are. But their simplicity narrows the range of reactions they might provoke and, in this case, that could be a virtue.

"I didn't want to create something threatening or anxiety producing," Kornfeld said. "I wanted something that would not alarm people, but would be very recognizable."

In a way Kornfeld's men will be sentries suppressing their emotions. They will be neither especially upbeat nor grim. Kornfeld's silver men are much more humane than a simple informative sign might have been, but they are not at all artsy or self-indulgent. They will be accepted, he said, because they are "friendly." Which might be the perfect word.

They will be much more conspicuous, but they have the same psychic role as fire hydrants. They will be silent signs of a friendly service we hope we never need.

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